Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Theodore Michael Christou
Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919–1942

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. 242 pp.

Robert M. Stamp
University of Calgary

My first encounter with progressive education in Ontario occurred in September 1942 (the terminal year of Theodore Michael Christou's study) when, as a wide-eyed, five-year-old youngster, I entered Vera Jackson's Grade One class at Steele Street Public School in Port Colborne. Five years had passed since the 1937 curriculum revisions were outlined in *Programme of Studies for Grades I to* V*I of the Public and Separate Schools.* Over the next several months and years, I experienced such "progressive" activities as rhythm bands, current events quizzes, lab experiments in science, bird watching, and learned to read from books with such titles as *Golden Windows* and *A Garden of Stories.* In retrospect, however, it was superficial progressivism at best, mixed with such traditional school experiences as memory work, place-name geography and kings-of-England history.

My second encounter with progressive education in Ontario came to a climax forty years later with the publication in 1982 of my book, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876–1976 (*Toronto: University of Toronto Press). To satisfy the demands of a one-volume account stretching over a century of change, curriculum reform of the 1920s and 1930s had to fight for its place alongside such other topics as separate schools, rural school consolidation, and Depression-era financing. Yet again, my treatment of progressive education was not as penetrating as it might have been, given my decision to separate elementary and secondary school reform, and to concentrate my attention on the provincial level while downplaying local personalities, ideas and developments

Now, another thirty years and more later, I again encounter the enigma of progressivism through Theodore Michael Cristou's intriguing study, *Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919–1942.* Far more than my direct, first-hand experience of 1942, or my academic research results in 1982,

Christou's volume is a much more perceptive and penetrating study of Ontario progressivism than anything seen to date.

While making extensive use of secondary source material on progressive education — provincial, national and international — Christou also exploits hitherto-overlooked archival sources that inform Ontario education, particularly sources at Queen's University and at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto. Yet the study is most enlivened by the author's thorough examination of two journals that dominated the province's educational scene in the 1920s and 1930s. He mines the articles and editorials of both *The School* (published by the Ontario Educational Association) and *The Canadian School Board Journal* (Ontario School Trustees and Ratepayers' Association) to capture the latest thoughts of both educators and laypersons on the proper direction of the province's schools.

Both these journals presented a progressivist vision for Ontario's schools. By focussing so much on *The School* and *The Canadian School Board Journal*, however, Christou eschews controversy. He is very forthright: "This book is not a tale of fierce struggles for the curriculum, fought by warring interest groups that were commandeered by public intellectuals engaged in debate" (45). Yet neither is it a tale of consensus, for both journals expose a myriad of interpretations of "progressivism" and "progressive education", and underline the difficulties educators of that day (and today) had in defining the term.

For most of his study, Christou takes a topical rather than a chronological approach. He organizes progressive rhetoric and thought around three themes: active learning, individualized instruction, and the linking of schools to contemporary society. And he offers three distinct interpretations of each theme: child study and developmental psychology, social efficiency and industrial order, and social meliorism and cooperation.

This topical approach, combined with the journal articles and editorials, certainly widens the debate to include dozens of participants beyond the provincial education department: William Blatz of the Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto, Joseph McCulley of Pickering College, C.C. Goldring of the Toronto Board of Education, even two of my wife's elementary school teachers.

Yet this topical approach does have its limitations. Were there significant differences between the progressivist rhetoric of the (relatively) affluent 1920s and the Great Depression years of the 1930s? Why did the Liberal administration of Mitchell Hepburn respond more positively than the previous Conservative regimes of Howard Ferguson and George S. Henry? How influential were the New Education Fellowship and Progressive Education Association conferences of 1937–1939 in garnering support for innovation? And the focus on these two seemingly "Protestant" journals begs the question: How did Ontario's Roman Catholic separate school spokespersons and supporters regard progressive education?

Minor quibbles? The Institute of Child Study at University of Toronto was not part of the Catholic separate school network (163, fn 168). Donalda Dickie instructed at all three of Alberta's (not Calgary's) normal schools (176, fn 41).

Leaving aside these quibbles and reservations, Christou has given us a deep insight

into the progressivist thinking of Ontario educators and laypersons during the interwar years. But he admits that "it is outside the scope of this book to find material evidence of classroom practice or policy being transformed along progressive lines" (45), and concludes that "the extent to which progressivist discourse and rhetoric actually affected classroom practice is debatable" (124). By implication, that is the challenge the author throws out to colleagues and future researchers. How do we determine if progressivist thinking actually led to progressivist classrooms?

Some years ago now, I tried to respond to that very question with my article "Growing Up Progressive? Going to Elementary School in 1940s Ontario," *Historical Studies in Education*, 17, 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 187-198). Now it's time for other voices to weigh in on this question. As Christou reminds us, "we are children of the progressives, pedagogically" (144). Hall-Dennis anyone?