

**GROWING UP IN...  
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**Growing Up Progressive?  
Part I:  
Going to Elementary School in 1940s Ontario**

**Robert M. Stamp**

**Steele Street School**

eight grades, eight rooms, eight teachers  
we advanced in lock-step order

learned our letters, printed our names  
did our sums, sang our songs

six rows of desks, seven to a row  
wooden beasts bolted to the floor

printing to writing, pencil to pen  
stories from smiley, friendly readers

blackboards across front and down one side  
six large windows on our left

*God Save the King*, salute the flag  
at Friday morning assemblies

proper nouns, complex sentences  
add subtract multiply divide

foolscap paper with inch-wide margins  
cinder-crusteds knees from recess play

double trios, triple trios, school choirs  
*Flow Gently Sweet Afton Among Thy Green Braes*

place-name geography, kings-of-England history  
*Flanders Fields* for memory work

through eight classrooms, four up four down  
we moved in perfect symmetry<sup>1</sup>

It's September 1942, the Tuesday after Labour Day weekend, as I enter Grade 1 to begin my formal education. The school is Steele Street Public School; the town is Port Colborne, an industrial and shipping centre in the Niagara region of southern Ontario.

I am five years old. So is the Ontario Department of Education's much-heralded 1937 curriculum revision – the *Programme of Studies for Grades I to VI of the Public and Separate Schools*. How will this “new” curriculum shape my childhood and my future learning?

According to a senior departmental spokesperson, the “focus of attention is shifted from content to child, and from the child in general to the individual child...The factory system of mass production is replaced by something approaching the care and study of the craftsman and artist.” Educators saw visions of classrooms “that were bright and cheerful, where children could work together around a table, with maybe a rocking chair here and there.” The classroom would be “a place where children could live socially, where it was a joy to go, and where their interests and activities could be fully developed.”<sup>2</sup>

We five-year-olds go directly into Vera Jackson's Grade 1 classroom, since Steele Street lacks a kindergarten. Officially we are the “Beginners' Class,” although the big kids call us the “Baby Class.”

The revised *Programme of Studies* creates a new set of demands for Miss Jackson and her colleagues. She is bluntly told that the “curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stated.” Her classroom “must follow the method of nature, stimulating the child, through his own interests, into activities guiding him into experiences useful for the satisfaction and development of his needs.”

Miss Jackson throws out the old *Ontario Readers*, and teaches us beginning reading from a new Grade 1 primer – *Mary, John and Peter*. With its clear type, attractive drawings, handsome design, and controlled vocabulary, this little book prepares the way for a new generation of readers. Teachers report that beginners make more rapid progress and take a greater interest in reading than was the case with the former, more literary readers.<sup>3</sup>

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1 “Steele Street School” was first published in *Green's Magazine* 30, 1 (Autumn 2001): 66.

2 Thornton Mustard, “The New Programme of Studies,” *Educational Courier* (Oct. 1937): 8-10.

3 Viola Parvin, *Authorization of Textbooks for the Schools of Ontario, 1846-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 99.

In addition to reading, Miss Jackson teaches us how to print our names and do our sums, work quietly at tables, sit in a large circle on the carpeted floor, put up our hands when we need to go to the bathroom. How to be especially nice to little Anna Foster, our English war-orphan classmate, blitzed out of her London home and washed up on Lake Erie's shore. Best of all, Miss Jackson puts us together in a "rhythm" band, a motley collection of atonal kids banging out tunes on wooden sticks and metallic triangles.

Are we progressive?

The last day of June of our Grade 1 year marks the end of our collective innocence. Big Timmy Harris from the senior grades breaks our hearts when he blabs that we will never see our beloved Miss Jackson again. She is getting married, she won't be Miss Jackson any more, she will be Mrs. Prettie, and married teachers aren't allowed to teach. Is this our first lesson in gender politics?

