

## **Beyond the Progressive Education Debate: A Profile of Toronto Schooling in the 1950s**

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This paper revisits the subject of progressive education in Canada in the 1950s. Drawing from original research on the history of schooling in Toronto, it contends that historians and educational commentators have simplified the educational debates and struggles of that era. Rather than a case of either progressive or traditional education, school policy was an amalgam 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. But they did so within the political culture and dominant values of the province and the times. The analysis has implications for historiographical approaches to progressive education and school reform.

Ce texte reconsidère le sujet de l'éducation progressiste au Canada durant les années 1950. Tiré de premières recherches sur l'histoire de l'instruction à Toronto, il soutient que les historiens et les pédagogues ont simplifié les débats et les luttes de cette époque. Plutôt qu'un cas d'éducation progressiste ou traditionnelle, la politique scolaire fut un amalgame dans lequel les éducateurs utilisèrent des outils disponibles et nouveaux pour aborder les besoins en enseignement qu'ils percevaient chez une population en rapide croissance. Ils employèrent ce qu'ils pensaient pouvoir fonctionner. Mais ils le firent selon la culture politique et les valeurs dominantes de la province et de l'époque. L'analyse nuance l'historiographie de l'éducation progressiste et de la réforme scolaire.

I began kindergarten at Ryerson Public School in London, Ontario, in 1954 and graduated from Grade 8 in 1963. Ryerson was a mainstream, middle-class school in a famously conservative community. I have very powerful memories of my elementary school years – my most dominant recollection is the emotion of fear: 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, ritualistically held three times a year; 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.

In light of this experience, I was rather stunned, when, as a student of educational history, I first read Hilda Neatby's *So Little for the Mind*,

published in 1953.<sup>1</sup> I simply didn't recognize the progressive, "child-centred" system of education which she claimed was rampant in Canada during my childhood. In an "age without standards," she wrote, educators apparently believed that children could only learn when they were "happy." Students must enjoy "guidance not hardship," "discussion...not dictation." "There is no attempt to exercise, train and discipline the mind," she asserted. Educators were preoccupied with the task of cultivating democracy, which evidently applied to the classroom itself, where "the teacher does not decide, or at least does not pronounce on what must be done."

Perhaps my memory is faulty, perhaps my school was an exception, perhaps Neatby inaccurately portrayed the reality of Canadian education, or perhaps there is a different explanation for these seemingly irreconcilable impressions. Arising from a project on the history of schooling in Toronto since World War II, this paper is an attempt to go beyond my own Ontario experience, and Neatby's laments, to comprehend education during the 1950s. What, indeed, was happening in the schools of Toronto during that decade?

My fellow educational historians, in the main, have concluded that Hilda Neatby was wrong about the nature of Canadian schooling in the post-World War II period. Robert Stamp, George Tomkins, Neil Sutherland, and Bob Gidney, among others, contend that tradition rather than progressivism characterized education in the 1950s. "The system was based on teachers talking and pupils listening."<sup>2</sup> "The sheer weight of academic tradition at work" reinforced core values and pedagogical practices in Ontario, notwithstanding the colourful rhetoric of both progressive educators and their critics.<sup>3</sup> Yet these observations are based on relatively little primary research on Toronto schooling per se. In order to fully understand the nature of education in Toronto, it would be useful to have detailed information on all 108 public schools in the city, which, in 1951, included 100,000 students, 2,800 teachers, and 700 other employees.<sup>4</sup> Interviews with ex-teachers and students would also, potentially, deepen the analysis. What I have, instead, are Board of Education minutes and records, Ontario Archive documents, and detailed newspaper reports of Toronto schooling during the 1950s – sources that have led me to re-frame the analytical approach to this subject in what, I stress, is a work in progress.

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1 Hilda Neatby, *So Little for the Mind* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin and Company, 1953), 8, 9, 15, 41.

2 Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada From the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 192.

3 R.D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 33.

4 Toronto Board of Education Archives (TBEA), W. Harold Male, Chairman, Toronto Board of Education, Address of 1951, Minutes of Board of Education, 1951, Appendix, p. 2.

