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Implementing Progressive Education in Alberta's Rural Schools

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ABSTRACT

In the mid-1930s, in the midst of economic depression, social turmoil and political upheaval, the province of Alberta introduced an innovative progressive school curriculum, consisting of the “enterprise” approach and the replacement of history courses with Social Studies. Historians who have examined this revision, like Robert Patterson, assert that the curriculum was never seriously implemented, particularly in the rural schools of the province. They argue that young and inexperienced teachers with few teaching resources were simply not up to the task of putting the child-centred, project-based program into effect. This paper argues that rural teachers, not inhibited by many elements of what Tyack and Cuban call “the grammar of schooling,” were actually well placed to implement hands-on, subject-integrated and student-directed learning activities. An examination of a range of primary source material, including teacher memoirs, newspaper accounts and Department of Education correspondence, indicates that rural teachers, though they faced considerable challenges in fully implementing progressive curriculum reforms, adopted and adapted teaching practices they saw as relevant and useful for the students in their classrooms.

RÉSUMÉ

Au milieu des années 1930, dans un contexte de crise économique, d'agitation sociale et de bouleversement politique, la province d'Alberta introduisit un programme d'études progressiste et innovateur, caractérisé par l'approche « entrepreneuriale » et le remplacement des cours d'histoire par les sciences sociales. Des historiens qui ont étudié ce changement, comme Robert Patterson, maintiennent que le programme d'études n'a jamais été véritablement mis en œuvre, particulièrement dans les écoles rurales de la province. Ils affirment que de jeunes enseignants inexpérimentés, travaillant avec peu de ressources pédagogiques, n'étaient tout simplement pas en mesure d'appliquer le programme orienté vers des projets centrés sur l'enfant. Cet article soutient que les enseignants des écoles rurales n'étaient pas limités par plusieurs éléments de ce que Tyack et Cuban appellent « la grammaire de l'enseignement », mais qu'ils étaient plutôt bien placés pour mettre en pratique la transmission des savoirs basée sur l'intégration des matières et l'apprentissage individuel. Notre étude d'un corpus de sources primaires comprenant les mémoires d'enseignants, des journaux et la correspondance du Département de l'éducation révèle que les instituteurs ruraux, bien qu'ils aient affronté des défis importants dans la mise en œuvre des réformes, ont su adopter et adapter dans leurs classes les pratiques pédagogiques qu'ils trouvaient pertinentes et utiles pour leurs élèves.

Introduction

In the mid-1930s, in the midst of economic depression, social turmoil and political upheaval, the province of Alberta introduced an innovative progressive school curriculum. Historians who have examined this revision, like Robert Patterson, assert that the curriculum was never meaningfully implemented, particularly in the rural schools of the province.¹ Pointing to the range of limitations of one-room schools, they argue that young and inexperienced teachers with few teaching resources were simply not up to the task of putting the child-centred, project-based program into effect.

This paper argues that the negative assessment of this curriculum implementation is deeply flawed. It does not account for the fact that many elements of the revision, such as the use of the “enterprise” teaching approach and the replacement of history courses with Social Studies, endured in Alberta while other provinces returned to more traditional instructional methods after 1945. Indeed, writing in the 1960s, educator and historian John Chalmers said that the Enterprise “has been the basis of the elementary programme of studies for some thirty years...it has been the most significant curricular development which this province has ever seen.”² Thus, this paper asserts that the process of curriculum implementation may be more nuanced and more complex than historians have assumed. It argues that a meaningful assessment of a program’s impact must take a longer view, and following Tyack and Cuban, realize that teachers adopted or adapted instructional practices they saw as useful, often resulting in “hybridizing” models of instructional reform.³ The progressive curriculum may not have been implemented as its creators intended or hoped, but those elements of the program that were adopted deserve closer examination and analysis.

