

## The History of Psychology and the History of Education: What Can Interdisciplinary Research Offer?

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The child taught in school is the one who is browbeaten at home, adulated or rejected; whose mental activity is deeply coloured by his fears, jealousies. . . . The programme has to be planned for the whole child, not merely for his intellect.

—Runa M. Woolgar<sup>1</sup>

The history of education in Canada continues to benefit from constant revision of topic, emphasis, and method. In line with Runa Woolgar's 1954 call for a "whole child" view of learning, contemporary historians of education have encouraged their colleagues to stop "defining their field solely in terms of the history of schools and schooling."<sup>2</sup> New work in the history of education has ties with Native and ethnic studies, research on the family, childhood, labour, gender, professionalization, and, more generally, the production and reproduction of social relations. Historical studies show how education is constituted of forces that not only acted, but were acted upon.<sup>3</sup>

The convergence of psychology and education in Canada following the Second World War marks the intersection of just such forces, and challenges historians to consider the field's interdisciplinary possibilities. Psychology, a

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<sup>1</sup>Runa M. Woolgar, "Parent, Teacher, Child," *Food for Thought* 14, no. 6 (March 1954): 33. The term "child" was most often denoted by the masculine "he" in postwar popular writing.

<sup>2</sup>J. Donald Wilson, "The New Diversity in Canadian Educational History," *Acadiensis* 29, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 148–69.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, *Professional Gentlemen: The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on Women and Teaching*, ed. Alison Prentice and Marjorie R. Theobald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Robert Welker, *The Teacher as Expert: A Theoretical and Historical Examination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992); J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Shmuel Shamai, "Ethnicity and Educational Achievement in Canada, 1941–1981," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 24, no. 1 (1992): 43–56.

force largely unexplored in Canadian educational history, has long since brought its particular priorities, judgements, values, and orientations to bear on the experience of teachers, students, and parents. Armed with I.Q. tests, personality inventories, and definitions of "normalcy," psychology influenced how children experienced education, how education was defined, and the kinds of social values education tried to reinforce.

In this brief research note, I discuss four important ways interdisciplinary research, specifically psychology's role in the history of education, furthers our understanding of the past. My analysis is by no means exhaustive but rather suggests possible benefits and problems of interdisciplinary research for historians of education. Interdisciplinary research is especially well suited to delineating those forces that helped produce overarching and often convoluted educational theories and practices. Progressive educational theory would count as an example. Further, interdisciplinary research encourages historians to consider interpretive problems from varying perspectives, allowing a fuller and more dynamic picture of the past. And interdisciplinary research more precisely shows how socially significant forms of knowledge—psychology among them—"co-opted" education and discourses about education. Starting from these research questions, historians are led to think of education as a hotly contested field in which complementing and competing forces have vied for influence and control. Lastly, and connected to the previous point, interdisciplinary research encourages historians to accommodate and to make sense of conflict, rivalry, and competition amongst various forces in the history of education. The goals, priorities, and dreams that motivated psychologists often differed from those that motivated teachers, parents, and children.

The connections between the history of psychology and the history of education present practical and conceptual difficulties. Neither field is monolithic or immune to change. In the case of psychology, Richard Littman has argued that "if psychology's past were agreed upon there would be little need to write histories of psychology except for updating and modernizing literary style and appearance."<sup>4</sup> The same could easily be said of the history of education. Although revision ensures vibrancy in both fields, interdisciplinary research proceeds in the contested landscape of two disciplines, not one. Some have argued that interdisciplinary studies risk degenerating into academic juggling acts, thus demonstrating scholarly ingenuity but not necessarily competence, and possibly rendering the end-product "poorly conceived, poorly

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<sup>4</sup>Richard Littman, "The Real History of Psychology Stands Up," *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences* 27 (July 1991): 204–13.

written, and failing to reflect hard-nosed analysis."<sup>5</sup> As anthropologist Max Gluckman warned some years ago, those who dare to stray from their specialized training run the risk of exceeding the limits of their competence.<sup>6</sup>

The interdisciplinary historian must, then, guard against becoming a jill-of-all-trades-but-master-of-none. Still, interdisciplinary approaches shed light on changing conceptions of education, and on who was affected by it, and when and how.