It is not surprising that the educational debates reflected in and triggered by *So Little for the Mind* were so intense; educational officials themselves offered contradictory perspectives on the nature of schooling in the decade following the end of World War II. Indeed, if one focuses exclusively on the degree of progressive education in Toronto (and in other Canadian schools) then the debate about the nature of schooling in the post-war period might never be resolved because abundant evidence can be gathered on all sides of the question. W.J. Dunlop, the new Ontario Minister of Education, declared war on “fancy subjects, frills and fads,”<sup>5</sup> which included the subjects of art, music, and physical education, and later resolved to “improve our educational system until the last shreds of this so-called progressive education are gone.”<sup>6</sup> But was Dunlop railing at a straw man? C.C. Goldring, the director of the Toronto Board of Education, declared in 1954 that “there is not in Canada today a publicly supported system of education taught along progressive educational lines for the simple reason that parents and taxpayers would not approve of it.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, an official centennial history of the Toronto Board of Education, published in 1950, adopted the kind of progressive educational perspective that might well have kept Hilda Neatby and W.J. Dunlop awake at night. “A modern school,” it noted, “pays attention to the mental, as well as the physical, health of the pupils. The normal child requires reasonable affection, reasonable security, participation in activities, and the joy that comes from being able to do the assigned work efficiently after using effort.”<sup>8</sup> Reiterating naturalistic views on child development, G. Blair Laing, the Chairman of the Toronto Board of Education (1950), contended that “a child should develop much in the same way that a great artist paints a landscape; first he brushes in lightly the essentials of the composition, and later with broad, strong strokes of his brush laden with rich colours completes the composition.”<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding the highly polemical nature of her book, Hilda Neatby, a respected historian, did not exactly fabricate examples of progressive schooling. She cited statements, like those above by educational officials, and she quoted from provincial curriculum documents, though she acknowledged that in exploring the subject she had not undertaken an “enormous research project.”<sup>10</sup> She used

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5 “Back to 3Rs, Cut Out Frills, Less Athletics Dunlop School Order,” *Toronto Star*, 19 Feb. 1952.

6 “Progressive Education Comes Under Attack,” *Globe and Mail*, 16 April 1958.

7 Cited in Robert M. Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876-1976* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 192.

8 E.A. Hardy and Honora M. Cochrane, *Centennial Story: The Board of Education for the City of Toronto, 1850-1950* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson & Sons [Canada] Limited, 1950), 284.

9 TBEA, G. Blair Laing, Chairman, Toronto Board of Education, “Address of 1950,” Minutes of Board of Education, 6 Jan. 1950, Appendix, p. 1.

10 Neatby, *So Little for the Mind*, vii-viii.

unrestrained sarcasm to make her case against educational experts, democratic pedagogy, and curricular relevance. As an alternative to “false rationalism” and the “new barbarism,” she implored the schools to embrace a “re-definition of democracy in terms of freedom and a return to the habitual and deliberate contemplation of greatness.” Teachers, she insisted, should be genuine masters of a body of knowledge. “They should go out not as skilled conditioners trained to induce desirable attitudes but as evangelists with a genuine love of truth and with an urge to instruct and inspire those whom they teach.”<sup>11</sup> Like conservative commentators before and since who perceive contemporary schooling as the canary in the mineshaft, Neatby saw progressive education as a signal of social dissolution and cultural decline.<sup>12</sup>

From this perspective, the 1937 curriculum reforms in Ontario which still held sway in the 1950s, particularly at the elementary level, were one source of the problem. Framed by a “progressive outlook,”<sup>13</sup> the program entrenched health education in the curriculum, including instruction in appropriate habits, physical inspections, and games and sporting activities. The subject of social studies, much to Neatby’s dismay, combined elements of history and geography (and added citizenship training) rather than maintaining the disciplinary integrity of these subjects. Worse, it periodically included the “enterprise” method of instruction in which students would dramatize great historical events in the classroom. Natural science introduced students to plant and animal life and employed, wherever possible, hands-on instruction and displays, including the observation of these phenomena in their natural environments. Elementary education also offered music and art, which were designed to cultivate the student’s knowledge, skills, and aesthetic sensibilities. The core subject, English, which occupied the largest component of the curriculum, focused on oral reading and written language skills. Finally, arithmetic was intended to equip the child with “an understanding of the significance of numbers in the ordinary affairs of life and to provide him with numerical skills for his own practical use.”<sup>14</sup>

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11 Ibid., 324-28. For an extended discussion of Neatby’s educational views, see Kenneth C. Dewar, “Hilda Neatby and the Ends of Education,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 97, 1 (Spring 1990): 36-51.

12 I review some of this literature in Paul Axelrod, “Romancing the Past: Nostalgic Conservatism, the Great Brain Robbery, and the History of Education,” in *Historical Perspectives on Educational Policy in Canada: Issues, Debates and Case Studies*, ed. E. Ricker and B. Anne Wood (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 1995), 61-74.

13 W.G. Fleming, *Schools, Pupils and Teachers – Ontario’s Educative Society*, Vol. III (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 123.

14 Ibid., 122-27. Classroom time included the following proportions: English: 30 per cent; Social Studies: 20 per cent; and natural science, arithmetic, music, art, and health, 10 per cent each.

