

## Revisiting the Progressive Education Debate: Ontario Schooling in the 1950s

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the debate over progressive education in Ontario pedagogy during the 1950s and expands upon the work of previous scholars who argue that schooling in the 1950s was neither strictly traditional nor progressive but rather a blend of the two approaches. This study expands upon previous research by looking at various school boards in the province. Drawing upon original research from provincial and school board archives, as well as professional education journals, I conclude that although traditionalism was a common approach in Ontario education, the reality was that the 1950s were not as conservative as some scholars have argued, and that there was more nuance in pedagogy, with pockets of progressive experimentation throughout the province.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine le débat sur l'éducation progressive dans la pédagogie de l'Ontario au cours des années 50 et enrichit les travaux d'anciens universitaires soutenant que l'école à cette époque n'était ni exclusivement traditionnelle ni progressive, mais était plutôt le résultat combiné de ces deux approches éducatives. Cette étude approfondit également le champ des recherches précédentes en portant son regard sur divers conseils scolaires de la province. S'appuyant sur les recherches originales provenant des archives provinciales et des conseils scolaires, ainsi que sur les revues spécialisées d'éducation, l'auteur en arrive à la conclusion que, même si l'approche traditionaliste en éducation était courante en Ontario, les années 50 n'ont pas été aussi conservatrices que certains chercheurs l'affirment, et qu'il y avait en pédagogie de nombreuses nuances, avec le développement d'îlots d'expérimentation progressive à travers toute la province.

In 1955, W. T. MacSkimming, the Ottawa Public School Board's chief inspector, defended progressive teaching in his board. He wrote in his 1955 report that there "has been no neglect of the three Rs. We are convinced of the necessity for instruction in the so-called fundamental subjects of the curriculum, and there is an insistence on high standards of achievement." But it was no longer enough, he continued, to make

children proficient in the traditional three Rs. They must also receive a progressive education in good citizenship in a dangerous Cold War world.

The other problem of education—how best to equip children for the new atomic age dawning upon us—must get equal attention. We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that this age is vastly different from previous ages. The direction in which this new age will go—whether to peace and prosperity or to chaos—will depend, in large measure, upon the character of the generation now in school. The schools must work hand in hand with the home and the Church to create citizens whose will it will be to make the miracles of science the slaves of mankind, to check the lust for power and to walk in the ways of holiness.<sup>1</sup>

Progressive education is multidimensional and difficult to define. However, scholars have identified three forms of progressive education: administrative progressivism, in which the discipline and efficiency of science is brought to school management; social progressivism, in which schools are mobilized to solve social problems and renew society; and pedagogical progressivism, whose advocates stressed that school reform should be the outcome of a better understanding of children.<sup>2</sup> R. D. Gidney provides a helpful definition of pedagogical progressivism. He explains that it meant less emphasis on traditional academic subjects and more emphasis on practical life skills, including vocational education, and more concern with contemporary problems and issues in an era of urbanization and industrialization. Central to pedagogical progressivism, Gidney adds, was the belief that “the whole child goes to school.” That is, the school had a responsibility for more than just the child’s intellectual development but also the child’s social, emotional, and physical growth through the cultivation of good health habits, the ability to get along with others, and the child’s self-esteem.<sup>3</sup> In both curriculum and classroom practices, Gidney continues, pedagogical progressives believed the school must be “child-centred.”

The curriculum must focus on the interests, needs, and abilities of children; must actively engage them in the learning experience; must provide for individual differences in learning styles and the pace at which learning takes place. Self-directed learning was critical as well: students would learn best if they had opportunities to select their own learning experiences, or plan them in concert with peers and teachers, rather than have content and sequence simply imposed by adults.<sup>4</sup>

The opposite of progressivism was a traditional form of education, or formalism, as it was also known, in which the teacher’s authority over both the content to be learned, and over the students, was unquestioned. The essence of traditionalism, as Robert Vipond writes, “is the idea that teachers should talk and students should listen: that the curriculum consists of an ordered body of knowledge and that the job of the student is to master it—usually through repetition and memorization.”<sup>5</sup> The teacher

prepares the daily lesson plan based upon the content of a standardized textbook that all students are assigned, and the teacher questions the students based on the reading from the textbook. In addition, the teacher lectures and makes heavy use of the blackboard to reiterate and reinforce the lesson plan—what has been called the “chalk and talk approach.”<sup>6</sup> Grades and standardized examinations are used in the traditionalist approach to evaluate students.<sup>7</sup>

This article's focus is pedagogical progressivism in classrooms. The article is not concerned with administrative progressivism, or the school as a social agency (education as progressive social reform), nor with the theoretical or philosophical aspects of progressive education that have been examined elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Rather, the issue I address is the extent to which pedagogically progressive educational practices took place within Ontario classrooms during the 1950s. On this question of whether Ontario education in the 1950s could be characterized as progressive or traditional, historians fall roughly into two camps. Hugh A. Stevenson, Neil Sutherland, Robert M. Stamp, George S. Tomkins, and Gidney argue that postwar Ontario education was traditional, both in its emphasis on academic subjects, and the way in which teachers taught.<sup>9</sup> The hostility of William Dunlop, Ontario's education minister from 1951 to 1959, towards progressive education was cited by Gidney and Stamp as an additional factor contributing to the triumph of traditionalism.<sup>10</sup> Gidney dismisses Hilda Neatby's criticism that progressivism had run rampant in the schools as “patently off-target.”<sup>11</sup>

