

Back to School? Historians and the View from the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In 1986, Chad Gaffield challenged historians to go “back to school” in order to better understand children’s experiences. This article addresses the historiographical approaches historians have used since 1986 to elucidate continuity and change in the contexts and cultures of schools and the content of instruction. The history of schooling contexts reflects increasing efforts to use resources efficiently and to make schools more comfortable places to be. Studies of school and classroom culture have revealed a shift away from the centrality of teacher authority. Research on curricular change describes a process characterized by renovation rather than transformation. To what extent have historians been successful in meeting Gaffield’s challenge? Historians have sought out rich and diverse sources that illuminate how adults’ concerns and priorities shaped students’ educational experiences. Now they need to find sources that better reveal children’s voices. The article argues for attentiveness to the achievement of a multifaceted understanding of students’ experiences of state schooling over time.

RÉSUMÉ

En 1986, Chad Gaffield a mis les historiens au défi de « retourner à l'école » afin de mieux comprendre les expériences vécues par les enfants. Cet article aborde les approches historiographiques utilisées par les historiens depuis 1986 pour expliquer la continuité et le changement dans les contextes et les cultures des écoles, ainsi que le contenu de l'enseignement. L'histoire des contextes scolaires reflète les efforts croissants déployés afin d'utiliser les ressources de manière efficace et de rendre les écoles plus confortables. Des études sur la culture de l'école et de la classe ont révélé une distanciation face à l'importance de l'autorité des enseignants. La recherche sur l'évolution des programmes d'études décrit un processus caractérisé par la rénovation plutôt que la transformation. Dans quelle mesure les historiens ont-ils réussi à relever le défi de Gaffield? Les historiens ont cherché des sources riches et diverses qui illustrent comment les préoccupations et les priorités des adultes ont influencé les expériences pédagogiques des élèves. Ils doivent désormais trouver des sources qui rendent davantage compte de la voix des enfants. Cet article plaide pour qu'une plus grande attention soit portée à la compréhension multifacette de l'expérience des élèves de l'école publique dans le temps.

In 1986, Chad Gaffield challenged historians of education to go “back to school.”¹ In a thorough review and critique of Canadian educational historiography, he argued that “current analysis still fundamentally ignores the largest group involved in education, the students.”² Curriculum historian George Tomkins agreed, arguing we have “little knowledge of school processes, or of the details of life in Canadian classrooms.”³ In the decades since, Canadian educational historians have tried to address this gap. A review of this historiography should acknowledge the importance of historical perspective on school and classroom culture and on students’ experiences in state schooling. It should provide insights that can inform contemporary efforts to redesign curriculum and transform students’ learning experiences.

The central challenge for historians researching questions about students’ schooling experiences is, of course, the scarcity of primary sources that meaningfully and authentically convey those experiences. In this review and analysis of English-language accounts of compulsory state schooling, we see that historians have been critical and creative in interrogating official sources such as department of education policy documents, programs of study, and school inspectors’ reports, as well as textbooks and other teaching materials, in their attempts to uncover the experiences of children through sources created by, and often intended for, adults. Increasingly historians have paid attention to other sources, such as memoirs, oral histories, and survey data, all of which can be used to probe respondents’ memories in order to enrich our understandings of children’s perspectives on their school experiences. In analyzing and interrogating these sources, historians strive to demonstrate what Mona Gleason calls “empathetic inference”—“the ability to imagine and to interpret historical events and sources from the point of view of young people.”⁴

The purpose of this essay is to explore what historians have discovered about children’s experiences of state schooling. It will address the historiographical approaches historians have used to elucidate continuity and change in the contexts and cultures of classrooms and schools and the content of instruction. It will promote a multifaceted understanding of students’ experiences of state schooling over time. Context refers to the physical and organizational aspects of classrooms and schools, as well as attendance and retention and the broader geographical (rural/urban) and cultural milieux in which they were located. This section also considers non-traditional contexts of public schooling. Culture refers to the quotidian experiences of children in schools, for example, routines, norms, expectations, discipline, hierarchies, and organized extracurricular experiences. Content includes curriculum, both formal and informal, as well as textbooks and other materials.