Students were organized in class by age, testing was common, and attendance, punctuality, attitudes, and interests were all assessed by teachers. During World War II, much greater emphasis than in previous years was placed on preparing students to live in a “democratic society,” and war-related activities were incorporated into classroom routines.<sup>15</sup>

The secondary school program introduced in 1937 featured a common grade 9 curriculum that included the subjects of English, social studies, health and physical education, business practice and writing, mathematics, general or agricultural science, French, general shop for boys, home economics for girls, music, and art. In 1950, most Ontario students still left school for work after grade 10. “The educational mandate for those ten years was to ensure that the next generation achieved literacy and numeracy, acquired an elementary familiarity with their rights and duties as citizens, and were exposed to a modicum of common culture.”<sup>16</sup>

Those who remained beyond grade 10, ideally, were prepared for the professions or university and followed a fairly uniform curriculum with some options depending on available school resources, which were more abundant in urban settings. Notwithstanding the inclusion of such subjects as physical and health education, to which traditionalists frequently objected, the senior high school in Ontario was scarcely a laboratory of educational innovation. As Gidney notes, it “was one of the gatekeepers of the social system, and at the same time, a guardian of the cultural order.”<sup>17</sup>

The Royal Commission on Education in Ontario, the so-called Hope Report, published in 1950, five years after its initiation, periodically employed progressive educational language, and promoted such causes as an extension of kindergarten, an end to “stultifying” departmental secondary school examinations, and a reorganized grading structure that would smooth the student’s transition from elementary to secondary education. But in favouring the “subject-centred” high school, and in privileging the traditional values of “honesty and Christian love,” the Hope Report, in Robert Stamp’s view, revealed itself to be fundamentally traditional in its academic orientation.<sup>18</sup> From this perspective, Neatby, alas, need not have worried, but as *So Little for the Mind* proved, worry she did.

The Toronto Board of Education had its worries, too, in the early 1950s, which focused, to a large degree, on the issue of growth. While the provincial population as a whole expanded by 50 per cent between 1946

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15 Charles M. Johnston, “The Children’s War: The Mobilization of Ontario Youth During the Second World War,” in *Patterns of the Past: Interpreting Ontario’s History*, ed. Roger Hall, William Westfall, and Laurel Sefton McDowell (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1988), 356-80.

16 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 15.

17 Ibid., 16.

18 Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario*, 188.

and 1961, school enrolments rose 116 per cent at the elementary level and 141 per cent at the secondary level, and higher still in large urban centres.<sup>19</sup> Each year saw considerable construction and renovation, with a five-year growth plan initiated in 1955.<sup>20</sup> Pedagogical debates aside, merely coping with the influx of baby-boom children, and recruiting teachers, consumed much of the administrators' and educators' time.

Given the expansion of Malvern Collegiate, for example, according to one recollection, it was "no longer possible for a student to know more than a small group of his fellows, and many of the teachers are to him only adult faces seen in the corridors...In accordance with the demands of the times, and the requirements of students of other than intellectual aptitudes, practical subjects such as home economics, manual training, and business courses have been added to the curriculum...This multiplication and expansion of subjects has crowded the school day and forced the pace, and the increased tension is aggravated by a short noon hour and a lack of a recess period."<sup>21</sup>

The growing variety of students mirrored the evident diversity of instructional methods. There were, without question, unconventional strategies being attempted in at least some Toronto schools, particularly at the elementary level. In a series of articles, *Globe and Mail* reporter William French reported on new methods for the teaching of reading designed to identify early on under-performing children, and to address, in the long term, the under-acknowledged problem of illiteracy among many adults. Following vocabulary and comprehension tests, some 6,500 "graduating" kindergarten children in 1949 were divided into three groups according to their demonstrated reading levels, and, in grade 1, assigned readers appropriate to these levels. Teachers employing this method sought to stimulate students' interest as a means of engaging them in the reading process.<sup>22</sup> Some schools also used the new film strip "flash card" technique to introduce reading and arithmetic. Adopted in wartime as a way of teaching soldiers to recognize aircraft, students were shown fleeting images of objects which they were expected to quickly identify. Eventually, children would translate their picture recognition skills to comprehension of words on a page.<sup>23</sup> A former principal of Hillcrest Public School recalls the introduction of a new system of reading, "Look-

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19 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 27.

20 TBEA, Address of M.D. Morton, Chairman, Board of Education, 5 Jan. 1956, Appendix, p. 2-4.

21 TBEA, "A General Retrospect," from Harriet Ingham, ed., *Malvern Collegiate Institute 1903-1953*, Malvern College: 1953, p. 3.