Older and wiser, we pass into Elaine Marsh's hands for Grade 2. According to the new *Programme of Studies*, Miss Marsh should emphasize socially oriented subjects like health, English, social studies – in that order, followed by natural science, arithmetic, music, and art. Her course outlines are suggestive rather than prescriptive; book lists replace single, authorized texts; and teachers are encouraged to use an activity-oriented or "enterprise" methodology. All subjects must emphasize activity-oriented learning in a happy, wholesome environment.

Our Grade 2 reader, *A Garden of Stories*, contains considerably less material from the "great" authors of the past than the old *Ontario Readers*, and a much stronger appeal to children's interests. Yet it still presents us with a very idealized world. A lengthy passage entitled "Friendly Village" is "a place where most girls and boys would love to live," with gentle hills and flowing stream, where "everyone is friendly as friendly can be," and strife totally absent. In part, this new reader transfers the "good life" from the past to the present, and transplants it from Great Britain to North America.

Yet Miss Marsh's Grade 2 classroom is mostly about the serious business of learning. She makes us sit up straight in our desks instead of lolling about on a carpeted floor. She teaches us to read more difficult words and to write more complex sentences. We begin spelling. In arithmetic, we learn the magic of subtraction. We don't dare talk. We do no group work. There is no rhythm band.

At the end of June, we are once again ready to move on. The 1937 revisions propose that children advance naturally through the eight grades of the new elementary school, not held back by the artificial barriers of formal examinations. "The elementary school has no

business with uniform standards of attainment,” declares the *Programme of Studies*. “Its business is to see that children grow in body and mind at their natural rate.”<sup>4</sup> Joanne Woods must have grown faster than the rest of us, for she “skips” Grade 3 and goes directly to Grade 4. A couple of the boys are held back. The rest of us move lock-step into Dorothy Monroe’s Grade 3 class.

Are we progressive?

Miss Monroe’s classroom, like all the rooms beyond Grade 1, is uniformly predictable. Six rows of desks, heavy wooden structures bolted to the floor, with curly black iron frames, each attached front and back to another desk. Blackboards across the front and down the right-hand wall, six large windows on our left-hand side. Cloak rooms at the back (separate ones, naturally, for boys and girls) with hooks for our coats.

Miss Monroe continues to develop our literary skills with yet another controlled-vocabulary reader, *Golden Windows*. She spends a lot of time teaching us printing, trying to make us neat little printers. Then she moves us on to writing, hoping perhaps to turn us into junior calligraphers. Miss Monroe tries to teach us a lot of things, without too much success. It is her first year of teaching, she stutters with her nervousness, and we veteran seven- and eight-year-olds are learning to misbehave.

### **The Day the War Ended**

Lined up on our school’s May-fresh lawn  
Miss Monroe’s fidgetty Grade 3 class  
1s and 2s beside us, older kids behind  
We listen up as Principal Baldy Robinson  
booms out the German surrender  
the Allies victorious, the war over

Little Billy Hanham pokes me in the ribs  
whispers that we brave lads  
who fought the Jerries  
with our toy guns and plastic helmets  
in hand-to-hand combat across

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<sup>4</sup> Ontario Department of Education, *Programme of Studies for Grades I to VI of the Public and Separate Schools* (Toronto, 1937), 5-9.

the backyards of Clarence Street  
will never play war again <sup>5</sup>

Ethel Kern is next for Grade 4. Lovely Miss Kern, with her unforgettable voice, confident and assertive, yet gentle and caring. She encourages me to read stories from *Gateways to Bookland*, teaches me how to pronounce “cucumber,” and lets me tell the class about the arrival of a new “baby sister” at our house. Best of all, we have rhythm band again!

Are we progressive?

Then Elaine Kniseley for Grade 5. Come spring, and Miss Kniseley whips us into a fever pitch of excitement over bird watching. She asks us to record our first sighting of a robin, Baltimore oriole, redwing blackbird, dozens of species. Date, time, place, weather conditions. Like junior ornithologists. Yet some of us are not very interested in birds, and have no intention of careers in ornithology. Sad to say, we lie about our sightings, fabricate our reports, and learn the art of school-room deception.

