THE PEDAGOGY OF PEACE: EDUCATION AND THE EXIGENCIES OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

The history of education in Canada is a story of the Canadian people struggling to understand what schools should be and how they might be in the best of all possible worlds. The theme of progressive education has been the protagonist of this broader story over the past century. The rhetoric of progressive education reveals aspects of our human existence within a modern age and, simultaneously, it articulates our existential concern with the transformational forces of modernity. This article will principally look at two reverberations of progressivist rhetoric from the past century. The first dominated the years between World War I and World War II, whereas the second dominates today and is known as *21st century learning*.

INTRODUCTION

In their monumental publication *How Schools Worked: Public Education in English Canada, 1900-1940,* R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar (2012) describe the landscape of public education in the country over the first forty years of the twentieth century. With some notable exceptions (i.e. French Canada, First Nations), limitations enforced by the limitations of evidence and the methods pursued in the study, they succeed in offering a map of public schools' functioning and operations. One further limitation is noted on the first page of their introduction; the authors make plain their view that there is:

> *A persistent bias that bestows undue attention on the emergence of a reform agenda variously known as "the new education" or "progressive education." While it is not possible to write about the period without taking some account of the abundant rhetoric this movement generated, we have given it short shrift in the pages that follow. This book is not about schools as they should be or might be in the best of all possible worlds. It is about schools and systems at work.*[1]

I argue that the history of education in Canada is – particularly from the period following the First World War – a story of the Canadian people struggling to understand what schools should be and how they might be in the best of all possible worlds. I thus reveal my own bias towards educational rhetoric and policy as historical sources of value, if only because they constitute evidence of an idealization of schools and an obstinate projection upon public schools of all that we hope the world might be and ought to become.

As a consequence, I am gripped by the theme of progressive education, which has been the protagonist of this broader story over the past century. The rhetoric of progressive education reveals aspects of our human existence within a modern age and, simultaneously, it articulates our existential concern with the transformational forces of modernity. Progressive education has been a tour de force, which continues to shape the ways that we think about and discursively frame public education. We live in a world of ideas, and we should never disregard the power of ideas to change the world.

Here, I will principally look at two reverberations of progressivist rhetoric from the past century. The first dominated the years between World War I and World War II, whereas the second dominates today. We know the latter by its moniker, or slogan, *21st century learning*. In both cases, I treat samples of rhetoric from the province of Ontario as indicative examples. Both progressive education – a term used here to denote the interwar incarnation of progressivist pedagogy – and 21st century learning can be thought of as: a) responses to modernity; b) intimate aspects of modernity or (as I am inclined to believe); c) both of the above. As a response to modernity, these movements represent manifest our existential angst about the accelerated rate of change affecting the social landscape of life. As an aspect of modernity, they are part and parcel of this accelerated rate of change, reverberations of the social, economic, and political impulses, which drive towards innovation and novelty.

DISCUSSION

The history of education in Canada requires a thorough encyclopaedia to be properly discussed. This is mere preamble. My focus is on progressive education, which was, I argue, the most important force in Canadian educational reform during the twentieth century. It has had staying power. Today, we hear a great deal in education about so-called 21st Century Learning. If we listen carefully to this rhetoric, we will recognize that it is a clear reverberation of progressive education and sentiments that are nearly a century old.

Progressivist educational ideology as articulated historically and contemporaneously concentrates on three aims, each of which is symptomatic of a general unrest provoked by the radically transformative effects of modernity. For the past century, progressivists have implored educationists to: a) focus on the individual learner's aptitudes and interests rather than upon a rigid curriculum developed in a bygone age; b) engage the learner actively in the construction of knowledge, a process prohibited by the memorization and examination of content; and, c) commit to relating school life to the modern world and its concerns, not to the affairs of a world of the past.[2]

This is half the story. A tenuous embracement of both/and logic is most suitable with respect to progressive education. It is also controversial. In 2011, I gave a talk at the University of British Columbia as part of a speaker series on curriculum hosted by Dr. William Pinar. I argued that progressive education was a popular, existential response to modernity. Dr. Peter Grimmett challenged this position, positing that progressive education was a simulacrum of modernity. An email exchange followed, and I concluded that we were both correct.

Whilst progressive education can be defined by the three broad themes that it encompasses, noted above, it can also be defined by its function and purpose. *Functionally*, progressive education serves as the pedagogical response to an existential realization: the world we inhabit today is qualitatively different from the one that we inhabited as children. *Purposively*, it serves as the means by which we might align schools more meaningfully with the qualitatively inimitable world of the present. It is, further, an *instrument* of change within a rapidly changing world. Progressivist pedagogical philosophy, in other words, is philosophically grounded in anxiety regarding the relationship of schools to social reality; operationalized, however, it is the catalyst for greater dissonance in that relationship.