22 William French, "Scrap Old Concepts of Teaching for Results of 25 Years' Research," *Globe and Mail*, 18 May 1949; William French, "First 'R' Said Just Like Game of Golf as Some Pupils End Up In Rough," *Globe and Mail*, 14 Oct. 1949; William French, "Old Alphabetical Way Given New Treatment," *Globe and Mail*, 24 Nov. 1949.

23 William French, "Easily Run Gadget to Aid Students," *Globe and Mail*, 14 June 1949.

See,” in grades one to three. “Members of the staff were very apprehensive because in the early stages the stress on the use of phonics was dropped.”<sup>24</sup>

Junior kindergarten itself was also a source of some controversy in this era, where students “played games, sang, rode tricycles and teeter totters, painted and listened to stories.” A survey of 75 Toronto principals whose schools had no junior kindergartens found that 34 wanted them and 31 didn’t, while 10 were “doubtful.” Supporters claimed that junior kindergartens advanced student learning and particularly served poorer families who “lived in rooms” with too little space for active children. C.C. Goldring, the director of education, claimed that JK spawned “greater self-assurance and self-reliance,” among children, and that they “were better prepared for senior kindergarten, acquired certain social habits of value, [and] were happier at home.”<sup>25</sup> Opponents believed that junior kindergarten encroached on parents’ child-rearing responsibilities and that it was too expensive.

The desire to teach children by stimulating and sustaining their interest, and to equip them for effective living, survived the 1950s in at least some Toronto schools. R.A. Cook, the principal of Davisville Public School, reported in 1958 that, while the students were visiting the circus, his staff met to discuss the following educational goals: “To develop in the child more inner drive to solve his or her own problems. 2. To develop in the child the ‘Sir’, ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs’ habit. 3. To help the child discover the satisfaction to be gained from work well done and through the pursuit of a desirable goal. 4. To help the child develop the desire and ability to share his gifts and knowledge with others. 5. To assist the child to possess a faith in God and to know and share love for others. 6. To assist the child to attain a well-balanced and individual personality through the development of reasoned judgment, emotional security, and individuality of thought and action. 7. To help the child acquire the ability to utilize leisure time in such a way as to relieve tensions and benefit him emotionally and physically. 8. To succeed in attaining an orderly and well-run school without regimentation.”<sup>26</sup>

At Ryerson Public School, one former student recalled the approach of the new principal, Mr. McEachern, who, in 1949, “ushered in a new era of what would now be called participatory democracy. Affection and respect characterized our relations with him, and his unfailing courtesy

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24 TBEA, Reminiscence of Kenneth J. Strangway, Principal, 1951-1955, in *Hillcrest Reunion*, May 8, 1976, p. 19.

25 William French, “Opinions Clash on Scheme’s Value,” *Globe and Mail*, 5 March 1949; “More Time Required to Evaluate Kindergartens,” *Globe and Mail*, 11 Jan. 1950. For a similarly positive view of kindergartens, see John R. Seeley, R. Alexander Sim, and Elizabeth W. Loosley, *Crestwood Heights: A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life* (1956; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 262-63.

26 TBEA, R.A. Cook, Davisville Public School, November 1958, Elementary School Files.

and encouragement to attempt newer and more innovative methods of teaching were hallmarks of his leadership. He was a true gentleman.”<sup>27</sup> In its semi-rural setting, and with its emphasis on learning by doing, the Toronto Island school was another venue that promoted what could well be considered progressive educational practices.

Similarly progressive strategies underlay the teaching of elementary school art, as observed by a *Toronto Telegram* reporter, who evidently visited three Toronto schools per week in 1950-51. “Teachers in these classes are trying mainly to encourage boys and girls to be creative. They want kids to learn and think for themselves and to express their thoughts with a paint brush (or their fingers in finger painting). They don’t worry too much about how straight Johnny makes his lines or whether his tulip looks more like a daffodil – technical skill can come later. The important thing is that the tulip is his own creation, the transference to paper of Johnny’s own conception of tulipness.”<sup>28</sup>

The arts mattered to the Toronto Board, whose music director and four assistants taught vocal music to students from kindergarten to grade 9.<sup>29</sup> Music was optional from grades 10 to 13, and it counted as a matriculation subject. Most high schools had choirs, and many had a band. Efforts were made to increase the number of instruments available to students, though because of the expense, this happened only gradually during the decade. Music competitions were held annually, and to cultivate broader student interest, the Toronto Board arranged for the Toronto Symphony Orchestra to conduct ten concerts per year for elementary and secondary school students. Every grade 7 and 8 student had the opportunity to go, and over a five-year period, some 67,000 Toronto students attended a symphonic concert.<sup>30</sup>

School experts, whom Hilda Neatby so deplored, contributed to the development and conduct of guidance programs in Toronto which had been initiated at Central Technical School in the 1920s. There a teacher spent some time advising students on courses and future occupations. Guidance had become a required part of the grade 9 program by the end of World War II, “and the appointment of one or more teachers with part-time or full-time responsibility for guidance came to be the rule in secondary schools throughout the province. During this period, the Toronto Board of Education provided a special room for interviews and supplied clinical help to assist with record-keeping. In 1948 it opened a guidance clinic.” An Ontario Department of Education directive

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27 TBEA, Reminiscence of Joe Adair, 1947-1950, *I Remember When: Ryerson School 1877-1977*, p. 28.