Now we write with straight pens, dipping those pens in glass inkwells that sit in holes on the top right corner of our desks (it is assumed we are all right-handed!). The inkwells hold washable blue ink supplied by the school. It is hard to write with a straight pen. Often the nib will scratch, and fuzz from the paper collect at the tip, making blotches on the work. It is even harder for class monitors to fill the inkwells without spilling ink on kids’ books and papers – or worse, on someone else’s clothes.

Our Grade 6 teacher, Rita Carrant, is Steele Street’s music specialist. She has taught us music once or twice a week since Grade Two; now we have her every day. We sing in our seats, we sing at Friday-morning assemblies, at noon-hour and after-school practices for the annual Port Colborne Music Festival. We do trios, double trios, triple trios, class choirs, school choirs. We are versatile little singers.

“Flow gently sweet Afton/Among thy green braes.” We still remember the words. “My love’s an arbutus, by the borders of Lene/So slender and shapely in her girdle of green.” (The word “girdle” cracks us up every time!)

Now in senior grades, we hike across town to DeWitt Carter School one afternoon each week, the girls for home economics and boys for industrial arts or “shop.” Most kids look forward to these subjects, a welcome break from our book-oriented curriculum. But we

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5 “The Day the War Ended” was first published in *Qwertzy* (Fall 2003): 64.

don't relish the idea of intruding on DeWitt's home turf, since their kids are bigger, older, and tougher than we little Steele Street goody-goodies.

We enjoy Miss Roberts as our Grade 7 home-room teacher. According to the new curriculum – extended to Grades 7 and 8 in 1938 – Miss Roberts should blend the old, discrete subjects of history, geography, and civics into “social studies” – where the “whole” exceeds the sum of its former “parts.” Traditional approaches to the formal subjects of history and geography – “the amassing of knowledge in neat lists and summaries” – are now considered inadequate preparation for life in a democratic society where economic hardship and social misery are facts of life. The new social studies courses should begin with the child and extend into his/her relationship with society at the neighbourhood, local, national, and international levels, in both historical and contemporary time-frames.

But Helen Roberts continues to teach history and geography. The old-fashioned way. She teaches (and we learn) Great-Man history and place-name geography. Her one concession to the new social studies comes on April 1, 1949, the day Newfoundland joins Canada. That afternoon, we mature Grade 7 pupils pair up with younger kids in Grade 3. I help little Sheila Gale draw a paper fish in honour of our new province. And cut it out. And colour it. This may be the high-water mark of “progressive education” at Steele Street Public School.

Steele Street is simple and symmetrical: eight grades, eight classrooms, eight teachers. We move through the school in lock-step progression. From Grades 1-7, from Miss Jackson to Miss Roberts, all our teachers are female and all are single. Now in September 1949, after seven long years of female nurturing, we await with some anxiety our male Grade 8 home-room teacher and the school's principal, R.H.L. “Baldy” Robinson.

Many of our teachers and parents still refer to Grade 8 as the “entrance class,” calling up visions of generations of rag-tag Ontario youngsters sitting for their “entrance” exams to get into high school. Those province-wide, standardized exams are a thing of the past for my Grade 8 class, but Mr. Robinson continues to see his role as preparing us for the grunt-and-grind of high school academic work.

In grammar, Baldy reviews all the easy parts of speech before moving on to gerunds and participles; warns us to avoid dangling participles and split infinitives. In arithmetic, he teaches us the “banana” solution for solving problems: If six bananas cost eighteen cents, how much will ten bananas cost? In history (not social studies), he drills kings-of-England history into our little heads. In science class, he instructs us on the workings of an automobile carburetor – from a

book rather than looking under the hood. In his one concession to activity-based learning, Baldy Robinson takes us on a field trip to the local water-purifying plant, then makes us write a “composition” about our visit.