This review is limited to historians’ accounts written since 1986, which examine aspects of English-Canadian schooling within the time frame of the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s. It was in the mid-nineteenth century that provinces began to establish formal, compulsory, state-supported school systems, and it was the mid-1960s when neo-progressive measures began to transform classrooms and schools. Although neo-progressivism was short-lived, with, for example, the announcement of new core curricula in Ontario and British Columbia in 1976, there was no going back to the formalism of the past.⁵

Context

School Facilities

Across Canada, most children experienced early public schooling in makeshift settings. Sandra Rollings-Magnusson's descriptions of schools in rural Saskatchewan from 1878 to 1914 could be applied to the first public schools in rural settings across Canada. She used survey data obtained between 1953 and 1955 from 316 respondents who described their school experiences.⁶ In the early part of this period, one-room shacks, private homes, a teacher's residence, an old butcher shop, a local church, and even a tent provided ad hoc shelters where instruction could take place. Her descriptions are similar to Susan Houston and Alison Prentice's characterization of schools in mid-nineteenth century Upper Canada as "low-roofed, unplastered log buildings that were poorly ventilated, dirty, and badly furnished."⁷ Rollings-Magnusson explains that school furniture and supplies were difficult to obtain due to a lack of funds, and homemade desks, chairs, and blackboards were found in many schools. Parents had to purchase textbooks by mail order or at the local general store. Teachers were transient, rarely staying more than a year. It is interesting to note that, in spite of these hardships, the majority of the survey respondents reported that they "enjoyed going to school and were quite fond of it."⁸

As settler populations expanded and school systems grew, school facilities also expanded and, theoretically at least, improved. Departments of education distributed plans for school buildings and encouraged school districts to provide appropriate, healthy, and well-furnished facilities, complete, at the elementary level, with fenced-in schoolyards for safe play. Robert Gidney and Wyn Millar, in their study of English-Canadian schools from 1900 to 1940, point out that "until at least mid-century, the one-room school was, by far, the most common type of school building in Canada."⁹ Small rural school districts with a limited tax base struggled to provide anything more than a single, ungraded classroom and materials that would support a basic elementary education in the 3Rs. Donated books and a piano enlivened the school experience for some students. Gidney and Millar quote a *Maclean's Magazine* article from 1951 that described many rural schools as "dilapidated, dungeon-like, draughty, ill-furnished shacks that no progressive farmer would keep his milk herd in."¹⁰ But it is worth remembering that even in large cities, impressive brick buildings with multiple classrooms were for many years crowded, unhealthy places for children to be. School inspectors' reports from the first decades of public schooling frequently criticize districts for allowing inadequate toilet facilities and for refusing to attend to poor ventilation, inadequate heating, or poor lighting in classrooms.

Over time the reality of school and classroom spaces came to reflect educational leaders' rhetoric about order and self-discipline. Schools had separate entrances for boys and girls who knew to line up before entering. Hooks were provided for coats and hats. Students were organized in age-graded classrooms where desks were arranged in rows, and shelves held approved books and teaching materials. Desks faced the front of the room where the teacher's desk and blackboard were the focus of attention. Gidney and Millar describe how school boards in cities and towns began

expanding school facilities in the first half of the twentieth century to include specialized areas such as gymnasiums, and, in the case of high schools, rooms with equipment for industrial training and domestic science.¹¹ Some high schools even boasted a library and an auditorium. Teaching materials and technologies also changed over time so that classrooms that began with textbooks and blackboards later included maps, globes, phonographs, and even movie projectors.

Few descriptions of classrooms capture the “feel” of children’s experiences better than Neil Sutherland’s do, as communicated by those who went to school between the 1920s and the 1960s:

On the days when the windows could not be opened the characteristic classroom odor was particularly strong: on the one hand, plasticine, sour paste, pencil shavings, orange peels in the waste baskets, chalk dust, oiled floors and dust bane; on the other stale bodies and sweaty feet, occasionally enriched by “fluffs.” Characteristic sounds complemented these smells: steam radiators clanked, “blackeyed” toes and heels clattered down the aisles, chalk screeched on the blackboard and bells divided the day into segments.¹²

The huge increase in the student population after the Second World War meant that students in the 1950s and 1960s experienced the same challenges with overcrowded classrooms as their grandparents might have experienced in earlier decades. Relying on a range of official sources, including statistical reports, Royal Commission and other government studies of education, and department of education annual reports, Doug Owram describes how the baby boom children experienced large classes; poorly trained teachers who had been rushed through hastily-devised teacher education programs that followed only a year or two of undergraduate discipline-based education; classrooms awkwardly placed in gymnasiums, school basements, and portables; split shifts; and muddy, unfinished playgrounds. An upside was the increasing presence of new, one-storey, flat-roofed schools in the burgeoning suburbs. Owram describes these changes from the viewpoint of the child:

It was exciting to start in a brand-new school. The blackboards weren’t black at all, but green! The room was lighter and more colourful than those in the old school. The desks were new, light-coloured, Formica-topped, and unblemished by decades of predecessors’ minor acts of vandalism. It was fun to have a playground filled with the latest in slides or swings. If the playground wasn’t ready and was still largely mud, that was fun too.¹³

Over this period, school facilities improved in both urban and rural settings, although certain problems, such as overcrowding, remained. Until the mid-1960s, classrooms looked much as they ever had, although the new one-storey elementary schools, built to accommodate the baby boomers, were very different from the imposing structures built previously in urban areas. By the mid-1960s, neo-progressive notions were having an impact on school context, particularly at the elementary level. Desks in rows

were sometimes replaced by flexible learning stations and tables at which groups of students worked together. New open-area schools that accommodated such pedagogical innovations as team teaching and the organization of students in multigraded groupings were built, although these last innovations never became the norm.¹⁴