Another group of historians have challenged the idea of Ontario education in the 1950s as rigidly traditional, arguing that the system exhibited elements of both traditionalism and progressivism. These historians, including Paul Axelrod, Robert Vipond, Mona Gleason, and Doug Owrarn, recognize the traditional elements of hierarchy, the authority of the teacher, and consistent memorization in the province's schools in this period. But they also cite progressive practices originating from the curricular reforms of 1937 that were still in existence during the 1950s, including the teaching of social studies, music, art, and health education. Moreover, they point to progressive teaching methods, including experiments in reading and arithmetic, as well as the use of audio-visual aids such as motion pictures, film strips, magazines, newspapers, and reference books that supplemented the authorized textbooks.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Kristina Llewellyn has identified, in her study of postwar women teachers in Toronto and Vancouver, additional non-traditional pedagogical practices in schools in the 1950s. In particular, she points to teachers who ventured beyond the prescribed curriculum to add their own personal knowledge, or who required their students to read books not on the Department of Education's recommended textbook list.<sup>13</sup>

My argument in this article falls into the second camp, concurring with those historians who argue that education in Ontario during the 1950s exhibited aspects of both traditionalism and progressivism. However, the examples of progressive teaching practices offered by historians, particularly Axelrod, Vipond, and Llewellyn, are almost exclusively drawn from Toronto. I wanted to explore what was happening in other parts of the province to present a more comprehensive picture. Boards I

examined include those in Ottawa, St. Catharines, and to a lesser extent, Kitchener, Woodstock, and Wentworth County outside of Hamilton. Gidney suggests that progressive practices appeared to have been largely concentrated in schools within larger urban boards that, with their mixed residential and business assessments, would have had the resources to offer the newest buildings, the best equipment, the best-qualified teachers, and a richer mix of academic, vocational, and commercial programs that smaller urban or rural boards would not have had.<sup>14</sup> These were largely concentrated perhaps, but not reserved for these boards only. While I found progressivism in places such as Ottawa and Kitchener that fit Gidney's larger and urban description, I also found it in smaller urban and rural centres such as St. Catharines and Owen Sound.

In terms of research methodology, I reviewed the professional education journals from the era, specifically the *Bulletin* (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation), the *Canadian School Journal* (Canadian Educational Association), and the *Educational Courier* (Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario). Their readers and contributors included teachers, administrators, trustees, and others. These journals provide excellent examples of the pedagogical debates among teachers and other education professionals at the time, as well as specific examples of progressive practices within the classroom. To provide a comprehensive look into pedagogical practices, the professional education journals were supplemented by public school board minutes, school board reports found within the Ontario Department of Education records at the Archives of Ontario, as well as the records of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario housed at the Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections at York University. In reviewing these varied sources, I looked beyond the perspective of decision makers at the provincial level to provide the perspectives of decision makers at the board level and educators in the classroom.

### **Progressive Education Practices within Ontario Classrooms**

Despite the hostility of traditionalists such as William Dunlop, progressive education practices continued in classrooms throughout the province during the 1950s. For example, in Ottawa in 1951, grade 9 English and social studies classes in four secondary schools focused on activity programs. Over the course of the year, for one-third of class time, those classes were freed from the prescribed courses, allowing teachers to provide their students with what one Ottawa high school teacher described as "an opportunity to study at first-hand the social and economic structure of their community by seeing it in action," concluding that such an experience "will be of even greater value than the traditional book work."<sup>15</sup>

Known as "The Ottawa Experiment," the community-based activity program established by the Collegiate Institute Board of Ottawa in 1945 had students and their teachers visiting dairies, bakeries, laundries, factories, mills, and newspaper offices. In addition, students also attended sessions of Parliament, municipal council, and sittings of the magistrates' court. Students saw how their city purified its water supply, protected its homes from fire, and cared for the sick. Students also studied transportation in the carbarn, roundhouse, and airport, as well as attending explanatory talks

in the library, the art gallery, and the observatory.<sup>16</sup> Upon returning to their classrooms, students talked about what they had seen, and they wrote about it in short or long reports and conducted research on related topics. According to an article in the *Bulletin*, students benefitted from the experience as they “develop a noticeable ease in oral and written expression and an ability to observe clearly and to think independently that should stay with them through the years.” Equally important, they learned to explain things to one another and conduct their programs without dependence on the teacher.<sup>17</sup> As for the teachers, they developed new methods of teaching and, like their students, learned from one another.<sup>18</sup> The community field trips in which students visited public institutions dedicated to the common good would likely have been examples of the kind of character education that Chief Inspector W. T. MacSkimming so vigorously defended in his 1955 report to the Ottawa Public School Board mentioned at the outset of this article.