What we 13- and 14-year-olds really want, however, are solutions for the ever-present problems of early adolescence! We want clues on how people get along with each other. We want lessons in human anatomy and physiology. We are budding teenagers. We can feel our bodies changing. Boys begin sporting peach fuzz on their upper lips; girls develop breasts. Hormones are stirring, sap is running.

We look up all the risqué words in our classroom dictionaries. Some of the best (worst?) words are missing. Yet even sanitized dictionaries cannot remove all the good words. We look up “body” and “breast.” Our favourite is “friction,” defined as “the rubbing together of two bodies.” That keeps us giggling and tittering for several days.

Are we progressive at Steele Street Public School in the 1940s?

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The success of the 1937 revisions depended on both teacher and public support. The whole program, declared curriculum developer Thornton Mustard, “is founded on the conviction that teachers are honest, intelligent, and genuinely interested in their work, and should be given a great deal of freedom in the selection of content and in the methods of instruction.”<sup>6</sup> But Steele Street teachers, along with thousands of their Ontario colleagues, were suddenly asked to abandon the security of traditional philosophies and proven teaching methods to venture into the unknown. The anticipated changes were many: wide use of reference materials rather than one basic textbook; no more notes dictated by the teacher; continuous assessment rather than end-of-term examinations; co-operation rather than competition among pupils; noisy chatter of children working on enterprises, rather than enforced silence.

Why blame Mr. Robinson and his Steele Street staff for failing to implement the new curriculum with its radical teaching strategies? He and his veteran staff might at least have expected a thorough in-service training in the new methodology. County inspectors were urged to advise their teachers to familiarize themselves thoroughly with the new course of study, yet there were no directives on enterprise learning.

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6 Mustard, “The New Programme of Studies,” 8-10.

The list of departmental summer courses for 1937 was identical to the list from the previous year. Instructors for these six-week courses gave as much or as little attention to the new program as they chose, and often that was precious little.

Steele Street's one rookie teacher, Grade 3's Dorothy Monroe, was no more carefully prepared than her veteran colleagues. Courses of study and examination papers at Hamilton Normal School and other provincial training colleges reveal a distinct absence of any focus on instructional reform through the late 1930s and early 1940s.

County inspector Mr. Wightman, from nearby Welland, was of little assistance to Miss Monroe or her fellow teachers. Twice a year, Inspector Wightman descended on each class at Steele Street School for at least a half-day of "inspection." On those occasions we had to sit up straight in our desks, stand up straight when answering his questions, make sure we answered correctly, and generally behave as if our lives depended on exemplary conduct! I remember Wightman instructing us on the proper way to distribute "foolscap" (special legal-size paper used for tests and exams) up and down the rows, but I have no memory of him leading us through activity-based, group learning exercises.

Beyond our teachers and our county inspector, there was a world conspiring against the 1937 curriculum reforms. Certainly the Second World War affected the routine of my first three years at Steele Street School in a myriad of ways, and the effects lingered after 1945's victories. Together with our teachers, we took up current-events quizzes, Junior Red Cross work, air-raid drills, paper and scrap-metal drives. Best of all were monthly inter-class competitions for the purchase of war-savings stamps; our home room always won because of the generosity of the parents of our two Jewish classmates.

Many Ontario educators hoped that the curricular revisions of 1937 might fulfil the demands of a society at war. Was not the new social studies course – and particularly the project or enterprise approach – an ideal vehicle for organizing fund-raising projects, for examining the month-by-month progress of the war, for underlining the co-operative endeavours of the Commonwealth and Allied nations? Could students not be led to an increased appreciation of the political freedoms of the British Empire and the moral tenets of Christianity? Was not the freer classroom atmosphere a daily example of democracy in action? Such hopes were naive, given the atmosphere induced by the global conflict. Already buffeted by teacher indifference and public scepticism, progressive education in Ontario was delivered a severe blow by the outbreak of the Second World War.