School Attendance

Over the course of the twentieth century, students attended schools that got bigger, were better equipped, and were much more comfortable. They also went more often and spent more years in school. In the early years of compulsory schooling, Houston and Prentice explain that children's attendance in Ontario schools was shaped by a range of factors, particularly the need for children's labour at home or on the farm.¹⁵ Their summary of the child's perspective is: "You helped at home when necessary; you went to school when you could. On most days you did both, but sometimes, for shorter or longer periods, you gave up going to school."¹⁶ Neil Sutherland has provided detailed descriptions of the nature of children's work, differentiated according to rural or urban settings, gender, and class and the impact of work on their schooling from the First World War to the 1960s.¹⁷

Other historians indicate how long this pattern lasted in the twentieth century. Drawing on a range of statistical data, Gidney and Millar make it clear that until the 1950s, most children experienced only elementary schooling and many did not complete even that. The authors note that opportunities for anything beyond elementary education, attendance at school, and the pace at which students progressed through grade levels depended very much on where students lived. For example, children in remote farming communities and northern communities dependent on resource industries were simply much less likely to have access to high quality, consistent schooling opportunities than their urban peers.¹⁸

Gender and ethnicity also impacted students' schooling progress. Gidney and Millar demonstrate the long history of a "boy problem" in education, arguing "boys simply did less well through elementary school and were more likely to leave school earlier than girls. And this was especially true of rural boys, whereas rural girls tended to persist into high school at rates roughly equal to their urban sisters."¹⁹ Michael Corbett's work suggests that in rural communities like the fishing community in Atlantic Canada that he studied, many historical patterns of school attendance and enrollment persisted through the late twentieth century. The disconnect between an abstract and academic school program and the job opportunities available to those willing to work hard in resource industries meant boys simply dropped out when they'd had enough.²⁰

Gidney and Millar point out that all classrooms, not just those in one-room rural schools, were likely to include students of a variety of ages.²¹ It was common for students to be held back or for high-achieving students to be pushed ahead as a way of streaming students into relatively academically homogeneous groupings, but their analysis of census data and of school enrollment and attendance information also indicates that students of non-British ethnicities were more likely to be held back or drop out of school.²²

Sorting and Labeling Students

Throughout the twentieth century, schools became more efficient at sorting and labeling students, and students' schooling experiences were more and more shaped by those labels. The 1950s witnessed the rise of psychology as an important influence on children's experiences of schooling. Gleason analyzes the ways in which post-war schooling was "psychologized," with the intent of "promot[ing] and reproduc[ing] the ideas, values, and priorities of a particular Canada: white, middle class, heterosexual, and patriarchal."²³ One way in which this was manifested was the regular practice of subjecting students to intelligence tests, which were administered in order to determine the extent to which children conformed to an Anglo-Saxon ideal of normalcy. This had the unfortunate effect of making ethnicity a sign of abnormality, since culture and English-language ability played a significant part in IQ scores. When resources were available, children were streamed into gifted classes or, at the other end of the spectrum, into segregated classes for those with learning difficulties.²⁴ All of this suggests that despite educators' claims to the contrary, children have generally not been at the heart of decisions regarding the physical and social contexts of learning; decisions about classroom organization and school design and programming have been grounded in concerns about the efficient use of financial and personnel resources. Diversity, in terms of culture, ethnicity, race, (dis)ability, and language, were for many decades seen as inconveniences and even threats to the school system. Difference was dealt with by forcing children to assimilate to some imagined and created sense of "Canadianness," by streaming and segregating them, or by excluding them. It is easy to see why some children would have seen school as something "done to" them rather than with or for them.

This is not to suggest, however, that students' ethnicities determined their educational path, or that students of racialized minorities simply accepted exclusionary practices aimed against them. Timothy Stanley's study of the 1922 Chinese student strike in Vancouver uses Chinese-language sources such as newspapers and correspondence to bring out the perspectives of the Chinese on their treatment by a racist school system. This innovative study reveals the exercise of agency by this community and the extent to which its resistance to racist policies helped define and empower the identity of its members as Chinese Canadians.²⁵ Robert Vipond's study of Clinton School in downtown Toronto demonstrates that through three different eras, principals, teachers, and parents at the school were not satisfied with accepting and implementing policy directives that were inappropriate for their students.²⁶ In the 1940s, the school's principal and teachers essentially ignored and then creatively worked around Ontario's Drew regulations, which required them to implement Christian religious instruction for their largely Jewish student population. In the 1950s and 1960s, the school initiated special English-as-a-second-language instruction long before the province or school district mandated it, because they recognized that their students, most of whom were first generation Canadians, required it. And in the 1980s, Clinton parents rejected the Toronto Board of Education's proposal for "heritage languages" programming at the school, not because they were opposed to multiculturalism or the support of their children's ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, but

because the school could not implement the range of programming their extremely diverse student population would have required without fundamentally undermining other elements of the school's programming parents and students valued, such as specialized music and physical education instruction. Studies such as Stanley's and Vipond's provide important insights into school communities that exercised discretion and even pushed back against policies and programs they deemed threatening for their communities, but they still largely communicate the views of adults in those communities. They suggest, however, the potential of and need for much more intensive study of the schooling experiences of students of diverse backgrounds, in order to learn more about their strategies of compliance, negotiation, and resistance.