Postwar education is a quintessentially interdisciplinary problem. The appropriateness of the progressive educational philosophy resurrected after the Second World War was a constant topic of debate amongst middle-class professionals and policy makers. But if we are adequately to "unpack" progressive educational philosophy—at least as it was conceived of from the top down—psychology's role must be central to the argument. The meanings of progressivism, the motivations of progressive promoters of different stripes, and concrete examples of progressivism in action are thus best explored in an interdisciplinary manner.

The period after the Second World War marked a critical juncture in the relationship between formal education and psychology. Promoters of progressive educational philosophy sought to do away with formal, highly structured, and drill-driven learning in favour of more fluid, child-centred approaches. Meanwhile, changing emphases in psychology suited it to "progressive" schemes. Psychologists promoted the involvement of children in participatory learning, seeing education as a dialogue rather than merely a matter of memorization and obedience. Less and less influenced by the dictates of behaviourism, psychology was poised to lend its social-scientific legitimacy to the resurgence of progressive philosophy in education.<sup>7</sup> Concurrently, and in a broader sense, Canadians looked to the country's schools to ensure a safe and peaceful future for their children in an increasingly technological world. Canadians demanded that schools provide concrete vocational training and career guidance for students as one step in this direction. Psychology, too, was influenced by pressure to adapt to and flourish in the postwar world. Eager to sustain war-time momentum, psychologists worked to ensure a permanent niche for themselves and their expertise in the lives of Canadians. Thus, at least

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<sup>5</sup>Herbert F. Smith, "Six Interdisciplinary Studies," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 451–63.

<sup>6</sup>Max Gluckman, *Closed Systems and Open Minds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

<sup>7</sup>I am grateful to Dr. Mark Flynn, Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan, for drawing my attention to this point.

on a philosophical level, the goals of progressivism could be made to suit the goals of both educationalists and psychologists, and vice versa.

Apart from fostering a fuller understanding of central problems in the history of education, the meanings of progressivism among them, interdisciplinary research requires that we consider problems of interpretation from varying, and often competing, perspectives. For postwar psychologists, the education system offered among other things a chance for professional enhancement, and a means by which their work on mental health might reach a larger audience. In 1937, psychologist William Line persuaded the Canadian National Education Association to adopt a resolution making mental hygiene an educational objective—the “fourth ‘R’”—and incidentally showing psychological influence on the progressive educational theory of the day.<sup>8</sup> Line’s colleague, John Griffin, remembered the late 1930s as a time of general collaboration between psychology and the school. He recalls:

About 1936 we got interested in the sphere of education as a world in which to work towards positive mental health, thinking that the goals expressed by professional educationists were not unlike, in fact they were very similar to those expressed by mental hygienists, so called, and psychiatrists who were interested in that field.<sup>9</sup>

After World War II, the “fourth ‘R’” resolution resulted in the Crestwood Heights Project, organized by J. R. Seely, which recommended the adoption of “human relations” classes for adolescents throughout the country and the training of 100 “outstanding teachers” into a national corps of mental health liaison officers.<sup>10</sup> Thus, involvement in the country’s schools had complex and provocative implications for the power of psychology’s knowledge claims in the postwar world. Overall, an interdisciplinary approach let us appreciate the multi-motivational aspects of change.

After the war, psychologists, acting as both scientists and practitioners, sought to shape the quality of the population by promoting mentally healthy personalities. And, as Jacques Donzelot has suggested, the school and the home

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<sup>8</sup>John D. Griffin, *In Search of Sanity: A Chronicle of the Canadian Mental Health Association* (London: Third Eye, 1989), 87–89; Paul Barbarik, “The Buried Canadian Roots of Community Psychology,” *Journal of Community Psychology* 7 (1979): 364.