Historian Michael Corbett asserts that Canadian educational historiography has been “dominated by an urban bias,”⁴ and certainly much of the historical scholarship regarding curriculum implementation has examined the experience of urban school boards. This paper seeks to challenge historians’ assumption that rural teachers did not implement progressive curriculum revisions because they did not implement them in the ways and to the extent that urban educators intended. Instead, it acknowledges that the progressive curriculum introduced in 1935 was in large measure created in order to suit the conditions of rural schooling, and it explores a range of evidence that indicates the efforts the teachers in rural, one-room schools made to implement the new activity program. An examination of this primary source material indicates that many rural teachers, though they faced considerable challenges in fully implementing progressive curriculum reforms, made use of teaching practices they saw as relevant and useful for the students in their classrooms.

The Revision

As Robert Patterson indicated, in the 1930s most Canadian provinces experimented with various school reforms that could be described as “progressive,” years after criticisms of similar reforms had already arisen in the United States. Like those in the

United States, curriculum reforms identified as progressive were grounded in many different ideas about children, schools and the nature of communities, but they were generally described as “activity” programs, “integrated” programs, “child-centered” education, “learning by doing,” and “democratic education.” Patterson argued that Canadian educators were drawn to the classroom practices associated with progressive education that they felt would enhance students’ enjoyment of schooling, but that “there was little or no recognition or acceptance of the underlying philosophy behind the movement.”⁵ Given this, it is not surprising that he concluded that educational leaders were unable to prepare classroom teachers for progressive curriculum revisions, and that their efforts at implementation “resulted in confusion, misunderstanding and, of course, misapplication.”⁶

The progressive revision in Alberta was undertaken in order to address problems that had been identified with the one-room schools in the rural areas of the province. A standing committee of the provincial legislature was appointed by the U.F.A. government in the early 1930s to study the problems associated with rural schooling and it reported its findings after the election of the Social Credit government in 1935. The committee identified a litany of issues plaguing rural school districts: financial insolvency stemming from the difficulty of collecting school taxes and exacerbated by the economic depression; teacher transiency; a lack of appropriate teaching materials; the inability of students to access high school programming; and, an academic curriculum that they argued was irrelevant for many rural students.⁷ The committee made a range of recommendations to address these problems: consolidation of rural school districts into larger divisions was intended to address their financial difficulties; the progressive curriculum was an attempt to modernize the school program and provide more flexible and relevant instruction for rural pupils.

In 1935, the new Supervisor of Schools in Alberta, H.C. Newland and a group of educators in the provincial Normal schools developed this curriculum that drew heavily from those strands of progressivism American historian Herbert Kliebard has labeled, social meliorist and developmentalist.⁸ A high school Latin teacher in Edmonton in the 1920s, Newland completed his doctorate in education at the University of Chicago in 1932. He was a leader in the provincial teachers’ association and a founder of the Canadian Teachers’ Federation. He served on the executive of the American Progressive Association. He was a democratic socialist, committed to social justice and profoundly influenced by George Counts’s understanding of schools as tools of social reconstruction.

Among the educators who assisted Newland in the progressive revision of the school curriculum was Donalda Dickie, an instructor at the provincial Normal School. Dickie completed postgraduate studies at Columbia University and Oxford before completing her PhD in History at the University of Toronto.⁹ She later drew on her experience with Alberta’s elementary school curriculum revision to author *The Enterprise in Theory and Practice* (1940), which became the standard text on progressive education and child-centered, subject-integrated elementary school instruction in teacher training institutions across Canada. Newland appointed Dickie and Olive Fisher, a like-minded colleague from the Normal School and educated at

Columbia and the University of Chicago, to create the new elementary school program grounded in the project approach they called, “the enterprise,” and intended to give students experience in group living through cooperative learning. The new Program of Studies described enterprises as “social experiences” and explained that “activities should be of such a nature as to cultivate the natural disposition of the pupils to express their ideas by speech, free art, dramatization, construction, writing and movement. Their activities should be as life-like as possible, so that the learnings acquired through them will be integrated and unified.”¹⁰ Teachers who had been used to a program that described learning expectations by indicating relevant page numbers in textbooks, now struggled to make sense of activities entitled “Water and Life: An Exhibit,” and “How Christmas Came to Canterbury: a Pageant or Play,” that included vague “desired outcomes,” such as “General geography of the British Isles and western Europe.”¹¹ They were directed to plan enterprises in consultation with their pupils and ensure that they incorporate “useful knowledge” in history, geography, science, health, literature, music and art. The program was piloted in 1935–1936 by seventy-five teachers who had received training in the child-centered, inquiry-based instructional methods required, and extended for general implementation in the fall of 1936.