Non-traditional Contexts

Historians have begun to examine some of the unusual or non-traditional contexts of public schooling. For example, some children in remote areas experienced very different kinds of schooling. Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Mona Gleason analyze unique sources—hundreds of letters that children and parents in remote, rural communities sent to British Columbia's Elementary Correspondence School (ECS) in the 1920s and 1930s—to consider “the key role the environment played in shaping [the children's] culture of play and work, their view of the world around them, and their belonging to broader communities beyond their families.”²⁷ While other historians of schooling have demonstrated how formal schooling shaped students' identities and reproduced social norms, this study provides insights into the role of geographical spaces and the natural environment in children's informal education. Most impressively, it describes how children's relationships with their environment differed from that of their parents. While the parents' letters often describe their concerns and feelings of isolation, the children

tended to focus their letter writing to the ECS on what they were learning from their engagement with the land. While negotiating the same harsh and isolating conditions as their parents, they also wrote about the beauty of their natural surroundings, the enjoyment, and challenges it could pose, and the lessons they learned about the world and themselves by engaging with it.²⁸

Sources such as these letters are valuable in communicating the unique and powerful ways in which children understood and experienced their learning contexts, despite the ways adults understood or tried to manage them. But examining contexts like correspondence or home-schooling settings also serves to illustrate how unique such contexts actually were and how few students experienced them.

Culture of Schooling and Student Experiences

The history of schooling contexts over the course of the late-nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century reflects increasing efforts to use financial and personnel resources efficiently and to make schools more comfortable places to be. But historians'

studies of school and classroom culture demonstrate that, until the 1960s, they were not particularly congenial.

Discipline

Houston and Prentice demonstrate the extent to which physical discipline dominated public schools in the late nineteenth century. The vague guideline that teachers exercise the discipline of a “judicious parent” gave teachers considerable latitude in punishing disobedient, defiant, or recalcitrant students. To clarify the limits of such punishment, they point to the class notes of normal school students of the period that directed them to avoid “flogging, hair pulling, striking a child while angry or on the head” and to department of education and newspaper reports that criticize teachers for “excessive punishment” if marks were left on a child.²⁹

Corporal punishment continued to be the norm through much of the twentieth century. Vipond’s study of Clinton School indicates that in the early 1930s students were strapped frequently for offenses such as breaking school rules, insubordination, fighting, destroying school property, and laziness. His analysis also reveals the significant gender bias in the use of corporal punishment since 95 per cent of students so disciplined were boys.³⁰ Margaret Mackey, in her self-study of learning to read in 1950s St. John’s, Newfoundland, refers to the “institutionalized violence” that taught children “to manage [their] unruly bodies.” She too notes that it was unusual for a girl to be strapped.³¹ Mona Gleason, in an analysis of twenty autobiographies of Canadians who attended school from 1930 to 1960, stresses that “children were expected to learn and remember important lessons regarding submission to authority and control over urges to disobey or to act out.”³² By this time corporal punishment was more formalized and ritualized as “getting the strap,” but her sources indicate “both male and female teachers... used corporal punishment as an acceptable part of the process of schooling.”³³ Vipond’s study demonstrates a gradual decline in the use of the strap in the 1940s and 1950s, which might have had more to do with the values and beliefs of the school principals than changing social expectations. In the end, in spite of being banned by the Toronto Board of Education in 1971 and the province of British Columbia in 1973, it was not until 2004 that the Supreme Court of Canada prohibited the use of the strap in all Canadian schools.³⁴

Teachers had other ways to ensure students’ compliance. Even if they avoided the use of corporal punishment, they could be stern, and they could humiliate their students. Historian Paul Axelrod, in his reminiscence of his school experience in the 1950s, says that fear was his most “dominant recollection”:

fear of very strict teachers who tolerated not the slightest interruption in class; fear of not getting my homework done well or on time; fear, in the junior grades, of colouring outside the lines; fear in senior grades of forgetting the English poems and New Testament biblical passages that I, a Jewish student, was expected to memorize; fear of not performing satisfactorily on examinations... and, most of all, fear of the leather strap which was liberally, or should I say conservatively, meted out to the recalcitrant, the insubordinate, or the unlucky.³⁵