<sup>9</sup>Interview with author, 4 October 1995, Queen Street Mental Health Centre, Toronto, Ontario.

<sup>10</sup>Paul Barbarik, “The Buried Canadian Roots of Community Psychology,” *Journal of Community Psychology* 7 (1979): 366.

were two key places where children "could be closely watched."<sup>11</sup> The relationship between psychologists and schoolchildren helped establish the former as experts in defining, diagnosing, and cultivating normal behaviour. Psychologists diagnosed normalcy in the school setting based on two components: children's intelligence quotient (I.Q.) and their behaviour. The I.Q. score was based on how well a child did on a series of specialized tests comparing other children of the same chronological age.<sup>12</sup> Cloaked in the pretence of science, the test score signalled whether a child was categorized as abnormal, normal, or above-average. In combination with the I.Q. score, behaviour monitoring and evaluation were to determine the health of a child's personality. Normal behaviour in school was associated with the qualities of obedience, conformity, happiness, and acceptance. Children were "abnormal" if they did not accept the conditions of their lives—they were sullen, they were disobedient, they were unhappy, they "acted out." This label was based on the assumption that conditions were indeed acceptable to begin with. Psychologists labelled and treated contrary behaviour as pathological and imposed standards that were socially rather than "scientifically" informed.<sup>13</sup>

Most significantly, interdisciplinary research highlights the complications of clashing motivations in the history of education and invites historians to find meaning in the fray. Although psychology aspired to reorient our understanding of children not merely as students but rather as complex people, education of the "whole child" was never entirely unproblematic, nor did it equally benefit all participants. Psychology's priorities and those of teachers, students, and parents were often at odds. Oral histories of students attending Canadian schools between 1920 and 1950 show that the tenets of progressive educational philosophy did not trickle down to the level of actual classroom experience. Despite the rhetoric, the style of teaching and demands of discipline enforced a strict and familiar hierarchy in which "teachers talked and pupils listened," independent thought was discouraged, and a system was put in place that

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<sup>11</sup>Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 47.

<sup>12</sup>J. D. M. Griffin, S. R. Laycock and W. Line, *Mental Hygiene: A Manual for Teachers* (New York: American Book Company, 1940), 98–99; John S. Long, "Intelligence Tests—In the Schools," *Health—Canada's National Health Magazine* (September–October 1948), 22. A classic critique of limitations of the I.Q. test is offered by Stephen Jay Gould in *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1981).

<sup>13</sup>Mona L. Gleason, "Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, the School, and the Family in Post-World War II Canada, 1945–1960" (Ph.D. diss., University of Waterloo, 1996). See especially Chapter 2, "Watching the Children: Psychologists, Schools and 'Normalcy,'" and Chapter 3, "Fracture of Interests: Psychology in the Postwar Schools."

"blamed rather than praised."<sup>14</sup> Gaps such as this between the interests of psychologists and those of teachers and students raises important questions for the researcher. Whose priorities held sway in postwar education, on the official level and in the classroom, and why? Were these priorities different or similar? How did this reflect on shifting relations of power within the education system? Did the clash of priorities foster a more invigorated or a more problematic learning environment for children? How did this play itself out?

An official concern to foster progressive classrooms, for example, seemed inconsistent with the day-to-day problems of teaching. On one hand, psychologists were concerned with supporting and furthering their profession under the umbrella of progressive educational philosophy. Meanwhile, however, the teaching profession faced practical problems that overshadowed philosophical concerns. A nationwide survey of teacher qualifications carried out in 1944 by the Canadian National Education Association in every province found "teachers with little or no professional training" working in classrooms across the country. As many as one-quarter of Nova Scotia's 3,400 school departments were staffed by underqualified teachers.<sup>15</sup> In the new province of Newfoundland, the difficulty was especially marked as 770 teachers in 778 one-room schools (from a total of 1,187 elementary schools) had not received even one year's professional training.<sup>16</sup> The significant proportion of underqualified teachers was, paradoxically, a result of the desperate need for teachers' services in the midst of increasing enrolments. In 1953, *Maclean's* writer Sidney Katz produced a three-part series on the "crisis in education," estimating that the country was short eleven thousand teachers.<sup>17</sup>

