

REVIEW ESSAY

Christou, Theodore M. (2012). *Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919-1942*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 242 pages.

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Academic debate in English Canada about the history of progressive education has typically centered on the degree to which progressive reforms moved beyond the level of policy documents and rhetoric about teaching and learning, to influence the reality of the classroom.¹ Questions have been raised about the definition of the term “progressive education,” with Robert Patterson and American educational historian Herbert Kliebard concluding the term too ambiguous to prove useful.² Paul Axelrod and Robert Stamp have attempted to push the discussion beyond a debate about the mere absence or presence of progressive pedagogy in the classroom, contending that the schools of their childhoods were a blend of traditional and progressive practices, which changed over time.³ The lasting impact of progressive education in the classroom has been identified by Amy von Heyking’s research, which highlights the ongoing use of the project method in Alberta schools, and the permanent replacement of history with the course social studies, both products of progressive reforms.⁴ In his analysis of the progressive language in Ontario’s 1937 revised curriculum, Patrice Milewski explains, “as a rupture in educational discourse, it conditioned or defined what could be said about teaching, learning, children, and schooling, for the greater part of the twentieth century.”⁵ It is to this research context that educational historian and philosopher, Theodore Christou contributes his detailed study of the rhetoric of progressive education.

In *Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919-1942*, Christou deliberately focuses on the language of progressive education, arguing that even if classroom practices changed little in this period, progressive rhetoric made a significant break with the traditional educational rhetoric, and is in itself a worthwhile area of study.⁶ Christou opens with a survey of research on the educational context in Ontario in the interwar period through which he demonstrates the pressure schools were under to align themselves with what was perceived as a changing, progressive society, which resulted in

discourse about health, social efficiency, and the study of children. In the following three chapters, he traces the presentation and dissemination of progressive ideas in two widely read Ontario journals, *The School* and *The Canadian School Journal*, asking how “progressive education” was understood and described.

The heart of *Progressive Education* is organized according to three domains of reform on which progressive rhetoric focused, and which emerged in response to progressive educators’ concerns about traditional schooling:⁷ Chapter 3 considers the call for active learning; Chapter 4 looks at the call for individualized instruction; and Chapter 5 examines the view that schools be connected more closely to life in contemporary society. Borrowing from the work of Kliebard, Christou divides each of these chapters into three sections, wherein he writes about the content from the perspective of one of three interest groups seeking to influence curriculum reforms in the above three domains: educators interested in child study and developmental psychology, educators interested in improving social efficiency and seeing that students adjust to industry employment, and those interested in bettering society (known as social melioration and cooperation).⁸ Christou points out that all three orientations are in their own right “progressive,” as they reflect the social, political and economic climate of change in the interwar period. They all advocate for active, individualized and relevant learning, and depart from the language and values of traditional schooling. And yet, as his study so systematically reveals, the above domains meant something different to each of these groups. Before concluding, Christou examines the Ontario curriculum revisions introduced between 1937 and 1942 in light of the war and progressive reforms. He concludes that changes to Ontario’s revised *Programme of Studies* rooted in child study and social meliorist rhetoric were far more evident than those from social efficiency.⁹

Christou’s analysis of the Ontario journals and curriculum offers insight into the hybridization that commonly occurred in progressive reforms.¹⁰ Whereas Kliebard argues that a single term could not be used to identify and describe all that took place in schools, Christou brings clarity to what is evidently a complicated term by expounding on various overlapping and interwoven facets of progressive education.¹¹ Moreover, Christou demonstrates that the social interest groups in favour of progressive education and identifiable in Ontario educational journals were on parallel and interrelated courses, rather than competing in a struggle as Kliebard describes the American context.¹² Through a deliberately structured text and by explicitly delineating what his study is and is not attempting to address, Christou brings clarity to a topic that has proven difficult to define. He does not diminish the complexity of progressive education, but rather uses the educational journals to demonstrate ways in which that complexity operated. *Progressive Education* is a worthwhile read for academics interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the ideas and interests at the heart of progressive reform.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Neil Sutherland, "The Triumph of "Formalism": Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s," *BC Studies* 69-70 (Spring-Summer, 1986): 175; Nick Kach, "Progressive Education in Alberta," in *Essays on Canadian Education* eds. Nick Kach, Kas Mazurek, Robert S. Patterson, and Ivan DeFaveri (Calgary, AB: Detselig, 1986), 79-96; Robert S. Patterson, "The Implementation of Progressive Education in Canada, 1930-1945," in *Essays on Canadian Education*, ed., Nick Kach, Kas Mazurek, Robert S. Patterson, and Ivan DeFaveri (Calgary, AB: Detselig, 1986), 79-96.

² Herbert M. Kliebard. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958*. (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 31; Robert S. Patterson, "The Canadian Response to Progressive Education," in *Essays on Canadian Education*, eds. Nick Kach, Kas Mazurek, Robert S. Patterson, Ivan DeFaveri (Calgary, AB: Detselig, 1986), 61-77.

³ Robert M. Stamp, "Growing Up Progressive? Part I: Going to Elementary School in 1940s Ontario," *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'education* 17,1 (2005): 187-98; and Robert M. Stamp, "Growing Up Progressive? Part II: Going to High School in 1950s Ontario," *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'education* 17, 2 (2005): 321-31; Paul Axelrod, "Beyond the Progressive Education Debate: A Profile of Toronto Schooling in the 1950s," *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'education* 17, 2 (2005): 227-41.

⁴ Amy von Heyking, "Selling Progressive Education to Albertans, 1935-53," *Historical Studies in Education* 10(1)(1998): 67-84; Amy von Heyking, "Implementing Progressive Education in Alberta's Rural Schools," *Historical Studies in Education* 24, 1 (2012): 93-111.

⁵ Patrice Milewski, "'The Little Gray Book': Pedagogy, Discourse and Rupture in 1937," in *Schooling in Transition: Readings in Canadian History of Education*, eds. Sara Z. Burke and Patrice Milewski (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 20012), 324; Patrice Milewski, "I Paid No Attention to It": An Oral History of Curricular Change in the 1930s," *Historical Studies in Education* 24, 1 (2012): 112-129.

⁶ Christou, *Progressive Education*, 44.

⁷ Their main concerns were about rote scholarship in school, content driven learning, and the disconnection between life in society and what was taught in schools. See John Dewey, *Education and Experience*, (New York: Touchstone, 1938).

⁸ Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958*, (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

⁹ Christou, *Progressive Education*, 130.

¹⁰ See also Kliebard, *The Struggle*, on the hybridization of curriculum reforms in the 1930s in the American context.

¹¹ Kliebard, *The Struggle*, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 269.