Formalism

Many historians have demonstrated the extent to which and the length of time Canadian classrooms were dominated by formalism, “with its emphasis on strict discipline, rote learning and memorization.”³⁶ Gidney and Millar’s analysis of sources such as provincial programs of study, authorized textbooks, and department of education regulations in the first half of the twentieth century indicates that students experienced classrooms characterized by a high level of teacher direction and routines that stressed drill, uniformity, and accuracy. They argue that students spent most of their day learning “tool” subjects related to literacy and arithmetic. They were drilled in spelling and arithmetic. They read aloud and recited poetry. They memorized essential facts in history, geography, and sometimes nature study.³⁷ They contend that although new ideas about schooling and child-centred learning emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in Canada, there was remarkable continuity in the nature of schooling and children’s classroom experiences from the 1880s to at least the 1930s. In their view, while Canadian educators may have begun to use the rhetoric of progressive education, classrooms remained formal, structured spaces dominated by teachers.³⁸

This description of classroom culture is supported by Sutherland, whose interviews “follow[ed] the pupils through their day, their week and their school year, describing what they learned and how their teachers taught it”³⁹ in scrupulous detail. He stressed the remarkable consistency in his narrators’ memories of schooling characterized by rituals, routines, rote learning, and rigidity. Gleason too concludes that “the atmosphere in schools in the memories of Canadians surveyed here was characterized as a combination of strict discipline, impenetrable hierarchies, racial intolerance, and often harsh circumstances.”⁴⁰ Vipond quotes Clinton School’s principal acknowledging, in 1961, that “you, the pupils, learn to read, spell, write and many other skills in your classrooms. Much of the work... is merely composed of exercises which the teachers have assigned. Sometimes it must seem boring and of little use.”⁴¹ And yet many if not most children and parents expected schools to be like this. Sutherland’s participants said they enjoyed school. As harsh and even unpleasant as students’ classroom experiences may seem to interviewees of later generations, Sutherland’s research clearly demonstrates that “[c]hildren’s experience of schooling is obviously more than its parts.”⁴²

Certain activities were highlights of the school year. Preparation for the annual Christmas concert, practising the Maypole dance, and rehearsing for a school band performance were learning experiences that departed from the daily routine.⁴³ Clinton School students had vivid and fond recollections of field trips to concerts and libraries, of overnight camping and tours of historic sites, of performances in the local music festival, and of a range of clubs, sports teams, and charitable efforts in which they participated in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁴

For many children the best part of school were the extracurricular activities “that both built on, and served as something of an antidote to, the more monotonous routines of everyday classroom life.”⁴⁵ In 1987, Nancy Sheehan argued that if teachers’ classroom pedagogy in the 1920s and 1930s remained stubbornly formalist, many students experienced activity-based and community service learning through their

participation in thousands of Junior Red Cross clubs across Canada. Drawing on the *Canadian Red Cross Junior* magazine and newsletters from across the country, Sheehan demonstrates that clubs were established by teachers and met during class time, but students learned and lived out skills of democratic citizenship by leading meetings, acting as officers of the clubs, and organizing subcommittees to carry out fundraising activities.⁴⁶

Cynthia Comacchio's research stresses the importance of schools' extracurricular activities on the developing culture of adolescence in the 1930s and 1940s. While debates continued among educators regarding the appropriate balance of academic preparation and vocational training in the formal curriculum, clubs, teams, and social activities "reflected and projected the new social meanings ascribed to adolescence."⁴⁷ Drawing on student-produced but teacher-supervised sources such as student yearbooks, she demonstrates the extent to which organized activities such as student government, cadet programs, school sports, and dances reinforced gender, ethnic, and social class conformity and were seen as opportunities for the healthy socialization of youth.

School and classroom culture has been about a move from prominence and centrality of teacher authority to acknowledging individual freedom/choice/interests of students. That the stress was for so long and so emphatically on the former in classrooms might be why students remember their extracurricular involvements so fondly.

Content: Curriculum, Textbooks, and Other Materials

George Tomkins's *A Common Countenance* remains the only monograph to provide a historical overview of official programs of study and therefore the content of children's schooling across Canada. He demonstrates the extent to which the values and issues that dominated Canadian society were reflected in school curriculum, stressing, "cultural conflict in Canadian education has characteristically been curriculum conflict."⁴⁸ Despite the fact that provinces have jurisdiction over public schooling, Tomkins identifies national trends that arose over time as schools responded to economic and social issues: the rise of technical education to prepare students for an industrialized economy; an emphasis on cultural assimilation or "Canadianization" at times of increased immigration; more accommodation of vocational education and other courses to meet the demands of growth in the number and diversity of the student population; and the introduction of Canadian studies and bilingual programs later in the twentieth century as Canadians grappled with new understandings of Canadian identity. Tomkins also identifies remarkable continuity in many characteristics of Canadian school curriculum. While there were always concerns that schooling should be practical, it was generally academic and subject-centred. While the explicitly religious tenor of the curriculum faded, schooling remained committed to moral regulation. Provincial departments of education continued to impose curriculum requirements, student assessment procedures, and the materials that were to be used in classrooms.