Progressive approaches were also implemented in other parts of the province. Like their counterparts in Ottawa, social studies students at York Memorial Collegiate in the Toronto suburb of York Township visited various local institutions, observed housing conditions, studied local industries, made surveys, and went on conservation expeditions.<sup>19</sup> Some of the York Memorial teachers took their students on trips to Ottawa and to the United Nations in New York that required preliminary preparation, and afterward, the students were required to provide oral and written reports.<sup>20</sup> At Kitchener-Waterloo Collegiate and Vocational School, commercial students were offered a “unique course in Salesmanship” that entailed building floor and window displays for local merchants, conducting sales demonstrations in the classroom, and working in retail stores two afternoons a week.<sup>21</sup> History students at Hudson Park Secondary School in Woodstock had an opportunity to ask questions of a visiting panel of five MPs representing all of the political parties. Among the questions they asked were “Should the Senate be abolished?” “What is Parliament doing about a national flag and a national anthem?” “What attitude does the Canadian government take on giving Red China a seat in the United Nations?”<sup>22</sup> The specific responses from the MPs were not recorded but were described as “emphatic and straightforward.” Hudson Park Principal S. R. Blair observed that the students were “enthusiastic” about the visit, both beforehand and afterward, and that the school would continue to invite MPs to visit.<sup>23</sup> The inspector of public schools for the County of Wentworth outside of Hamilton argued that “Teaching is getting children to work for themselves from the starting point of interest... Helping pupils to accept a goal and to work toward it is the basic method in social studies.” The inspector provided the example of a teacher who suggested a different approach to students in her class who struggled to understand a political map of Canada: “When their teacher made a surprise suggestion that they redraft it along lines acceptable to themselves, they showed their first enthusiasm of the term.”<sup>24</sup>

In other boards, local education officials wanted to experiment with innovations to established programs. W. M. Prudham, the principal of Owen Sound Collegiate, requested permission from the province to introduce a general program of studies for gifted students in which those students could complete the program of grades 9 to 12

in three years instead of four. In addition to the obligatory courses of English, social studies, history, mathematics, science, French, and physical education, students in the new program would select one course option from shop work, home economics, art, music, commercial work, or Latin in the first year and one of those or German or geography in the second and third years.<sup>25</sup> In an effort to increase high school participation rates for students who could not complete the high school program that was heavily weighted towards academic subjects, E. L. Crossley, principal of Pelham District High School in Fenwick near Niagara Falls, wrote to a Department of Education official to seek permission from the province to establish a new grade 9 course aimed at struggling older students in which they would conclude their studies at the end of grade 10.<sup>26</sup> Although somewhat apprehensive about the Owen Sound experiment, senior Department of Education officials believed both requests had merit and cautiously provided departmental authorization.<sup>27</sup>

Grade 10 students in Blanche Snell's social studies class at York Memorial Collegiate debated historical topics such as "The United States Should Not Have Broken Away from Britain," and went on conservation trips outside of the classroom, including a two-day camp near Bolton on the Humber River.<sup>28</sup> Ruth Morrison, a student in Snell's class, explained how she benefitted from her teacher's progressive approach.

In the use of groups our pride was aroused. We wanted to make sure that we knew everything about the topic so we could answer the sharp questions of our friends. When debating we had to know all the facts... so our opponents could not surprise us with new information. At camp when we actually saw the conservation projects and their results we learned more quickly and remembered more, longer. We agreed that we learned more in those two days at camp than we could have learned in two weeks at school.<sup>29</sup>

For her part, Snell, writing in the *Bulletin* in 1957, explained that "after many years of analysis of my own teaching experiences I *choose* the social studies" in which the teacher is an experimenter driven by conviction and enthusiasm.<sup>30</sup> Snell acknowledged the difficulty of her progressive approach: "Nor have I found it the easy way. Both training and experience have ingrained another [traditionalist] pattern." But, she added, "if history teaches us anything, it is that to cling to the status quo or to long for the past has always attracted more minds than to blaze new trails or to forge new idioms."<sup>31</sup> She understood that as someone "schooled in the days of the horse and buggy," she had to change her approach to teaching now that she lived in "the days of the super-jet; the radio, Hi-Fi and TV set" because "I became less sure of what I was doing" and she did not know what her students would need when they were thirty years old.<sup>32</sup> In contrast to the "lock-step system of learning," Snell found the social studies approach called for "freedom for the teacher as well as for the pupil." What did that mean in practice? Snell provided the example of how, for a class on the formation of the earth, she took her grade 10 students to the Royal Ontario Museum where "in smaller groups they got a clearer meaning of the terms archeology, geology,

paleontology, anthropology” and cleared up some of the confusion and “common fallacies about race.”<sup>33</sup>