28 Bruce Byrnes, “New Art Theory Schools Let Pupils Paint as they Like,” *Toronto Telegram*, 14 Dec. 1950. See also “Tots Paint ‘What Comes Natural,’” *Toronto Telegram*, 20 April 1951.

29 “News of the Week in Toronto Schools,” *Toronto Star*, 23 Dec. 1950.

30 TBEA, Minutes of Board of Education, Address of Chairman Gordon F. Ferguson, 7 Jan. 1954, Appendix, pp. 6-7.

contended that guidance “cannot be left to chance and to the goodwill of some interested person; it must be made a major responsibility of those teachers best suited for it by personality and training...a sound philosophy of guidance must gradually permeate the whole school.”<sup>31</sup> This process was taken especially seriously at Jarvis Junior Vocational School, which introduced a “group system” to guide the students. “On admission, each student is assigned to a particular ‘group counsellor.’ This teacher meets his group three times a day for ten-minute periods. He takes a special interest in the attendance, social adjustment, and general welfare of the student. This relationship continues throughout the school life of the student.”<sup>32</sup>

While students were not formally “streamed” in the 1950s, Toronto educators recognized, or at least assumed, that pupils had different backgrounds, interests, and abilities. Some were destined for university, and others for technical and vocational occupations. Four schools in the city, beginning with Central Technical School in 1915, were designed for students in the latter category.<sup>33</sup>

Eastdale Vocational School admitted 13-year-old girls who had been recommended by Child Adjustment Services of the Toronto Board, following the administration of the Simon-Binet test by a “qualified psychologist...The school endeavours to help these girls realize their highest potential academically and vocationally and to help them mature into socially acceptable young ladies who are prepared to go out into the community as respectable, independent citizens...A gratifyingly large percentage of the graduates find gainful employment, hold their jobs and give satisfaction to their employers. Employers report that they are industrious and well-behaved and that they follow directions well. Girls who come to us with a sense of failure and frustration are given an opportunity to experience success and they eventually go out to work as clerical workers, hairdressers, waitresses, messengers, elevator operators, semi-skilled or unskilled factory workers, laundry workers, or workers in various other service industries.”<sup>34</sup>

It was also common for schools to “group” students from “high to low,” after grade 9, according to their previous year’s grades. “The class at the lower end might have been offered extra assistance and assigned

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31 Fleming, *Schools, Pupils*, 249-51.

32 TBEA, Secondary School File, Parkview Secondary School (Jarvis Junior Vocational School/Parkway Vocational School), “Jarvis Junior Vocational School,” brochure, c. 1958.

33 For an overview of this development, see Harry Smaller, “Vocational Education in Ontario Secondary Schools: Past, Present and Future?” in *Integrating School and Workplace Learning in Canada: Principles and Practices of Alternation Education and Training*, ed. Hans. G. Schuetze and Robert Sweet (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), 95-112.

34 TBEA, “Boulton Avenue Junior Vocational School – Eastdale Vocational School,” memo, April 1962. The new name (Boulton) was adopted in 1962. The school was converted into a Collegiate Institute in 1974.

more homework in order to improve its members' chances on the same final examination as the other wrote. The bright class, on the other hand, might have opportunities for enrichment. Despite occasional attempts to disguise the situation, the lowest group soon identified itself, or was identified by others, as the 'idiots' or 'dummies.' Their performance reflected the teachers' low expectation of their capacities."<sup>35</sup> Some, with very low IQs, were labelled "retarded," considered "ineducable," and removed from the regular classroom to a special facility in 1953.<sup>36</sup> The Toronto Board paid particular attention to the issue of gifted children who, ironically, threatened to undermine the credibility of the public school system. Ontario College of Education researcher Dr. R.W.B. Jackson reported that only two-fifths of children with IQs exceeding 130 entered university. According to the 1957 chairman of the Board of Education, while some faced financial problems, many were not sufficiently stimulated and engaged in the schools, and subsequently dropped out. "The lack of challenge to ingenuity and to ability has been the cause in many cases of delinquency, social and psychological maladjustment, laziness and downright failure."<sup>37</sup>