From the outset of state schooling, curriculum was defined by textbooks. Houston and Prentice explain that, in the first decades of compulsory schooling,

“school-books were counted upon to convey the ‘useful knowledge’ necessary to deal with the practicalities of life and to provide an inkling of the standards of belief and behavior expected by adult society.”⁴⁹ Until the 1960s, while many things changed, the place of the textbook in classrooms remained constant. Every provincial department of education provided a list of textbooks authorized as suitable for use by students. These books served as the interpretation of curricular intents, forming the basis for instruction and student assessment. Given the fact that provincial examinations were based on them, school inspectors looked for their use, teachers were often inexperienced and ill-educated themselves and had few other sources of information, and they (particularly the readers) were a convenient way of sorting students for purposes of instruction, it is no wonder that they were central to the school experience. (What is surprising is how long it took provincial departments of education to take on the responsibility of ensuring that students did not have to furnish their own textbooks, a responsibility that was a burden for many parents.)⁵⁰

There is general agreement that, until mid-century, textbooks were patriotic and citizenship was imperialistic in nature.⁵¹ Owrarn describes a school day that still started with the Lord’s Prayer and the singing of “God Save the Queen.” There was a Red Ensign or a Union Jack in the classroom, and in some places, students pledged allegiance to the flag.⁵² The school curriculum fostered the virtues of citizenship that, in this period, meant “loyalty to the imperial idea, to the British monarchy, to the Union Jack as its symbol, and to the idea that patriotism meant being prepared to fight side by side with Britain in its defence of freedom.”⁵³ Benjamin Bryce’s examination of articles in the teacher journal *The School*, in which teachers shared their successful projects about citizenship and Empire, supports Gidney and Millar’s findings. Bryce provides a description of how teacher Dorothy Moorcroft and her Ontario class celebrated Empire Day:

Children dressed in typical English, Scottish and Irish clothing and another boy representing “the white population of Australia” appeared on stage in front of their classmates... one child represented “an Eskimo boy” by having a “dusting of cocoa on his face” and another in an Indian costume “complete with warpaint.”⁵⁴

Bryce concludes that by placing “Aboriginal people living in territories claimed by the Canadian state in the same discussion as non-European peoples in India and New Zealand [Moorcroft]... underscores one way that colonialism and imperial nationalism functioned together.”⁵⁵

Penney Clark has found that the central nation-building narrative of Canadian history textbooks has excluded certain groups, women and Indigenous people in particular. Indigenous people were the “other” in textbooks until the mid-twentieth century. She reports that many studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s found errors of fact, glaring omissions, and negative stereotyping in textbook depictions of Indigenous people.⁵⁶

Clark examined the portrayals of women in Canadian history textbooks authorized in British Columbia over the course of the twentieth century. Again, the nation-building narrative leaves women on the sidelines. Clark points out that:

Textbooks present an approved and even “official” version of how young people are intended to understand their world. They reflect the prevailing views of the historical period in which they are written and selected by the state educational apparatus for use in schools. As such, they provide fascinating evidence of change—but also of continuity—in the ways in which women’s place in the broader Canadian society has been remembered over time.⁵⁷

Clark notes changes over time. Textbooks in the 1920s and 1930s portray women, when present, as parasitic and weak. In the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, women were apparently required to possess royal status or be a famous writer to be included, presumably because such women left documentation of their lives behind. The Royal Commission on the Status of Women conducted a study of elementary readers, social studies, mathematics and guidance textbooks as part of its mandate. Its 1970 report concluded that “a woman’s creative and intellectual potential is either underplayed or ignored in the education of children from their earliest years.”⁵⁸

Although textbooks were central to instruction, they were not the only materials used in schools. In her examination of the experiences of English-Canadian children during the First World War, Susan Fisher demonstrates how Canada’s involvement in the war enhanced the existing imperial and Anglocentric nature of school curriculum. Provincial departments of education provided pamphlets that teachers could use in lessons about the war effort, and distributed dramatic scripts and songbooks featuring patriotic selections such as “Keep the Home Fires Burning” and “Rule Britannia” for public performances.⁵⁹ Schoolchildren “did their bit” by buying war stamps, raising money through a host of projects such as selling the produce from their school gardens and knitting socks or washcloths for soldiers serving overseas. These were powerful lessons in the privileges and responsibilities associated with citizenship in the British Empire. Fisher acknowledges that at least some children may have reacted negatively to these messages and activities, but argues “it would have been a hard case indeed who could still hold out when reminded of how men—even their own fathers, brothers, cousins, or uncles—were dying on the battlefields.”⁶⁰