In another lesson, and as an indication of Snell’s commitment to encouraging her students to think critically as opposed to rote learning, the class “examined the term nationalism, its strengths and its weaknesses... [as well as] attempts to control rampant national sentiments by a three-week study of the evolution of a united nations’ concept and of the structure and work of the present United Nations organization.”<sup>34</sup> Sometimes the traditional textbook was necessary, but Snell noted that even that could be incorporated into group work with the class working together to find the author’s main and supporting arguments or reading communally to find the facts that were needed. At other times, she challenged her students to go beyond the textbook to conduct research in the library for individual papers that she conceded was “difficult and exacting” for some, “the organization and writing even more so. But they enjoyed the freedom.”<sup>35</sup> For a unit on the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes system, the class incorporated history and geography into their fact finding, as well as government reports, maps, and Ontario Hydro pamphlets for each student. The students were then divided into pairs, each responsible for finding materials in the section they had selected and then selecting and organizing what they thought the class should know and then teaching it to the class. Snell described the skill sets the students learned: “This unit added one skill not called for in the other units, the skill of working in a room with others, and then taking control of the whole group. The group, at the same time, was wholly dependent upon the two in charge for any information acquired.”<sup>36</sup> Alluding to the challenge of the progressive approach, Snell acknowledged that “the teacher is in constant demand, must know the resource materials, [and] accept the exhaustion it sometimes creates and to keep the discouragements in their proper perspective.”<sup>37</sup> But in Snell’s assessment, the benefits for students in terms of personal growth and development as learners justified the additional work, as she explained.

First of all, there was the ability to find information, to weigh it, to separate the important from the unimportant; to reserve judgment before the evidence is at hand; to work independently; to put the case for a point of view or a small body of facts with clarity and dispatch in both oral and written form and to accept the responsibility for doing so as a personal contribution to the group’s learning rather than as an assignment by the teacher; to accept the decision of the majority and yet to hold a contrary opinion. Surely these are all qualities that make for good adult living in any democracy.<sup>38</sup>

Although Snell said that she and her students continually assessed their achievements, she was aware of the criticisms of traditionalists that students in social studies classes “do not learn facts, get little historical perspective, enjoy all play and have no pain, are the victims of indoctrination.” In reply, Snell stated “I am afraid I am not prepared to make claims which I cannot substantiate scientifically any more than I take too seriously the attacks of the critics who cannot substantiate their claims scientifically.”<sup>39</sup>

Snell partially conceded that the young teacher trained in the traditionalist approach might find experimenting with a progressive approach to result in disaster versus the more experienced teacher, but she claimed there were examples of young teachers easing themselves into the social studies approach, and she deplored the lack of assistance for such teachers during their training at the secondary level.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Snell praised the Ontario Department of Education for committing itself to “a policy of self-determination for its teachers, a policy which has pushed even those of us who are reluctant out of a state of subservience into a state of professional responsibility” that had allowed her to choose the social studies approach where “more real learning takes place in my classroom than it did before I reassessed what I was doing.”<sup>41</sup>

Blanche Snell’s progressive experimentation in her classroom is an example of teachers driving pedagogical innovations. Llewellyn provided examples of teacher agency during the 1950s that were not sanctioned by either local or provincial authorities such as Toronto teacher Phoebe McKenzie who went beyond the text in her Modern Russia class to add her own personal knowledge: “Now when we were studying Communism... we had a big blackboard summary with characteristics of Communism and we would fill the whole front board and part of the side board.... I was told that you could never do that in New York. Americans were absolutely scared skinny of Communism.”<sup>42</sup> Llewellyn also cited the example of Toronto teacher Karen Phillips, who required her students to read a novel that was not on the recommended list of textbooks from the Department of Education, specifically J. D. Salinger’s 1951 novel *Catcher in the Rye*.<sup>43</sup>

Teachers had different reasons for choosing to implement progressivism in their classrooms. For some teachers that implemented it, progressivism was tied to the postwar popularity of psychology and the rise of psychology in the schools—what Mona Gleason terms the “psychologizing” of postwar schooling in which the schools would foster “well-adjusted and productive citizens.”<sup>44</sup> Psychology, child development, and understanding children were part of the postwar teacher discourse. In her 1953 presidential address to the Federation of Women Teachers’ Associations of Ontario (FWTAO), Margaret Bennie connected psychology and progressivism.

In our Federation we realize that the teacher must not only know her subject, but more important, she must know children and young people. She must understand young people and know how to make it easier for them to learn. All of us as teachers in public schools must be in part psychologists, in part sociologists, and in addition professional persons ever alert to advances in the field of teaching. We must be guides, leading young people to knowledge not merely by the presentation of facts, but by helping them to test the facts through “whys” and “hows.” And today’s true teacher must not only teach the child his basic skills but give him the desire to learn and then satisfy that desire.<sup>45</sup>

In his study of postwar education in Toronto, Paul Axelrod concluded that educators were guided by pragmatism, not ideology, and that school policy was an amalgam of progressive and traditional approaches in which educators “were using available and

emerging tools to address the perceived instructional needs of a ballooning population. They employed what they thought worked.<sup>46</sup> Doug Owrarn argues that progressive practices in the classroom, including “education for democratic living,” were a manifestation of a growing anti-authoritarian ideology in the wake of the Second World War and during the Cold War, in which, unlike the societies under Hitler and Stalin, a healthy people would always struggle to be free. Democratic citizens, concludes Owrarn, are never produced in an autocratic school environment.<sup>47</sup>

My own research into Ontario education during the 1950s suggests that Owrarn may have overstated the yearning for freedom as the impetus towards progressive classroom practices because the democratic way of life that was taught within the secondary school curriculum, particularly in modern history and citizenship education within social studies, was a conservative form of democracy in which civil rights were balanced by civic and family responsibilities, hierarchy, and deference to authority.<sup>48</sup> It is plausible that progressive ideology connected to psychology may have influenced the classroom practices of some teachers. However, the progressive teaching experiments presented in this study lend credence to Axelrod’s interpretation that pragmatism reigned, with educators blending progressive and traditional practices because they believed their mixed approach was more effective.