Ronald Wright's 2004 Massey Lecture, *A Short History of Progress* develops a two-pronged argument. The first is relatively uncontroversial: the social world that we

inhabit is changing. The second is bolder, but also more exciting: the social world that we inhabit is changing at an increasingly accelerated rate, which renders the taken-for-granted world unrecognizable to us with alarming quickness. From the Palaeolithic era to the end of the last ice age, a span consuming 99.5% of human existence, tools and cultural ideals replicated themselves, evolving at a staggeringly slow pace. "Nowadays," Wright argues, "we have reached such a pass that the skills and mores we learn in childhood are out-dated by the time we're thirty, and few people past fifty can keep up with their culture – whether in idiom, attitudes, taste, or technology – even if they try."[3]

The century to come is qualitatively and quantitatively inimitable to the previous one. Schools need to be re-conceptualized. We must prepare our youth for the world of the future by engaging them actively with technologies available to us in the present. The world that they will inhabit is not the world of the past that we inhabited.

The first progressivist wave freely flowed throughout the interwar period, intensifying in the years following the Depression. Half a decade after Alberta introduced of a revised *Programme of Studies* for public schools in 1936, every province in Canada had transformed its formal curriculum, infrastructure, and examination structures. A new and progressive age was on the horizon, and it demanded that school life adjust to meet the needs of a contemporary world. This world was altered by the transformative effects of modern warfare, as experienced in the trenches of Europe, as well as by immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. The second wave of progressive education followed the first by approximately thirty-five years; an indicative example is Ontario's *Living and Learning* document, which was submitted to the public in 1968. More commonly referred to as the Hall-Dennis Report, a name associated with the two chairs of the committee that drafted the document, *Living and Learning* offered a wide set of recommendations, which challenged educationists to focus on the individual learner's inclination towards self-discovery and exploration, to limit competition, to re-vision classroom spaces, and to abolish corporal punishment. The third wave of progressivist thinking, which is branded 21st Century Learning, is a tidal force in education today. Whilst mediated within a discourse that concentrates upon the transformative influence of technology on our existence, the rhetoric of 21st Century learning is thoroughly progressivist in its philosophical orientation towards the place of schools in society.

Throughout the history of Canadian public education, progressivists have largely defined the pedagogical aims that they espouse in opposition to tradition; tradition, in this sense, bears a definitively negative connotation. According to progressivist sensibilities, noted above, extant school structures were derived in, and are associated with, a bygone and obsolete social context. The schools of today should help students understand and live in a modern world rather in a world that has passed. This argument is as persistent as it is problematic. Eighty-five years ago, John Dewey (1938) articulated a challenge to progressivist educators that still resonates; he felt that the dichotomy of "traditional" and "progressive" schools is problematic.[4] This sort of dichotomous thinking, despite Dewey's warning, has characterized educational rhetoric for the better part of a hundred years.[5]

Dewey felt that the dichotomy of "traditional" and "progressive" schools is problematic:

> *The general philosophy of the new education may be sound, and yet the difference in abstract principles will not decide the way in which the moral and intellectual preference involved shall be worked out in practice. There is always the danger in a new movement that in rejecting the aims and methods of that which it would supplant, it may develop its principles negatively rather than positively and constructively.*[6]

Progressive educators who had proceeded according to this principle of continuity had neglected questions central to the pedagogical project. Dewey challenged progressivists to be more critical of their own pedagogical principles and claims.

In 1928, an editorial in the *Canadian School Board* Journal, an Ontario journal published monthly by the Ontario Ratepayers Association, found it necessary to comment on that refrain, which was already widespread as a subject of discussion in the periodicals and at educational conferences.[7] In response to the needs of a modern world, the article noted, educational aims were shifting: "A perusal of the printed volume of Proceedings from year to year would show the bearing the discussions, resolutions and addresses of the various sections have had in adapting the educational system of the province to meet modern needs."[8] Indeed, that same year at the Ontario Educational Association Conference, *The*

Canadian School Journal reported labour leader Thomas Moore's pronouncement that "educational systems must necessarily undergo changes to enable the youth to meet the demands of modern complex civilization."[9] Duncan McArthur, Ontario's Deputy Minister of Education (1934-1937) and Minister of Education (1937-1942), who was at the helm when the province introduced its first thoroughly progressivist curriculum of studies for the public schools, incessantly argued that the best way to prepare students for the world of the future was to give them opportunities to face the world of the present intelligently. In so doing, they would cultivate habits of mind that would serve them well throughout their lives, whatever uncertainties they might face:

> *The school of tomorrow must, above all things, turn out citizens who are capable of facing their very different problems intelligently, courageously and with sympathy for all living beings. In this connection I make a plea for freedom of discussion, even of the most controversial issues in the classroom. The teacher must not be a propagandist but be encouraged to develop in the minds of his pupils the importance of ascertaining all the facts in a given situation, of accepting differences of opinion with tolerance and of making a decision, not on the grounds of personal prejudice but on the basis of the total community good. Education at its best in the intellectual sphere is the doing away with prejudices.*[10]

The schools of tomorrow were the subject of Ontario's progressivist rhetoric in the 1930s, and they remain the preoccupation of 21st Century progressivist rhetoric espoused today within the province.

This line of reasoning demands a disposition towards both/and, rather than towards either/or. The call for 21st century learning, as well as the concomitant argument that we commit to greater integration of technology, reveals both anxiety about the future and a keen ability to exploit that anxiety. In 2013, the following plea was made in support of educational reform:

> *Canadian education systems rank among the best in the world, resulting in a highly-skilled labour force and competitive industries. However, the challenges associated with the twenty-first century have placed new demands on Canada and, by extension, Canadian education systems. In particular, these systems are now tasked with educating a generation that faces an unprecedented pace of social, economic, and technological change.*[11]

The language is inescapably progressivist in the same sense as its historical antecedent was.

Groups like the Ontario Public School Boards Association have issued loud critiques of Ontario's public schools.[12] The most recent accuses Ontario of lagging behind with respect to the inclusion of educational technologies; as a result, it argues, the government risks losing the public trust whilst simultaneously compromising the competitiveness of its students in an increasingly progressive world. This plea uses a classic propaganda technique, fear mongering, to depict a future in which Ontario's future is bleak and the province is out of pace.

> *It is tempting to turn this on its head and speculate about what will happen if we do not embrace change. A graphic illustration of this would be the North American automotive sector which in 2008 has revealed itself to be a dinosaur that has ignored its environment and failed, not only to anticipate what its customers would want, but even to respond to them when they made their wants known through their defection to small, environment-friendly automobiles made in Asia and Europe.*[13]

Today's progressivist rhetoricians, who wage war against the same straw man of tradition, use the tactic ruthlessly. Note the arguments proffered by the Ontario Public School Boards Association (OPSBA), which seeks to rally Ontarians behind the banner of 21st Century Learning:

> *This paper is a call for the Government of Ontario and the Ministry of Education to lead the way in establishing a vision for Learning and Teaching in a Digital Age. Student and teacher*

> *use of technology in their everyday lives and the possibilities this creates for expanding the integration of 21st century skills into our learning and our instructional practices is at a tipping point. Many other jurisdictions have moved vigorously ahead to define a vision to guide education well into the 21st century and we urge Ontario, which is a leader in student achievement and in education in so many spheres, to take up this challenge. This call is not inspired by considerations of funding but by a conviction that it is critical to define how we will move to keep pace with rapidly evolving technology to ensure our students are globally competitive. This is a matter of public confidence in our education system. Students, teachers, parents, school boards – all our education stakeholders – are ready to embrace this vision.*[14]

This is a dawn of a new age, and public education must be progressivist or become extinct. One bit of irony seemingly unnoticed by 21st Century learning advocates, which is symptomatic of the ahistorical and unreflective character of this movement, is the is that schools have changed dramatically in the past century. This change is in no small part due to the potency of progressive education as a rhetorical tool for reshaping the linguistic, intellectual, and political contours of public education.

While 21st Century learning advocates may be right in proclaiming the necessity of integrating technologies within the classroom more consistently (despite the overtly tautological aspects of this argument), a small bit of investigative journalism would reveal that the standard bearers of this army of rhetoricians are actual technology corporations, which have everything to gain should the war be won. Case in point is a group called *Canadians for 21st Century Learning and Innovation*, or *C21*.[15] Ten of the twelve founding members of *C21* are corporations.[16] Their vision for innovation in teaching practice reads as follows:

> *Teachers adopt modern instructional pratices, including the teaching of 21st Century competencies, integrating technology with pedagogy, harnessing the power of social media for learning and offer learners interconnected learning experiences, choices, and opportunities. Faculties of Education in Canada adopt 21st Century learning based pre-service teaching standards and integrate ICT into their own pedagogies and classrooms. Provinces adopt 21st Century teaching standards for in-service teachers and provide the tools, resources and training required for teachers to be innovative, teach 21st Century competencies, integrate technology with pedagogy and better engage their learners.*[17]

It is not surprising that technology companies see greater integration of technologies as innovative, or, progressive. It may be, even for the more sanguine of us, startling to see these companies so interwoven with Ontario's public school associations. These technologies are framed as necessary media in an educational life. Society evolves quickly and inexorably, and technology stands as the most apparent metaphor for that evolution.