In 1986 Robert Patterson argued that “the years between 1930 and 1945 were the halcyon days of progressive thought in Canadian education.”⁶¹ His careful examination of policy documents, programs of study, and professional publications indicates that Canadian educational leaders—educators in departments of education, normal school instructors, school inspectors—took up progressive understandings of schooling with some enthusiasm. They stressed the function of schools in preparing students for democratic citizenship and co-operative living. They advocated subject-integrated and project-based approaches to instruction. Patterson, however, also stresses that these educators were not progressive ideologues: “Moderation and caution were bywords from the earliest stages of the movement in Canada.”⁶² Patterson’s

research indicated that changes in the rhetoric of educators generally and in programs of study specifically did not result in a transformation of children's classroom experiences. Drawing extensively from data drawn from questionnaires completed by retired teachers in the western provinces, Patterson concluded "ambivalence, confusion and reluctance seemed to typify the teacher's experience with progressive education in Canada during the Depression and World War II."⁶³ He identified poor training, and a lack of appropriate resources as key reasons for what was a superficial understanding and implementation of new child-centred activity programs at best.

Other historians have taken up Patterson's questions related to the extent to which progressive curriculum reforms actually changed children's experiences of schooling. Patrice Milewski's oral history of teachers who taught during the implementation of Ontario's progressive elementary program revealed they had little memory of significant change. Those who recalled the 1937 curriculum revision associated it only with greater flexibility in their teaching and giving students more opportunity to be more independent in their learning.⁶⁴ Lynn Lemisko and Kurt Clausen argue that there is little evidence to suggest that teachers in either Alberta or Ontario made serious efforts to shift towards teaching practices consistent with child-centred, project-based progressivism.⁶⁵ These findings are consistent with Robert Stamp's brief memoir in which he describes "march[ing] from a progressive activity-oriented playground into a traditional desks-in-straight-rows, sit-down-and-be-quiet 1940s Ontario elementary school."⁶⁶ There is therefore a consensus among historians that the progressive curriculum revisions of the 1930s did not transform students' learning experiences in ways or to the extent their creators had hoped.

Amy von Heyking takes a different stance, insisting that rather than dismissing progressive curriculum reform as a failure, it is helpful to consider the limited ways in which teachers tried to modify their practices by taking up strategies they felt were useful. She stresses that taking this perspective might help us better understand the ways in which teachers adapt programs and practices for their own purposes and contexts. Her research suggests that, at least in Alberta, one major element of the progressive curriculum revision, the introduction of multidisciplinary, issues-focused social studies as a school subject, endured.⁶⁷ Moreover, using sources such as teachers' and students' memoirs, newspaper articles, and the department of education's correspondence with federal departments, she suggests that by the 1940s Alberta students were engaging in a range of new learning activities such as building projects, conducting research, and discussing and debating the current events of the day.⁶⁸ So while progressive pedagogies were not adopted wholesale, there was a growing understanding that classrooms should be more pleasant spaces in which children could engage in a range of learning activities—hands-on and collaborative as well as independent and bookish. This historical research supports the work of scholars of educational change who see the change process as one characterized by renovation, rather than by transformation.

If revision to the formal curriculum was slow and difficult to implement, educators could respond to global events quickly through extracurricular activities. Sarah Glassford shows how the International Red Cross's interwar message of international

peace and cooperation shifted to patriotic efforts to support the war during the Second World War. School-based IRC clubs, which in this period boasted over three-quarters of a million student members, raised money by selling their handmade quilts, producing and selling school magazines, and putting on school performances and athletic events.⁶⁹ The work of these historians and others demonstrates how powerfully and how quickly global crises and conflicts impacted Canadian schools.⁷⁰

Tomkins asserts that, after 1960, “rapid social change was reflected in rapid oscillations between subject-centred, work-centred and child-centred reform.”⁷¹ By the late 1960s, a pedagogical shift was beginning to take place. Most provinces had a royal commission or other official investigation of schooling. These reports, most notably the 1968 *Living and Learning* (Hall-Dennis Report) in Ontario and the 1972 *Report of the Commission on Educational Planning* (Worth Report) in Alberta, were neo-progressive in tone, calling for individualized and child-centred approaches that would make use of a variety of resources rather than a single prescribed textbook.⁷² These changes were ushered in in full force in the 1970s and altered many children’s experiences of schooling.

Conclusion

So to what extent have historians been successful in meeting Gaffield’s challenge to go back to school? Have we illuminated students’ perspectives on the experience that in many ways defined childhood in the twentieth century, going to school? Canadian educational historiography describes the context, culture, and content of schooling. It clarifies the role of schools in state formation and the ways in which children were the focus of the development of Canadian national identity. Historians have illuminated how adults’ concerns and priorities shaped students’ educational opportunities (and lack of opportunities). They have demonstrated that despite adults’ attempts to protect and regulate children in school, global issues and events impacted schools and even empowered students.