*The School* magazine warned in the fall of 1940 that “the new education, designed to make democracy more effective, will bear the first brunt of the attack.”<sup>7</sup> Did not the lack of basic literary and computational skills among recruits for the armed forces imply a shortcoming of Canadian schools? And did not the abilities of Ontario schoolchildren in verbal and written expression suffer by comparison, once the British “war orphans” began arriving?

The 1942 meeting of the Ontario Educational Association demonstrated how quickly the pedagogical pendulum could swing. Throughout the 1930s, annual OEA Easter sessions had served as important forums to arouse interest and mobilize support for progressive education. But critics of progressivism had their innings in 1942. A succession of high school principals pointed out shortcomings of the new Grade Eight graduates: they lacked precision in the fundamentals; they were noticeably restless and unaccustomed to discipline; they expected too much entertainment.

Criticisms of skill attainments could easily be turned into attacks on the intellectual, social, and even political underpinnings of the new curriculum. Many university and high school people – those who thought of themselves as the defenders of the intellectual and cultural heritage of English-speaking Canada – feared that the classical ideal of education had been set aside in the 1937 *Programme of Studies*. More was at stake than the replacement of history with social studies. According to the older ideal, there were aspects of knowledge that an educated person should cherish – certain books, certain ideas, certain languages. Few scholars pretended that these ideals became the general property of the entire population; rather they were the intellectual heritage and preserve of an aristocracy of culture. These critics chafed at the replacement of an aristocratic ideal of education with one that claimed to be democratic. They saw the real danger of the new education as a reduction of everyone and everything to the level of the least common denominator.<sup>8</sup>

Culturally and politically, the revised program of 1937 implied a partial rejection of absolute values passed on to former generations of pupils through Aesop’s fables, Old Testament morality tales, and a focus on the past accomplishments of the British Empire. The new school readers of the 1930s emphasized the present and future rather than the past, an idyllic world of smiling faces and happy people rather

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7 *The School* (elementary edition) (Oct. 1940): 93.

8 J.S. Thompson, “New Education Has Come to Canada,” *Dalhousie Review* (July 1941): 230.

than stories of sorrow, temptation, and death. The search for moral values was now more open-ended, with the correct response in any given situation dependent not so much on Judaeo-Christian absolutes but on what a later generation would call situation ethics. And the search for political values and loyalty did not end with British victories at Trafalgar and Waterloo. A Conservative member charged in the legislature in 1942 that the number of patriotic selections had been reduced from fifty-five to eight in the new series of elementary school readers.<sup>9</sup>

Just as the books began appearing, the old British imperial ideal was making one last pull on Canadian loyalties. King George VI's coronation, the 1939 royal visit, revived interest in school cadets and Empire Day, all helped. Most important was the heroic defence of democracy carried single-handedly by Britain and the Empire for eighteen long months after the fall of France in June 1940. By 1941, the north-south cultural orientation of Ontario textbooks was out of harmony with the trans-Atlantic pull occasioned by the war. In much the same way, the internationalism and left-wing political orientation of the new readers and social studies books quickly became unfashionable and discredited as the 1930s turned into the 1940s.

Ontario Conservative leader George Drew identified himself and his party with these educational concerns in the 1943 provincial election. While all three political parties stressed the extension of educational opportunity in their official campaign literature, the real difference lay in curricular and philosophic emphases. Two years earlier, the Conservatives had developed a series of "platform notes" calling for "regulations, rigidly enforced, to ensure that pupils in primary schools shall receive a thorough grounding in the Three R's," and "a definite and planned programme with a view to instilling into young Canadians...loyalty to King, Country and Empire, respect for the flag, together with a more complete knowledge of British and Canadian history."<sup>10</sup> On the eve of the summer 1943 election, Drew warned that he would not "allow any school teacher to create doubts in the minds of children of the importance of the great fellowship that was the British Empire."<sup>11</sup>

Teachers and school administrators were made aware of new directions as the 1943 school year opened and as I began Grade Two. In an address on September 9, Premier Drew advocated a return to

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9 Toronto *Telegram*, 16 April 1942.