If the enterprise was the hallmark of the progressive revision at the elementary school level, the adoption of social studies to replace the teaching of history and geography characterized the secondary program. Newland appointed a young Normal School instructor, W.D. McDougall, to draft an outline of social studies courses for intermediate students (Grades VII, VIII and IX) that were “modeled on the Rugg approach.”¹² The new program described the social studies classroom as “a real laboratory, where cooperation, initiative, originality and responsibility are developed,”¹³ and therefore central to the development of a new kind of democratic citizenship. Because progressives understood learning as an active process, the new social studies program abandoned traditional topics in history and geography in favor of an introduction to “the problems of modern civilization in their historical and geographical setting.”¹⁴ For example, grade nine students explored the problem of the impact of technology on modern life. Students in grades ten to twelve continued to study the history of western civilization but it was now justified as important context to assist students in identifying, understanding and solving contemporary global problems.¹⁵

While the program continued to outline school subject expectations for twelve grades, those grades were categorized into four divisions: Division I consisted of Grades I, II and III; Division II of Grades IV, V and VI; Division III created a new intermediate, or junior high school, level out of Grades VII, VIII and IX; and, Division IV made up of Grades X, XI and XII was the new senior high school. Annual departmental examinations were eliminated for all grades except Grade IX and Grade XII. These divisional groupings were intended to facilitate teaching in multi-age or multi-grade classrooms like one-room schools. In a speech to the Canadian Education Association, Supervisor of Schools Newland explained, “In all one-room schools, and in most villages and town schools, the classes taught will comprise all the pupils in one division—either Division I or Division II...In language, oral and written, and

in social studies, the instructional materials, even though outlined by grades, may be used in a three-year cycle.”¹⁶ He went on to indicate the change in teaching method required by the new program: “The one great advantage of this grade-grouping procedure will be the saving of time that was formerly given to a multiplicity of ‘recitations’ and set format lessons in one-room schools.” He insisted that the new program would enhance students’ independence while still ensuring that the teacher provide direction for the students’ investigations.

In a significant break from tradition in terms of curriculum development, no textbooks were specifically authorized or developed for the new program. Instead, lengthy lists of minimum, secondary and supplementary books were provided. Teachers were encouraged to use magazines and current periodicals. New classroom equipment, like movie and slide projectors, was recommended. The new courses were supposed to be characterized by student research into problems facing society, class forums or discussions to present their research, and debates about the possible solutions. The old teaching methods—lecture, recitation from text—were clearly inappropriate in a program that emphasized the development of students’ research and problem-solving skills.

Attempts were made to help teachers implement the new progressive program and turn their classrooms into laboratories.¹⁷ The Department sponsored institutes and teachers’ conventions in order to educate teachers about the new program. In the summer of 1936, 1,100 teachers (out of a teaching force of about 6,000 and in the midst of an economic depression) attended a summer training institute in Edmonton.¹⁸ In response to a questionnaire developed by historian Patterson, one teacher remembered that “most of the session was devoted to ‘working things out’ together. I found it very helpful and heartening.”¹⁹ Another responded, “The courses I took at summer school were helpful.”²⁰ In addition, in the late 1930s and 1940s, the provincial teachers’ association magazine carried regular columns by leading educators in the province that summarized important books about progressive pedagogy and provided practical tips for teachers. In rural regions of the province, teachers traveled once a month in order to meet in study groups and share their understandings of and experiences with the program.