The weakness of the teaching profession after the war takes on added meaning if we consider the parallel history of psychology. Teachers' salaries, going largely to women, who were the majority of teachers, stood in stark contradiction to expert expectations of psychological sensitivity, untiring attention to children's individual needs, and educating the "whole child." The added duties implied by psychology's mental health objectives, however, did

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<sup>14</sup>Neil Sutherland, "The Triumph of 'Formalism': Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s," *BC Studies* 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986): 182-83.

<sup>15</sup>Sidney Katz, "Crisis in Education, Part 1: The Teachers," *Maclean's* (1 March 1953): 7-9.

<sup>16</sup>Frederick W. Rowe, *Education and Culture in Newfoundland* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976), 54-56.

<sup>17</sup>Sidney Katz, "Crisis in Education, Part 1," 8. Similar findings of the teaching profession's inadequacies were found in a survey conducted by the Canadian National Education Association in 1948 and contained in *The Status of the Teaching Profession: Report of a Committee of the Canadian Education Association* (Toronto: CEA, 1948).

not translate into additional remuneration for teachers. Rather, teachers were to carry out their duties at the lowest rung of a jealously guarded hierarchy of expert power. Psychologists trained the teachers, told them how to handle problems, and passed professional judgement on their performance. That this unfolded within the thoroughly gendered atmosphere of postwar Canada made women teachers more vulnerable and "naturally" subordinate to the pronouncements and demands of male experts. In 1949, for example, the average teacher in Canada earned \$1,855. The average salaries for doctors, lawyers, engineers, and architects, were \$9,008, \$9000, \$9,532, and \$10,428, respectively.<sup>18</sup> Between 1939 and 1944, although men made up only 20% of the teaching profession, women teachers had substantially lower salaries.<sup>19</sup> This dismal situation prompted an astute critic to observe:

In the field of education an attempt is being made to reconcile two incompatibles. On one hand, teachers are expected to offer the versatility of technique and the initiative necessary to implement modern, flexible courses of study, while, on the other hand, they are persistently paid less than most other groups in the community.<sup>20</sup>

While psychologists tried to reform education to take into account their priorities, teachers were often undervalued or overlooked. In fact, demands on teachers' time and expertise increased as they were expected to act as frontline psychological interpreters. In his summer school guidance course for teachers, for example, John Griffin taught students to predict delinquent tendencies in Grade 1 children. Personality traits that suggested the child was "self-centred, easily swayed, danger-loving, and head strong," and a home life that made the child feel "unwanted and rejected," were said to be strong indicators of future

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid. Overall, these wages had not risen substantially since the early 1930s. At that time, a profession paying around \$1,000 per year, particularly one employing large numbers of women, was advantageous. See J. Donald Wilson, "'I Am Ready To be of Assistance When I Can': Lottie Brown and Rural Women Teachers in British Columbia," in *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching*, ed. Alison Prentice and Marjorie R. Theobald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 203–33.

<sup>19</sup>J. A. Steveson, "Mounting Tide of Teachers' Strikes," *Dalhousie Review* 27 (April 1947): 98–101. Regionally, wages of teachers in rural Manitoba started at \$1,650, with a ceiling fixed at \$2,650. Eighty-four percent of Prince Edward Island's 734 teachers earned less than \$1,800 per year. In Quebec, as late as 1950, the average wage of the lay female teacher was \$812. In 1949, the purchasing power of New Brunswick teachers' salaries was approximately half that of salaries paid teachers in 1929.