In order to address this concern, the Board appointed an inspector of special education, and initiated 36 pilot projects involving gifted children in elementary schools. At Givins Public School, gifted students in science and social studies were assigned projects "requiring intensive research, selection and organization of material, and choice of presentation to class...To relieve these pupils from unneeded drill and review work, they assist in classroom routines by: (a) helping other pupils particularly New Canadians, (b) demonstrating physical education activities, (c) preparing science equipment for experiments, (d) keeping class records of completed work, (e) taking responsibility of monitorial duties...Many of them receive special training in public speaking in preparation for the annual school banquet and for grade assemblies where they introduce and thank guest speakers."<sup>38</sup> Such initiatives drew favourable press assessments. As the editor of *Saturday Night Magazine* noted, "We spend much more time getting the moron up to the average than we do to make the superhuman that much better. This is very foolish."<sup>39</sup> In attending,

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35 Fleming, *Schools, Pupils*, 91.

36 TBEA, Toronto Board of Education Minutes, 18 Jan. 1953, p. 88. See also "Opportunity Classes Provided in Ontario," *Globe and Mail*, 14 Jan. 1959. Deaf students were placed in Sunnyview School, which by 1958 was over-crowded and included other handicapped children as well. TBEA, Address of Roy Sharp, Chairman, Inaugural Board Meeting, 8 Jan. 1959, Minutes of Board of Education, Appendix, 1959, p. 9. See also "Keep Deaf Pupils Near Home, Parents Plea," *Toronto Telegram*, 8 Oct. 1958.

37 TBEA, Address of 1957 Chairman J. Sydney Midanik, Inaugural Board Meeting, 3 Jan. 1957, Appendix, p. 4.

38 TBEA, Report on Gifted Children – Givins School – January, 1954.

39 Arnold Edinborough, cited in "Too Little Time on Gifted Child," *Toronto Star*, 7 May 1959. See also, "Education's Problem: How to Define the Gifted Child," *Globe and Mail*, 28 May 1958.

however incompletely, to the educational needs of the gifted, the retarded, the academically oriented, and the vocationally bound working-class youth, Toronto educators believed that they were responding, appropriately, to differences in the abilities and capacities of the students they governed.

Such distinctions notwithstanding, these same educators sought to impose a regime of cultural uniformity in the schools as a means of securing social order and cultivating reliable citizenship. Christianity was unmistakably privileged in Ontario's non-denominational public schools. Regulations requiring religious instruction passed during World War II as means of combating "moral decline in a time of national crisis" endured well into the 1960s in Ontario. The Lord's Prayer and scripture readings were conducted daily in elementary schools, and additional religious instruction, including regular visits by clergymen, were common. Furthermore, the 1937 Department of Education directives required schools to ensure that Christianity "infuse[d] the curriculum," a goal supported by the Hope Report.<sup>40</sup> One principal believed that religious education was a logical extension of the school's responsibility to address the needs of the "whole child...his physical, mental, social, emotional, moral and spiritual beings."<sup>41</sup>

Non-Christian families were permitted to remove their children from religious exercises, though the pressure to conform to dominant classroom practices was strong. On one occasion, Toronto Rabbi Abraham Feinberg accused the public schools of attempting to convert Jews to Christianity,<sup>42</sup> and on another, he called for a ban on Christmas carols which he claimed violated the human "democratic" rights of religious minorities.<sup>43</sup> Critics soundly condemned these views.

While Christianity was actively promoted, communism was resolutely resisted as the Cold War came to Toronto classrooms. In 1948, the Toronto Board passed a motion banning any individuals or groups associated with communists from using school facilities for meetings or other events, a position it reconfirmed in 1953.<sup>44</sup> C.C. Goldring, the Director of Education, recommended that Igor Gouzenko's anti-

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40 R.D. Gidney and W.P.J. Millar, "The Christian Recessional in Ontario's Public Schools," in *Religion and Public Life in Canada: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Marguerite Van Die (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), quotations, 278-81.

41 TBEA, "An Address by Clare Maedel, Principal of Givins School, Givins School Old Boys' Association, 25<sup>th</sup> Remembrance Service, Wesley United Church, 15 Nov. 1953.

42 "Teachers Can't Resist Opportunity to Convert Jewish Pupils: Feinberg," *Globe and Mail*, 13 Dec. 1948.

43 "Feinberg Absurd to Ask School Ban on Carols, Astounded Rabbis Say," *Toronto Star*, 4 Dec. 1950.