Attempts were also made to prepare rural school trustees and parents for the new program. School inspector Lindsay Thurber, for example, explained in a presentation to rural school trustees that was reprinted in the local newspaper, that the new course “devised for rural schools” was already in effect in two schools in his Hanna inspectorate and would shortly be required in all schools. He explained why the eight grade system had been replaced with three divisions saying that it allowed pupils to progress through their studies at their own pace and engage in subject-integrated projects in cooperation with others in the same division.²¹ Once the program had been in effect for a year, rural newspapers continued to carry articles sponsored by local branches of the Alberta Teachers’ Association explaining and defending the new approach. For example, in 1937 the *Didsbury Pioneer* carried an article about “Enterprise Education” that asserted: “Our recent educational system did not give the child an opportunity to cultivate initiative, originality or individuality, as there was

an imposition of the teacher's ways and manners. The teacher will now be a guide or close supervisor, while the child will be given an opportunity to think, consider and experiment for himself."²² These attempts to educate rural trustees and parents always stressed the importance of the flexibility of the new program and its relevance for pupils.

Apparent Failures

Given the difficulties facing Alberta's rural schools in the interwar period, it is not surprising that in assessing the implementation of the progressive curriculum in Alberta Patterson concluded that, "support for progressive education did not extend far beyond a limited cadre of educational leaders"²³ and that, "the change appears to have been superficial at best."²⁴ Alberta's rural schools in the interwar period resembled those in British Columbia as described by Stortz and Wilson.²⁵ The schools were isolated and poorly equipped. The teachers were generally very young women with little understanding of the rural communities in which they were living. They were vulnerable to conflicts of local politics, poorly paid, and often living "lives of quiet, lonely desperation."²⁶ In her 1951 study of the Hanna area, sociologist Jean Burnet reviewed the financial and political difficulties schools in the region faced in the 1930s: "It became impossible to collect school taxes... There was a great deterioration in the quality of school buildings and equipment... Libraries and other facilities became fewer and fewer, and so low in caliber as to be of little use. Capable teachers also were hard to secure and hold when salaries were cut perilously low."²⁷ Young teachers, just out of Normal School, took on these positions desperate for work experience that would help them win positions in urban schools. One of these teachers, Ernest Hodgson, remembered being frustrated by his inability to implement project work as it had been modeled in his teacher training: "the enterprise work in Grades I-IV was a puzzle since we had so little to work with by way of library, art or construction resources. Dr. Dickie had made the enterprise method sound so 'right' and so logical and so obviously easy that I was constantly guilty about how little I seemed to be accomplishing."²⁸ Other teachers' reminiscences confirm that "most teachers made little more than a token effort."²⁹

Initially, the Department of Education was very encouraged by the willingness of teachers to adapt to the new programs. In 1936, Supervisor of Schools H.C. Newland reported that 80 percent of elementary school teachers were using the enterprise approach for part of their instruction.³⁰ The following year he claimed that 85 percent of elementary school teachers were using the enterprise technique, particularly in the teaching of social studies.³¹ By 1938 Newland reported "the enterprise technique is now almost universal in the rural schools as well as urban, and perhaps 60 percent of the teachers are successful in using it to good advantage in the integration and vitalization of the curricular activities of the schools."³²

Annual reports also indicate early satisfaction with the implementation of the new Social Studies courses at the secondary level. The new course for Grade IX was praised because "the pupils discuss problems more than they did under the old

course, engage in more research, and receive more training in generalizing and forming judgments.”³³ Inspectors who visited the many rural schools across the province were pleased to report that even these teachers who taught in remote locations with few resources felt “the course in social studies is the most interesting and useful course in the intermediate school today.”³⁴