<sup>20</sup>Dudley Bristow, "Teacher Training and Teachers' Salaries," *Canadian Forum* 30 (Fall 1951): 246.

juvenile delinquency.<sup>21</sup> A teacher's guidance handbook approved for use in Canadian schools likewise told readers that "through careful observation, you will be able to identify several types of youngsters in each of the following areas: gifted and talented; emotionally, socially, and educationally maladjusted; and physically handicapped."<sup>22</sup> Dr. C. H. Gundry, Vancouver's Director of Mental Hygiene Division, counselled that

whenever a child presents difficulties in development, the teacher should ask herself "which of his basic psychological needs is the child attempting to satisfy by his behaviour?" For, be assured that the child will attempt to find some sort of outlet for his need for social approval and independence, and for self-esteem and achievement. If the school is not wise enough to provide him with socially-approved methods of meeting these needs, he will be forced to try anti-social ones.<sup>23</sup>

Through such efforts as these, teaching was to be "psychologized" in the postwar years. In psychological discourse, bad children were more often than not simply misunderstood children, and a deeper cause, frustration of a child's "needs," was the real culprit. Thus, a child who exhibited "difficulties in development" could not be simply labelled "bad." This meant teachers had constantly to be analyzing students, searching out hidden reasons for their behaviour. More pressing, teachers had to spend most of their time establishing and maintaining order in classrooms. The most common complaint of postwar teachers, after their working conditions and salary, had to do with the provision of progressive-style services to children. A group of Saskatoon teachers, for example, confided that "constant interruptions" by school nurses, psychologists, or others interested in the child, were most irritating and most hindered their work in the classroom.<sup>24</sup> Sybil Shack, a postwar teacher, pointed out that

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<sup>21</sup>History of Canadian Psychiatry and Mental Health Services (HCPMHS) Archives, Queen Street Mental Health Centre, Griffin-Greenland Collection, John Douglas Morcroft Griffin Papers, Box 6—Addresses, 1936–66, File 1—Lecture Notes, "Predicting Delinquency in Grade 1 Children," 1. Griffin further maintained that the family that "lacked unity had a 96.9%" chance of producing delinquent children. The source of the percentage is not given.

<sup>22</sup>Robert F. DeHaan and Jack Kough, *Teacher's Guidance Handbook—Identifying Students with Special Needs: Vol. 1. Secondary School Edition* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1956), 7–11. This book was part of the Teachers Professional collection at the Ministry of Education in Sudbury, Ontario during the postwar years.

<sup>23</sup>C. H. Gundry, "Mental Hygiene and School Health Work," *Canadian Public Health Journal* 31, no. 10 (October 1940), 485.

<sup>24</sup>Sidney Katz, "Crisis in Education, Part 1," 59.



she and her colleagues were well aware of, and resented carrying out, the educational schemes of others:

We administer, mark, and enter the result of centralized tests. We calculate I.Q.'s and mental ages. We keep medical records. We do statistical analyses of examinations. . . . We tabulate our pupils according to every conceivable category for our school boards, our departments of education, and the Dominion Bureau of Statistics. . . . Undoubtedly most of these things are necessary, but they bore into our teaching time. . . . We resent having to tunnel our way through the mounds of directives, reports, records, and accounts, which block our passage every day of the week. . . .<sup>25</sup>

Only an interdisciplinary approach can fully reveal the clashing motivations and priorities, lying bare the importance of power, hierarchy, and gender in the history of education. As it affected teachers, and particularly women teachers, psychology in education complicated considerably the application of progressivism in the classroom.

Interdisciplinary research in the history of education is well suited to exploring the multi-causal and multi-motivational nature of the field, permitting a variety of perspectives, analyzing change from the "top down" or the "bottom up," from the position of the classroom or the boardroom, from that of administrators, teachers, parents, or children. Historians do not, of course, appreciate and understand in the same way(s) the motivations, constraints, goals, and milieu of education. Rather than struggle to keep separate the two ways of argument, historians and psychologists merely coexist or actually compete. The example of the history of psychology in postwar Canadian education shows how fruitful a cooperative endeavour would be.

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<sup>25</sup>Sybil Shack, *Armed with a Primer: A Canadian Teacher Looks At Children, Schools and Parents* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1965), 7.