44 Frank K. Clarke, "'Keep Communism out of our Schools': Coldwar Anti-Communism at the Toronto Board of Education, 1948-1951," *Labour/Le Travail* 49 (Spring 2002): 96; "Still Won't Allow Reds to Use Toronto Schools," *Globe and Mail*, 20 March 1953.

communist tract, *This Was My Choice*, be used in grades 11-13, and opposed the authorization of Margaret Fairley's *Spirit of Canadian Democracy*, a book that included interviews with Norman Bethune and Canadian communist leader, Tim Buck. Both the Management Committee of the Board and the full Board supported this recommendation, and Gouzenko's book eventually appeared in 16 school libraries.<sup>45</sup>

In the wake of the Korean war, on Goldring's initiative, the Board distributed a pamphlet which illustrated how "the socialist-communist idea of taking from each according to his ability to each according to his need...will eventually result in a living-death for all except the 'authorities' and a few of their favourite lackeys."<sup>46</sup> While the Board resisted attempts by the War Veterans' Association lobby group to force teachers to take loyalty oaths, it did pass a motion in 1950 barring communists from working for the Board of Education. The Board Chair, G. Blair Laing, contended that the motion was unnecessary because there were no communist teachers in Toronto, but he was outvoted by his colleagues.<sup>47</sup> Such initiatives invariably sparked heated debate and elicited considerable newspaper attention, owing in part to the presence of Edna Ryerson, a trustee with ties to the pro-communist Labour Progressive Party, who served on the Board from 1945 to 1956.

There were other educational strategies intended to preserve order, cultivate appropriate values, and promote the goal of responsible citizenship. Toronto trustees supported the national campaign against comic books, which were increasingly popular among children and youth. One report estimated that more than 500,000 comics, under 135 titles, were circulating in Toronto in 1950. On Edna Ryerson's urging, the Toronto Board unanimously passed a motion in 1953 "protesting the sale of so-called Comic books which glorify brutality, crime, war and sex and petitions the proper federal authorities to take whatever steps are necessary to prohibit the unregulated sale of this type of degenerating literature."<sup>48</sup> Not all educational "experts" agreed with this view. A postgraduate student at the Ontario College of Education, commissioned by the Board in 1950 to assess the impact of comics on children, found no available evidence linking comics to "intelligence quotient, educational achievement, social or personal adjustment [or] delinquency."<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the Board's moral crusade continued. It disapproved of the showing of the movies *The Wild Ones* and *Blackboard*

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45 Clarke, "Communism," 107-8.

46 Ibid., 100.

47 Ibid., 117.

48 TBEA, Minutes, Toronto Board of Education, 19 Nov. 1953.

49 "No Great Harm in Comic Books, Trustees Informed," *Globe and Mail*, 12 Dec. 1950. See also Mary Louise Adams on the national campaign against comics, in *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), chap. 7.

*Jungle* for their depiction of “crime, brutality, and the destruction of moral ethics.”<sup>50</sup>

Sex education, including explicit discussion of the causes of venereal disease, was introduced into the Ontario high school curriculum in 1944, a result of the broad public concern about the spread of syphilis and gonorrhoea during the war. The return to “normality” after the war witnessed the emergence of the “family life education movement,” which was designed to “channel children’s sexual energy toward eventual marriage and parenthood.”<sup>51</sup> The Toronto School Board’s Teachers’ Committee drew up a family life curriculum which stressed heterosexual relations, sexual abstinence before marriage, and good grooming. C.C. Goldring noted that the course would feature subjects such as the “evolution of the family, relationships with the family, meaning of adolescence, community life and significance of [the] human family.”<sup>52</sup> In health classes girls in younger grades learned how to improve their posture and poise, while older girls received instruction on how to get along with boys. In Grade 12, the focus was on child study. Males, evidently, received more detailed instruction on physiology and human growth than girls, though the subject of menstruation was addressed in grade 9 – well after many girls had reached puberty.

There were to be no explicit discussions of sexual activities in health classes, and by provincial order, specific reference to venereal disease was removed from the curriculum in 1950. Health and family education, on the one hand, touched on sexual themes, but on the other hand did so, not surprisingly, within the limits of contemporary moral conventions.

Social order was most directly imposed through disciplinary measures, which were, at times, severe. As Neil Sutherland notes, “School staffs held back the latent barbarism they perceived in the children with an increasingly severe range of sanctions that began with displeasure and ended with corporal punishment.”<sup>53</sup> The strap was the principal’s weapon of choice for those students, almost always males, who disobeyed, with greatest temerity, the school’s long list of rules. In 1947, the Toronto Board issued new and revised regulations governing student behaviour. Pupils were expected to “speak the truth on all occasions, obey their teachers, refrain from indelicate or profane language, from mocking or nicknaming their schoolmates or others, from chewing or spitting in the school and the school yard, and from other improper conduct and practice; be attentive, quiet and orderly; conform to the bylaws of the board; promote as far as possible the comfort and improvement of others;

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50 TBEA, Minutes, Toronto Board of Education, 17 June 1954, 86-87, and 19 May 1955, 79.