Historians need to continue to explore the range of contexts in which students received their formal education, while also paying close attention to how children responded to those contexts. Canadian educational historiography indicates that curriculum revisions created by a cadre of educational specialists do not necessarily shift classroom culture. Now it needs to address the ways in which students responded to, resisted, or embraced the curriculum adults designed for, and delivered to, them. What did it mean to be a child who was the focus of a formalistic or a child-centred curriculum?

Historians have been remarkably creative and tenacious in finding rich and diverse archival sources. They have listened to and critically interrogated adults’ reminiscences of their childhood schooling experiences. But there is more to be done. Now they need to seek out sources that illuminate students’ voices and perspectives. As Kristine Alexander has noted, children are still “more often spoken for and about than they are allowed to speak.”⁷³

Additional Readings

These additional readings have been selected because each represents the use of sources that reveal aspects of children's school experiences often not recorded in reports and other official documents. These include memoirs, oral histories, class photographs, student contributions to school yearbooks, and individual student records.

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- Raptis, Helen with Members of the Tsimshian Nation. *What We Learned: Two Generations Reflect on Tsimshian Education and the Day Schools*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016.
- Spike, Sara. "Picturing Rural Education: School Photographs and Contested Reform in Early Twentieth-Century Rural Nova Scotia." *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 49–71.
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Notes

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- 2 *Ibid.*, 182.
- 3 George S. Tomkins, *A Common Countenance: Stability and Change in the Canadian Curriculum* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1985), 4. A reprint of this book was issued by Pacific Educational Press in 2008.
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- 7 Susan E. Houston and Alison Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 205.
- 8 Rollings-Magnusson, "Slates, Tarpaper Blackboards, and Dunce Caps," 41.
- 9 R. D. Gidney and W. Millar, *How Schools Worked: Public Education in English Canada, 1900–1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 95.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 99.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 81–86.
- 12 Neil Sutherland, "'The Triumph of Formalism': Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s," in *Children, Teachers and Schools in the History of British Columbia*, 2nd ed., ed. Jean Barman and Mona Gleason (Calgary: Detselig, 1995), 324.
- 13 Doug Oram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 123.
- 14 Kurt Clausen, "Educational Reform in Ontario: The Importance of Pleasant Avenue School, 1962–1975," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 67–88.
- 15 Houston and Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars*, 215–16.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 218.
- 17 Neil Sutherland, "The Paid and Unpaid Work of Urban Children," 113–141, and "The Working Lives of the Children of Modern Pioneers," 142–68, in *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).
- 18 Gidney and Millar, *How Schools Worked*, 32–40.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 20 Michael Corbett, *Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling in a Coastal Community* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2007).
- 21 Gidney and Millar, *How Schools Worked*, 231.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 42–50.
- 23 Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling, and the Family in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 120.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 122.
- 25 Timothy J. Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy: School Segregation, Anti-Racism, and the Making of Chinese Canadians* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).
- 26 Robert Vipond, *Making a Global City: How One Toronto School Embraced Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).
- 27 Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Mona Gleason, "The Land Is My School: Children, History and the Environment in the Canadian Province of British Columbia," *Childhood* 23, no. 2 (2016), 273.
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- 29 Houston and Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars*, 193.
- 30 Vipond, *Making a Global City*, 41–43.
- 31 Margaret Mackey, *One Child Reading: My Auto-Bibliography* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2016), 450.
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- 37 Gidney and Millar, *How Schools Worked*, 201–8.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 200–1.
- 39 Sutherland, "The Triumph of Formalism," 319–20.
- 40 Gleason, "Disciplining the Student Body," 202.
- 41 Vipond, *Making a Global City*, 92.
- 42 Sutherland, *Growing Up*, 217.
- 43 Helen Raptis, "Remembering the School Christmas Concert," *BC History* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 4–8; Gerald Thomson, "140 Years of May Day in New Westminster, 1870–2010," *BC History* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 9–15; Geoffrey James Booth, "Managing the Muses: Musical Performance and Modernity in the Public Schools of Late-Nineteenth Century Toronto," *Historical Studies in Education* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 1–20.
- 44 Vipond, *Making a Global City*, 92–3.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 46 Nancy Sheehan, "Junior Red Cross in the Schools: An International Movement, a Voluntary Agency, and Curriculum Change," *Curriculum Inquiry* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 247–66.
- 47 Cynthia Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of Modern Canada, 1920 to 1950* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 113; see also Gidney and Millar, *How Schools Worked*, 215, 220–1, 256–60.
- 48 Tomkins, *A Common Countenance*, 2.
- 49 Houston and Prentice, *Schooling and Scholars*, 239.
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- 52 Owsram, *Born at the Right Time*, 129.
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