But as positive as the Chief Inspector and his colleagues were about the implementation of the Enterprise and of Social Studies, they acknowledged some challenges facing teachers from the outset. They realized that most schools did not have book-cases and shelves full of materials for student research projects. In 1936 they reported that “in certain section ... due to depressed economic conditions, the purchase of equipment and reference books by trustees has been found practically impossible ... The new course in this subject cannot be given effective treatment unless there is on hand in the school a plentiful supply of reference material.”³⁵ In 1939, Newland acknowledged that teachers with insufficient training or “no special interest” did not demonstrate the problem-based and research-oriented instruction required by the new Social Studies.³⁶

By 1945 the new Chief Superintendent of Schools, W.H. Swift, acknowledged that the progressive curriculum had not fulfilled expectations when he reported that: “the present status of activity and group techniques is far from encouraging... We have neither the school plants, equipment nor competent teachers necessary for their successful application.” He went on to imply that the enterprise technique seemed to result in the superficial treatment of topics and an insufficient development of students’ skills, saying “there is a tendency for pupils to waste time in random activities which are not on their plane of experience, which lack any coherent sequence and which result in the formation of no positive skill associations.” He concluded by conceding, “Until we have a body of well-trained teachers capable of leading and guiding pupils intelligently through a series of related, vital and purposeful activities, we shall fall short of our goal.”³⁷ But is this just a story of failed curriculum implementation? Is there evidence that teachers, particularly rural teachers, made some efforts to implement the program?

Evidence of Success

First, it must be acknowledged that the Enterprise remained at the core of the elementary school curriculum in Alberta until 1964 when it became an activity method for use in Social Studies classes only. Curricular connections to Health and Science were dropped in the 1950s, and while reading and writing were still developed within the context of enterprise activities, a specific curriculum guide for Language was developed in 1959.³⁸ The term “enterprise” was completely eliminated only with the 1971 Social Studies curriculum revision. While many provinces continued to teach integrated Social Studies courses in the elementary schools after World War II, only Alberta continues even now to require issues-centred, interdisciplinary Social Studies courses through to the end of high school, rather than offering a selection of history, geography and other social science courses to its secondary school students.³⁹ Clearly

in order to meaningfully assess the impact of the progressive curriculum revision, one must acknowledge its long-term legacy.

Moreover, there is evidence in a variety of primary source material that teachers, even teachers in rural, one-room, multigraded schools, attempted to implement the program as they understood it. For example, teachers' and students' memoirs and reminiscences indicate at least some rural teachers sought resources that would help them teach through a project approach. Hazel McKenzie said her Lethbridge school inspector was very helpful in delivering materials to assist students with their research projects, including piles of *National Geographic* magazines.⁴⁰ Ernest Hodgson asked relatives to send boxes of books and magazines and remembered "that box of material bailed me out time after time."⁴¹ Henry Pylypow recalled ordering prepared activity units from an entrepreneurial publisher: "In the one-room schools, resources were limited so 'ready-made' enterprises from the Western Canada Institute in Calgary. The logical and easiest choices were the Indians and Eskimos."⁴² Indeed the Institute began advertising its enterprise packages in the *Alberta Teachers' Association Magazine* within months of the implementation of the new curriculum. Its ads promised teachers that, "These Enterprises have been compiled with great care. They are so set up that a teacher will be given a complete and concise plan for the development of the Enterprise. Ample latitude is provided for the pupils to develop original ideas. Group discussions are invited and provided for."⁴³ School inspectors saw the widespread popularity of these units as a failure of teachers to implement the Enterprise. In the Department's 1937 *Annual Report*, one inspector complained: "prepared helps in enterprise work have proved an obstacle to efficiency, originality and teacher progress. These so-called aids may serve to provide the teachers with suggestions, but when the plans given in the manuals are slavishly followed, the very spirit of enterprise work is lost and pupil activity is seriously impaired."⁴⁴ But from the perspective of struggling young rural teachers, these could also be seen as what Tyack and Cuban have called "hybrids" of curriculum innovation, logical adaptations for "the local terrain."⁴⁵

Published teacher reminiscences include examples of effective Enterprise lessons. Murray Robison remembered a lesson that was particularly meaningful—and disappointing—for his students:

In 1934 Enterprise Education was introduced into the schools. It really meant teaching all subjects, or at least as many as possible, around a single theme. For my grade five student, Harry, I decided to "Take a Trip to Europe." This meant preparations for the trip, travelling across Canada by train, crossing the ocean in an ocean liner, et cetera. We were doing famously; Harry really seemed to be in the spirit of the activity. So much so that he really thought we were going to go, for real. It was his sister, Esther that put me wise. Poor Harry. It was such a disappointment when he found out it was only a fantasy.⁴⁶

What is interesting about these memoirs and reminiscences is that they suggest that rural teachers used progressive pedagogical techniques by necessity and intuition. Penelope Stephenson in her study of rural teachers in the Okanagan valley in the

1920s argued, “Rural teachers also learnt to utilize the natural resources on their school’s doorstep to provide interesting lessons for their pupils.”⁴⁷ Clearly many teachers in Alberta did the same. Roberta Volker remembered her experience in the one-room school at Wood Lake with teacher Margaret Campbell:

Social studies took us outside building a pioneer log cabin, and pioneer transportation had us build and float a raft. All were made with pioneer tools—axe and bucksaw. Science class took us out on plenty of nature finds to see wild orchids growing near the school as well as acorns being gathered by squirrels in preparation for winter. She had the ability to make every lesson come alive with her curiosity that she shared and passed on to us, her students. We all came away doing well in math because of her love of the subject and the fun projects she would create to make it real life experience for us.⁴⁸

Mildred Rasmussen remembered projects she developed that required her pupils in Dickson to interview their parents in order to write a history of the Danish community in the area.⁴⁹

Rural teachers seemed able to create relevant Social Studies lessons for their students, particularly during the war years. Gordon Littke describes how William Lay, the teacher in the one-room school near Hythe, divided the six intermediate grade students into two teams to debate the topic: “Resolved, that Japan is a threat to British, French and American possessions in the Pacific.” The teams of students had to work outside the classroom so they could not be overheard and were given the school library (about fifty books by Littke’s count), and newspapers to use to gather information. While he remembers Mr. Lay as a very creative and entertaining teacher, Littke also recalls that “We were expected to use these resources and to deliver our best efforts.”⁵⁰ New teaching resources supplied by the school divisions or by the Department of Education made it easier for teachers to create engaging Social Studies lessons. In a book of reminiscences of teaching during the war years, teachers recall using world maps and the School News Broadcasts to organize lessons around recent war news.⁵¹

Whether any of these teachers would have used the term “progressive” to describe their teaching is an interesting question. Maxine Sutherland writes in her memoirs about attending the Summer Institute on Enterprise Education at the University of Alberta in 1940 and describes the sessions as “most valuable.”⁵² Her memoirs go on to describe many active, project-oriented teaching activities, usually incorporating the arts, including a play that she and her students at Fairview School created in 1944 called “The Alberta Rangeland’s Story” that tells the story of wheat.⁵³ Her classroom in Bearspaw, described as “an example of a well organized and functioning rural school with a creative programme,” was one of two model schools that hosted student teachers from the University of Calgary in the early 1950s.⁵⁴

Edith Van Kleek, on the other hand, did not acknowledge the shift in educational philosophy or pedagogical approach. She taught in a number of one-room rural schools but left teaching in 1933. In her memoir, *The Way it Was*, she says that when she returned to a one-room school in 1942, “I found that there had not been much

curriculum change,⁵⁵ apparently oblivious to the introduction of the Enterprise. Nowhere does she describe her teaching approach as child-centred, discovery-based or hands-on. And yet she says:

I always had the children 'look it up.' There were good atlases and my world Book Encyclopedia in the classroom, and when they asked me a question about anything, really they knew before they asked that I was going to say, 'look it up,' and they would sigh and go for the books. There were good history books in the school, and of course a well-worn dictionary. Whenever anyone brought a question to school, about something they had heard elsewhere, I would say, 'Let's see what we can find out about that.' I tried to turn out students who had a lot of general knowledge and knew how to research and think on their own. I always had a consuming desire myself to find out about things, and I tried to instill that in the children, hoping they would get to love learning, about anything, as much as I did.⁵⁶