### **Combining Progressive and Traditional Approaches**

Traditional and progressive elements often co-existed in Ontario classrooms. Historians such as Vipond and Axelrod have argued this in their studies of Toronto schools.<sup>49</sup> This was also the experience in Ontario’s smaller centres. The St. Catharines Public School Board provides another example of how progressivism and traditionalism coexisted. Under the headline “Educational Advances,” the December 1950 minutes from the school board reveal that at one elementary school a new junior kindergarten program for four-year-old children had started, as well as an experimental combined grade 1, 2, and 3 class at the same school, as recommended by the Department of Education. The teacher of the combined class arranged the curriculum so that subjects such as music, art, health, and physical training were taken together, whereas core subjects such as reading, arithmetic, and spelling were taken separately by groups.<sup>50</sup> At the secondary level, the St. Catharines Collegiate Institute and Vocational School added a new course in instrumental music to the curriculum.<sup>51</sup>

In March 1954, a few months after the publication of Hilda Neatby’s controversial *So Little for the Mind*, a vehement denunciation of progressive education, the St. Catharines inspector of public schools noted that the principal and staff “are putting the three R’s first in each school.... One school found English to be its weakest subject, and is concentrating on that. Another school is giving particular attention to Science.”<sup>52</sup> One may be tempted to conclude from the inspector’s report that, in Neatby’s wake, progressive initiatives within the schools were to be discarded in favour of an emphasis on traditional subjects—but the school board minutes reveal otherwise. Music programming in St. Catharines schools, for example, expanded during the 1950s. String and wind instruments were introduced at three public

schools with two classes per week, one at either 8:15 a.m. or 12:00 noon and the second during school hours, while a public school orchestra comprised of twenty advanced students from all schools rehearsed once per week.<sup>53</sup> The October 9, 1958, board minutes noted that vocal music was offered in all classes and grades in the St. Catharines public schools. At the same meeting, the board observed that “in the present school year, every effort will be made to further increase the quality of music instruction in our classrooms, and to create opportunities for worthwhile musical experiences for our children.”<sup>54</sup> Clearly the St. Catharines board did not view music as a frill.

### **Advancing Progressive Education through Audio-Visual Experimentation**

Progressive educators considered audio-visual technologies to be valuable tools in their efforts to provide a more engaging learning experience for their students. An article on social studies in the February 1957 issue of *The Educational Courier* included an image of a teacher showing a film to her class with the caption “... every practical means to make study a varied experience can be good.”<sup>55</sup> As historian Mona Gleason in her history of psychology, schooling, and the family in postwar Canada observed: “The use of technological aids, in particular, was thought to improve the educational experience for both child and teacher.”<sup>56</sup> In 1950, for a series in the *Canadian School Journal*, *Toronto Telegram* reporter Bruce Byrnes visited a number of Toronto schools to see what had changed from his years as a student. Whereas his memory of school was “trying to learn the courses and pass the exams,” Byrnes remarked on the innovations he witnessed at suburban Forest Hill Village Public School to break down barriers between students and teachers: “An example is the widespread use of movie shorts; the kids love it, and it makes the teacher’s lesson more vivid.”<sup>57</sup>

The St. Catharines board introduced television programming in the city’s schools in April 1956. The programs varied by grade level. For example, broadcasts scheduled for students in grades 3 and 4 included “Adventures in Speech,” and, as part of a natural science class, “How Does Your Garden Grow. [sic]” Students in grades 5 and 6 social studies watched a program on map-making and another entitled “Visiting the Moon.” Grade 7 and 8 students taking a course in practical living were scheduled to watch a program on “Design in Every Day Things,” with subsequent programming on such topics as “Gunpowder to Horsepower,” “The Birth of Confederation,” and “the Office and Life of the Governor-General of Canada.”<sup>58</sup> The board minutes indicated that the teaching procedure would be similar to that used for radio programs, in that prior to each showing “each teacher will teach a preliminary lesson to prepare children for the study of the topic. Following the showing the teacher will discuss and review highlights of what was shown.” Evaluation of television as a teaching medium would be conducted by “Retention Tests” on each program provided by the Department of Education and given to students one week following the telecasts.<sup>59</sup> In his report to the board one month after the introduction of television in the classrooms, the inspector of public schools was optimistic in his overall assessment.