10 Public Archives of Ontario, Record Group 3, George Drew file, "Notes for Platform: Ontario General Election," 29 Sept. 1941.

11 Toronto *Globe and Mail*, 12 July 1943.

discipline in the teaching of children “in order to form a basis for a Christian democracy.” In October, he stressed formal examinations. In a November message to teachers and trustees, “personal discipline and recognition of constituted authority” were spelled out as the school’s role in building a responsible citizenship.<sup>12</sup>

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June 1950 sees us in our final month as Grade 8 pupils at Steele Street Public School. We look forward to moving on to Port Colborne High School, and anxiously await the mysteries and promises of our teenage years. What memories do we retain from our eight years at Steele Street Public School?

How can we forget Miss Jackson’s rhythm band, Miss Monroe’s stutter, Miss Kniseley’s birds, Miss Currant’s *Flow gently sweet Afton*, Baldy Robinson’s banana solution?

Playground games at Steele Street School remain indelibly etched in the mind long after reading lessons and arithmetic tests fade from memory. Most of us lived nearby, and usually got to school early. Before our nine o’clock morning classes, during hour-and-a-half noon breaks, and at recess times, as long as the weather was halfway decent, we played outside in Steele Street’s large playground. Behind the school, of course, not on the carefully manicured grass in front of the building. We dared not trespass on that front lawn, but we played our hearts out on an ample paved area immediately behind the school and a scrub-grass field that stretched all the way back to Forest Avenue.

Girls bounced tennis balls and skipped rope. They played hopscotch. They whispered confidences to each other. They rode on swings and teeter-totters. They whispered some more. Older girls spent quite a bit of time eyeing the boys. And talking.

We boys had our own swings and teeter-totters, on our own side of the playground of course. Boys shot marbles, played robust games of chase and tag, and watched as big kids beat up on little kids. “Piling on” was a favourite game – one poor kid designated as “it,” and another ten or fifteen pushing him down and piling on top. Bold and venturesome boys who strayed over to the girls’ side were banished to the Pigtail Club by our ever-vigilant Grade 6 teacher, Rita Currant, always peeking out a second-storey window at us. (Miss Currant also

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12 Ibid., 10 Sept. 1943; *The School* (secondary edition) (Nov. 1943): 267-68.

had a society for those of us who chewed on our pencils – her infamous Beaver Club!)

Older boys got into huge games of soccer and baseball, dozens of kids per team, everybody playing. Hockey displaced all other sports during Stanley Cup time in April. (Yes, in those far-distant days, NHL playoffs were finished by the first of May.) Tennis-ball hockey on the pavement behind the school, not ice hockey.

Transitions from playground to classroom were indelibly inked on our minds forever. Every morning at 9 o'clock, for eight long years, Principal Baldy Robinson emerged from the school, striding boldly out the boys' door, hand-bell ringing loudly. He ordered us to stop playing, line up, stop talking, and march smartly into school to begin the serious business of the day. Again at 1:30 each afternoon, and at the end of every morning and afternoon recess, there was Baldy with his hand bell. No more talking! No pushing and shoving! Get in single file. Step smartly.

We marched from a progressive, activity-oriented playground into a traditional desks-in-straight-rows, sit-down-and-be-quiet 1940s Ontario elementary school.

(“Growing Up Progressive? Going to Elementary School in 1940s Ontario” is the first part of Robert M. Stamp’s memories of his schooling in mid-twentieth-century Ontario. The second part, to appear in the Fall 2005 issue of *HSE/RHE*, is entitled “Growing Up Progressive? Going to High School in 1950s Ontario.”)