51 Christabelle Sethna, “The Cold War and the Sexual Chill: Freeing Girls of Sex Education,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 17, 4 (Winter 1998): 58.

52 Board Approves Sex in Very Modified Form,” *Globe and Mail*, 5 May 1949.

53 Sutherland, *Growing Up*, 208.

refrain from playing games prohibited by the principal; be respectful to their teachers and all other persons in authority and kind and obliging to each other; prepare such home lessons as may from time to time be assigned by teachers.”<sup>54</sup> A former teacher at one school, HumberSide Collegiate, recalled its military-like aura. Students moved about the school smartly and in an orderly fashion. This “apparent regimentation reflected a fine tradition of discipline.”<sup>55</sup>

School Board members were not unaware of educational and child rearing theories disputing the virtues of corporal punishment. They simply weren't convinced by them. In 1954, the Board Management Committee overwhelmingly reaffirmed its belief in the use of the strap, even for smaller children. Mrs. Stella McKay, chairman of the Toronto Home and School Association, offered one possible justification for this decision. “I don't think that corporal punishment should be abolished but it should be kept under strict control. Some children may know of no other correction in their home and therefore have great respect for the strap even if it's only in the principal's office or in the teacher's desk.”<sup>56</sup> As late as 1968, the Ontario Rubber Company was reportedly still selling schools about 1000 straps per year, one of which was apparently used “eighteen times on each hand” of a 13-year-old Toronto student who was caught chewing gum.<sup>57</sup>

There are, of course, other issues that merit attention in this profile of Toronto schooling in the 1950s, and these will be addressed in future research. The education and treatment of immigrant students, the pervasive exams and report cards, the public speaking competitions, the Christmas concerts, even the school courses on automobile driving and public safety – all were part of the annual school cycle in that era. The philosophy and practice of teacher education also merit attention. Despite these outstanding questions, certain conclusions can be drawn at this stage. Toronto had significant elements of progressive education in the 1950s – more, it seems to me, than historians have acknowledged or implied. But the educators' approach was pragmatic, not deeply philosophical, and the system they governed remained ordered, disciplined, and hierarchical. For example, the attempt to distinguish educationally among the gifted, the retarded, the academic, and vocationally oriented students drew from a progressive approach that sought to sort students efficiently using testing, measurement or other “scientific” means. In the context of the times, this was, arguably, an enlightened educational practice. On the other hand, as we now know,

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54 *Toronto Star*, 25 Nov. 1947.

55 TBEA, Reminiscence of Virginia Stevenson, retiring teacher, “The HumberSider,” Issue 1, Summer, 1989, *HumberSide C.I.* (Notes from Secondary School Files).

56 *Toronto Telegram*, 10 March 1954.

57 Betty Lee, “4R's and a Whack!” *Globe Magazine*, 8 June 1968, 50.

such innovation reproduced class and cultural divisions, and treated students, not as individuals, but as members of a category with presumed behavioural traits. Sex education, to some degree, had originally been influenced by new currents in educational thinking, which linked matters of the body and mind. By the 1950s, it had morphed into family values education that reinforced prevailing cold war notions of appropriate gender relations.

Thus it was not a case of progressive *or* traditional education, as the theorists and polemicists would have it. School policy was an amalgam 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. But they did so within the political culture and dominant values of the province and the times. Elements of new education were in play in Ontario – and had been since at least 1937 – but the maintenance of order in the classroom and the school yard was not compromised. Indeed, educational authorities 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. In light of this interpretation my London, Ontario, experience begins to make more sense. In the 1950s, the elementary school curriculum could be somewhat “progressive,” *and* I could still be afraid of my teachers. Hilda Neatby’s widely publicized and (still) controversial commentary captured a piece of the educational picture, but by no means the whole picture.

This perspective also provides the basis for a clearer understanding of what happened in public education in the late 1960s. Schooling came under the sway of educators who were, in many ways, strongly committed to realizing the progressive ideal, but they now believed, in concert with emerging social values of the day, that this goal could only be achieved in a more liberal classroom setting that was free of repressive tools such as the strap. Testing too, once considered a progressive innovation, no longer would be so viewed. Streaming was perceived, not as a sophisticated means of responding to student difference, but as an instrument of social divisiveness and inequity. School policy would soon idealize diversity instead of cultural uniformity in its curriculum and programs. Educational reform was pursued and resisted in an altered historical context.

Alas, Toronto educators in the 1950s were imperfect problem-solvers, neither as villainous nor as saintly as their conflicting popular images implied. True then, and in all likelihood, true now.