There appears to be a place for this teaching aid. In those lessons which were suited to the age and ability levels of the pupils, there was an excellent response. The teachers believe that this medium is not yet as effective as radio and films, but with further improvements in presentation it may be.<sup>60</sup>

Teacher federations were mostly supportive of audio-visual aids in the classroom. On the subject of television in the classroom, delegates to the 1953 conference of the FWTAO acknowledged the complaints of some that television at home deprived children of sleep but concluded that those concerns were compensated by the potential of television as an educational aid.<sup>61</sup> In their 1956 brief with recommendations to the Royal Commission on Broadcasting, the Ontario Public School Men Teachers' Federation recommended that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) further develop the school broadcast program that "has met with the high approval of teachers. We have observed, with satisfaction, the continual improvement in this programme in meeting the needs of the curriculum in the schools."<sup>62</sup>

The Ontario Department of Education noted the steady increase in the use of audio-visual aids in schools. In 1951, 98 school broadcasts covering fifteen different school subjects were prepared in co-operation with the CBC over a network of twenty-three radio stations.<sup>63</sup> In 1955, the number of broadcasts had increased to 110 over twenty-seven radio stations and 8,333 schools reported owning a radio. That same year, films were shown to more than eight million students.<sup>64</sup>

### **Traditionalist Holdouts in Postwar Ontario Classrooms**

To be sure, traditionalism did not go away. As an element of the mix, it could be found in many places, something observers within and outside of educational circles noted. In a 1958 address to the Ontario Teachers' Federation, Past President R. J. Bolton declared "Progressive schools have never existed in Ontario. There have been, however, and there still remain some traces of Progressive Philosophy."<sup>65</sup> Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation Immediate Past President Claire E. Coughlin complained that "the so-called 'progressive' education which has filtered into our Ontario education is calling from our students only natural cognition and is delaying too long the necessary intellectual effort we must cause them to make if they are to be trained to think in an adult way."<sup>66</sup> In a 1959 editorial on a new Mathematics Commission, a joint initiative of the Ontario Teachers Federation and the Canadian Mathematical Congress to explore the introduction of new concepts of mathematics into secondary schools on an experimental basis, the *Toronto Star* cautioned that "Ontario high schools are not going to have a brand new kind of mathematics overnight" as methods of educating students would change slowly "partly because teachers like to look before they leap and most tend to be conservative—to teach the way they themselves were taught."<sup>67</sup>

Educators in Ottawa, Owen Sound, Fenwick, St. Catharines, and other places examined in this article embraced varying degrees of progressivism. However, rural and smaller urban school boards were not progressive bastions. They were also

numerous in Ontario in this period. The number of school boards in Ontario prior to the start of board amalgamation in the mid-1960s ranged from a high of 4,200 in 1950, declining to 3,700 in 1961.<sup>68</sup> Ingersoll Collegiate Principal Donald Thomas, who also served as second vice-president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, highlighted the resource disadvantage of smaller boards when he complained that "schools just can't handle academic education, technical education, religious education, social education, sex education, and sports education during the present school day, and with present funds available."<sup>69</sup> He sarcastically suggested that students who receive a progressive education earn credits in such "jolly subjects" as flower arrangements, interior decorating, and basket weaving.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Chatham resident W. M. Abraham, the retiring president of the County Council of the Ontario Educational Association, objected to the idea of community field trips during school hours, arguing such excursions infringed upon parental rights: "Such doctrines are alienating the child from its parents and making of the child a creature of the State." Abraham defended and praised the teachers in his county "who are doing excellent work in our Public Schools today, who are being belittled by the Educational Progressives, because their training does not include most of the fantastic subjects that are rightly classed as non-essential."<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

Although the progressive education experiments of the 1950s took place within a province whose dominant values and political culture were conservative,<sup>72</sup> the experimental child-centred teaching approaches, along with the increased use of audio-visual technologies in the classroom, indicate that a significant minority of teachers and school boards questioned the efficacy of a strictly traditional "chalk and talk" approach to teaching and were willing to try new approaches, whether progressive or—as I have argued was more commonly the case—a pragmatic blend of traditional and progressive. Moreover, the progressive program experiments in Ottawa, Kitchener, Owen Sound, St. Catherines, and Fenwick reveal a desire among board officials and educators to find ways to improve the learning experience, including for those students who may have struggled with the traditional academic program. The rising influence of psychology in the schools may have inspired the work of some progressive teachers, but the examples in this study suggest that pragmatism was the main motivating factor. The program and teaching innovations outlined in this article were also intended to provide a more meaningful and engaging education tied to contemporary societal issues. Those societal issues included the dangers of Cold War instability in a new atomic age characterized by unprecedented technological advances. For officials and educators such as Chief Inspector W. T. MacSkimming in Ottawa, Principal S. R. Blair at Hudson Park Secondary School in Woodstock, and social studies teacher Blanche Snell at York Memorial Collegiate in York Township, providing an education relevant to contemporary society took on added importance. In short, the old ways of the little red schoolhouse, focused on a traditional academic program of the three Rs, were no longer sufficient in a rapidly changing world.

Certainly traditionalism did not go away, and the progressive education experiments of the 1950s coexisted with traditional approaches—as Axelrod, Vipond, and others have noted. Looking at school boards beyond Toronto, which has been the predominant focus of historians of educational progressivism, adds to our understanding of postwar Ontario education.