CONCLUSIONS

Interwar progressivist rhetoric and contemporary 21st Century Learning rhetoric hinge their arguments on some unrest concerning the future. Economies falter, wars loom and, if we are to take any stock in the dramatic and sharp popularity of films and television series featuring an apocalyptic future populated by zombies who overtake the earth, tomorrow will not look like today. Our forebears had witnessed trench warfare, mustard gas, machine guns, and untold atrocities within a world radically transformed by technology, urbanization, immigration, and industrialization. We have today definitive evidence that the earth's temperatures are increasing, that polar ice caps are melting, that we are polluting our fresh water sources, and that as a human species we are detrimental as a whole to the ecosystems that we occupy.

We can be forgiven for any unrest and anxiety that we exhibit. We cannot be blamed for turning to education – the projection of ourselves into the future and the attempt to manipulate or control what is to come – as a means of salvation. The world is inexorably and unceasingly changing; schools are our principle means of making sense of: a) making sense of this change; and b) serving as agents of change.

Within a popular epistemological framework informed by Charles Darwin's evolutionary model, we know that we must adapt to the world as readily as it, randomly and efficiently, renovates and revises itself. Educationists are thus thrust within a continuum that stretches from the traditionalist to the progressivist. The first position argues that we must stand strong and lean upon those institutions, stories, beliefs, and customs that have allowed us to survive and thrive throughout our existence. The latter position says that we must flee the past, let it be overrun and disassembled, because it is both moribund and obsolete.

NOTES

1 R.D. Gidneyand W.P.J. Millar, *How Schools Worked: Public Education in English Canada, 1900-1940* (Toronto: *University of Toronto Press*, 2012): XVII.

2 Theodore Michael Christou, *Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919-1942* (Toronto, ON: *University of Toronto Press*, 2012).

3 Roland Wright, *A Short Story of Progress* (Toronto, ON: *House of Anansi Press,* 2004): 14.

4 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1938): 20.

5 La mesure dans laquelle les écoles sont " progressives " ou " traditionnelles " a été l'objet d'un long débat qui n'a pas été résolu. Voir Hilda Neatby, *So Little for the Mind* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1953); et Paul Axelrod (2005), "Beyond the Progressive Education Debate: A Profile of Toronto Schooling in the 1950s," *Historical Studies in Education* 17(2): 227-41.

6 *Ibid*.: 20.

7 "The Challenge of Childhood," *Canadian School Board Journal* (June 1928): 2.

8 *Ibid*.: 2.

9 "The Aims of Education," *Canadian School Board Journal* (Juin 1928): 4. The speaker cited was President of the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada. The article summarized events occurring at the 1928 Convention. Moore also, the article related, spoke of the League of Nations and introduced its publication, *A New World*. His speech is notable because of the expression he gave to the changes modernity wrought on Ontario, but also because he saw these changes as ongoing: "No one can possibly forecast what the educational needs of the next decade will be because of the rapid development in industry, agriculture, and science."

10 *Ibid*.:140.

11 Action Canada, "Future Tense: Adapting Canadian Education Systems for the 21st Century," February 2013, http://www.actioncanada.ca/en/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/TF2-Report_Future-Tense_EN.pdf: 3.

12 Ontario Public School Boards Association, "A vision for learning and teaching in a digital age," http://www.opsba.org/files/OPSBA_AVisionForLearning.pdf: 1.

13 *Ibid*.: 16.

14 Ontario Public School Boards Association, "A vision for learning and teaching in a digital age," http://www.opsba.org/files/OPSBA_AVisionForLearning.pdf, 1.

15 The Ontario Public School Boards Association is a founding member of *C21*.

16 *Ibid*.: 41. These corporations include: a) one that arranges for educational excursions internationally, but also online language learning, Education First; b) five publishers, Scholastic Education, Pearson, Oxford, McGraw-Hill/Ryerson, and Nelson; and c) four from the technology industry, Dell, Microsoft, SMART Technologies and IBM. The two outliers, which are educational associations, are the Canadian Education Association and the Canadian School Boards Association.

17 Canadians for 21st Century Learning and Innovation, Shifting Minds: A Vision and Framework for 21st Century Learning in Canada, 2012, http://www.c21canada.org: 17-18.