## Notes

- 1 Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO), RG 2-43, Department of Education Central Registry Files, B350979, box MK6, file: Ottawa P.S. Bd. 1956, Chief Inspector's Annual Report, City of Ottawa Public Schools for the Year 1955, 15.
- 2 Amy von Heyking, "Selling Progressive Education to Albertans, 1935–1953," in *Schooling in Transition: Readings in Canadian History of Education*, ed. Sara Z. Burke and Patrice Milewski (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 340. See also Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). On administrative progressives, see David D. Tyack, *The One Best System* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 177–98. On pedagogical progressives, see Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993). Scholars also debate the philosophical influences underpinning the progressive education movement in early twentieth-century Ontario, particularly the American version of progressivism associated with philosopher, social critic, and Columbia University professor John Dewey, and the British version associated with the Hadow Reports of the late 1920s and early 1930s. See, for example, Theodore Michael Christou, *Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919–1942* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Patrice Milewski, "'The Little Gray Book': Pedagogy, Discourse and Rupture in 1937," in *Schooling in Transition*, 323–40.
- 3 R. D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 30–31.
- 4 Gidney, 31.
- 5 Robert Vipond, *Making a Global City: How One Toronto School Embraced Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 91–92.
- 6 Cited in George S. Tomkins, *A Common Countenance: Stability and Change in the Canadian Curriculum*, 2nd ed. (Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press, 2008), 298–99.
- 7 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 32.
- 8 Christou, *Progressive Education*; Milewski, "'The Little Gray Book.'" See also R. S. Patterson, "The Canadian Experience with Progressive Education," in *Canadian Education: Historical Themes and Contemporary Issues*, ed. E. Brian Tittle (Calgary: Detselig, 1990), 95–110.
- 9 Hugh A. Stevenson, "Developing Public Education in Post-War Canada to 1960," in *Canadian Education: A History*, ed. J. Donald Wilson, Robert M. Stamp, Louis-Philippe Audet (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 387; Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 192; Robert M. Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876–1976* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 192–93; Tomkins, *A Common Countenance*, 265; Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 32–33.
- 10 Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario*, 193, 201; Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 36.
- 11 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 35. Neatby was a University of Saskatchewan history professor whose 1953 book, *So Little for the Mind*, denounced progressive education as anti-intellectual, amoral, and anti-cultural. Hilda Neatby, *So Little for the Mind* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin and Company, 1953).

- 12 Paul Axelrod, "Beyond the Progressive Education Debate: A Profile of Toronto Schooling in the 1950s," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 17, no. 2 (2005), 230, 232, 236–37; Vipond, *Making a Global City*, 91–93; Doug Owrarn, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 127–28; Mona Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal: Psychology, Schooling, and the Family in Postwar Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 122.
- 13 Kristina Llewellyn, *Democracy's Angels: The Work of Women Teachers* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 118–20.
- 14 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 29.
- 15 Laura E. Rorke, Glebe CI, Ottawa, "An Ottawa Experiment," *Bulletin* 31, no. 3 (June 1951): 141.
- 16 Rorke, 141.
- 17 Rorke, 141.
- 18 Rorke, 141.
- 19 Myrtle H. Adams, York Memorial CI, "Social Studies and Preparation for Citizenship," *Bulletin* 35, no. 1 (January 31, 1955): 28.
- 20 Adams, 28.
- 21 "Education and Business Cooperate in Kitchener," *Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (January 1953), 22.
- 22 S. R. Blair, principal, Hudson Park SS, "An Experiment in Citizenship," *Bulletin* 35, no. 6 (November 1955): 314.
- 23 Blair, 314.
- 24 Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, York University, Federation of Women Teachers' Association of Ontario fonds, FWTAO 1999-027, box 571, Edith M. Deyell, "More Power to your Social Studies Techniques," *Educational Courier*, February 1957, 17.
- 25 AO, RG 2-43, Department of Education Central Registry Files, B353558, file: Owen Sound, W. M. Prudham to S. D. Rendall, Superintendent of Education, February 20, 1957.
- 26 AO, RG 2-43, Department of Education Central Registry Files, B353558, file: Pelham Dist HS Board, E. L. Crossley to J. F. Guenther, September 2, 1957.
- 27 AO, RG 2-43, Department of Education Central Registry Files, B353558, file: Owen Sound, F. C. Asbury to S. D. Rendall, February 22, 1957. See also in the same file a handwritten note to "Stan" (S. D. Rendall); AO, RG 2-43, Department of Education Central Registry Files, B353558, file: Owen Sound, S. D. Rendall to W. M. Prudham, March 6, 1957 AO, RG 2-43, Department of Education Central Registry Files, B353558, file: Pelham Dist HS Board, Deputy Minister of Education to E. L. Crossley, September 5, 1957.
- 28 Ruth Morrison, Gr. 10, York Memorial CI, "A Student's Report on Social Studies in a Core Class," *Bulletin* 35, no. 1 (January 31, 1955): 29.
- 29 Morrison, 29. Blanche Snell's progressive pedagogical approach has also been noted by other scholars. See Lorna McLean, "'There Is no Magic whereby such Qualities Will Be Acquired at the Voting Age': Teachers, Curriculum, Pedagogy and Citizenship," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 49; Bob Davis, *Whatever Happened To High School History? Burying The Political Memory of Youth, Ontario: 1945–1995* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1995), 28–29.
- 30 Blanche E. Snell, York Memorial CI, "I Choose the Social Studies," *Bulletin* 37, no. 2 (March 1957): 69.
- 31 Snell, 69.
- 32 Snell, 70.
- 33 Snell, 70.

- 34 Snell, 70.
- 35 Snell, 70.
- 36 Snell, 120–21.
- 37 Snell, 120–21.
- 38 Snell, 70.
- 39 Snell, 122.
- 40 Snell, 122.
- 41 Snell, 123.
- 42 Llewellyn, *Democracy's Angels*, 118. Phoebe McKenzie is a pseudonym.
- 43 Llewellyn, 119–20. Karen Phillips is a pseudonym. *Catcher in the Rye* tells the story of a disillusioned 16-year-old, Holden Caulfield, who, after his expulsion from prep school, rails against the superficiality of the adult world.
- 44 Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal*, 120. See also Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 116.
- 45 Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, York University, Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario fonds, FWTAO 1999-027, box 003, Presidential Address 1952–53, August 1953 [no pagination].
- 46 Axelrod, "Beyond the Progressive Education Debate," 240–41. Axelrod's reference to a ballooning population was a reference to the baby boom cohort that flooded the schools during the 1950s and into the 1960s. Between 1941 and 1971, Ontario's population more than doubled from 3,700,000 to 7,600,000. As a result, elementary school enrolments jumped 116 per cent between 1946 and 1961, while secondary enrolments rose 141 per cent during the same period. See Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 26–27.
- 47 Owram, *Born at the Right Time*, 127–28. Dominique Clément noted the anti-authoritarian impulse as he asserts that the postwar era saw the emergence of "Canada's Rights Revolution," in which Canadians, following the atrocities of the Second World War, asserted themselves as rights-bearing citizens. Dominique Clément, *Canada's Rights Revolution: Social Movements and Social Change, 1937–82* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), see chapter 2.
- 48 Frank K. Clarke, "The Impact of Cold War Events on Curriculum and Policies, and the Protection of Children in Postwar Ontario Education, 1948–1963" (PhD diss., York University, 2020), see chapter 3. Paul Axelrod also noted that the system in which educators governed remained ordered, disciplined, and hierarchical. Educational authorities, he writes, "believed that schools could not achieve their aims (progressive or otherwise) without strict discipline. Similarly, Christianity, the British monarchy, and capitalist democracy remained embedded in the province and were not threatened by the schools." Axelrod, "Beyond the Progressive Education Debate," 240–41.
- 49 Vipond, *Making a Global City*, 91–92; Axelrod, "Beyond the Progressive Education Debate," 230, 232, 236–40.
- 50 District School Board of Niagara (hereafter DSBN), minutes of the Board of Education, City of St. Catharines, November 9, 1950, 882, and December 28, 1950, 940.
- 51 DSBN, December 28, 1950, 940.
- 52 DSBN, March 11, 1954, 138.
- 53 DSBN, October 8, 1953, 362.
- 54 DSBN, October 9, 1958, 439–40.
- 55 Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, York University, Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario fonds, FWTAO 1999-027, box 571, Edith M. Deyell, "More Power to your Social Studies Techniques," *Educational Courier*, February 1957, 17.
- 56 Gleason, *Normalizing the Ideal*, 122.
- 57 Bruce Byrnes, "Back to School," *Canadian School Journal* 28, no. 7 (October 1950): 274.

- 58 DSBN, minutes of the Board of Education, City of St. Catharines, April 12, 1956, 179–80.
- 59 DSBN, 180.
- 60 DSBN, May 10, 1956, 221.
- 61 Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, York University, Federation of Women Teachers' Association of Ontario fonds, FWTAO 1999-027, box 315, fall conference minutes, 1949–1969, file: Fall Conferences 1949–56, Regional Conference Lundy's Lane United Church, Niagara Falls, Saturday, October 31, 1953 [no pagination].
- 62 Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, York University, Federation of Women Teachers' Association of Ontario fonds, FWTAO 1999-027, box 571, "O.P.S.M.T.F. Submits a Brief," *Educational Courier*, October 1956, 33.
- 63 AO, Department of Education Annual Reports, Report of the Minister 1951, 15.
- 64 AO, Department of Education Annual Reports, Report of the Minister 1955, 8.
- 65 Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, York University, Federation of Women Teachers' Association of Ontario fonds, FWTAO 1999-027, box 571, "Presidential Address to the O.T.F. Board of Governors," *Educational Courier*, October 1958, 72.
- 66 Claire E. Coughlin, "We Grow in Stature," *Bulletin* 34, no. 1 (January 1954): 6.
- 67 "Revising School Science, Maths," *Toronto Daily Star*, August 31, 1959.
- 68 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 29. According to Robert M. Stamp, more than 1,500 rural school section boards as late as 1964 each consisted of only a single one-room school. Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario*, 207.
- 69 Donald Thomas, Second Vice President, OSSTF, Principal, Ingersoll CI, "So Our Schools Are No Good!," *Bulletin* 38, no. 3 (December 1958): 336.
- 70 Thomas, 367.
- 71 "Censures Modern Trends in Education Techniques," *Canadian School Journal* 21, no. 5 (June-July 1953): 174.
- 72 Axelrod, "Beyond the Progressive Education Debate," 241.