She goes on to describe the nature walks that became science lessons and resulted in bird-house construction that required students to research bird habitats and use their math skills.⁵⁷ She recounts how a nearby barn-moving became an opportunity for the students to get some hands-on experience in a lesson on levers.⁵⁸ She writes about in-depth discussions with her students about current events, and remembers that during students' research on the lives of Alberta pioneers (a topic prescribed by the Grade 4 Enterprise curriculum by the late 1940s), she and the students built their own sod-dies and a log house.⁵⁹ Van Kleek may not have identified herself as a "progressive" teacher, but clearly her students had every opportunity become the problem-solving, cooperative citizens the Enterprise program was intended to develop.

There is other evidence that provides some insight into the nature and extent of the new program's implementation in rural schools. In 1939, the editor of the *Lethbridge Herald* received five hundred responses from students in seventy local schools when he contacted the rural school division to find out, "the opinions of the children of the schools as to the effectiveness of the new course of studies."⁶⁰ Their responses, accompanied by photographs of pupils working in their classrooms, appeared in a full-page features story in the newspaper in February. Younger students like Norma Jorgensen from Hardieville said she liked enterprise work because, "I like to look up reports and read them out to the class because it gets you used to standing up in front of a crowd without being frightened. It also helps the other children learn things, which they did not know before. I like enterprise because it is not like having to write notes, notes and more notes...The first enterprise we made was a picture show, then a 'Forest and Stream' booklet."⁶¹ Other students described working with maps, graphs and collecting and colouring pictures about their enterprise topics. Many commented on their interest in current events and said they enjoyed discussing problems and issues during "open forum" time. Gertrude Withage from Nobleford provided very specific information about how the new Social Studies course was implemented in her school:

About three weeks after school started, grades seven and eight clubbed together and organized a Social Studies club. We voted on a president, G. Withage, a vice-president, Lyle Tackaberry; a treasurer, Ila Mae Jarvis, and a librarian, Joyce Hunt. We have covered all the mineral resources of Canada and lumbering on the western to eastern coasts. We have taken all the history of France and are now discussing the problem: How Canada became French.⁶²

Her description certainly indicates a remarkable breadth, if not depth, of coverage of Grade VII Social Studies. Many of the older students echoed Picture Butte student Kathleen Parker's assessment of the long-term value of the new program: "It tends to develop the students' minds and to teach them to gain information through their own experiences . . . By reading many books a pupil reads several points of view which students never got from the old history textbook. In this way the student has developed an independence which will help him in years to come."⁶³ It is certainly possible that the teachers in the Lethbridge rural school division worked with their students in crafting their responses to the editor's request, but the sheer volume of letters and the students' detailed comments indicate that the teachers were making some efforts to implement the required program.

Other evidence of Alberta teachers' initiatives with regard to implementing the Enterprise is found in some unexpected places, including the Department of Education's file of correspondence with the Dominion government. After the introduction of the new program, a variety of federal departments sent letters to the Deputy Minister of Education complaining about the number of letters coming from Alberta teachers and students seeking information, samples or teaching materials. The file includes a letter from the Chief Inspector of Schools apologizing to the Department of Agriculture for the actions of overzealous rural teachers who did not think about the consequences of encouraging their students to exchange seeds with students in foreign countries. In his letter, Inspector Fuller explains that the course of study does not suggest such an exchange but concedes that "It is quite possible, however, that teachers in different parts of the Province are encouraging their pupils to do this." He goes on to agree that "it would be unfortunate, however, if through an exchange of seeds dangerous pests were imported into Canada," and suggests that an official announcement from the Department in the teachers' magazine will quickly bring an end to the practice.⁶⁴

In September 1937 the Department of Trade and Commerce wrote to the Deputy Minister asking why they were receiving a large number of letters from Alberta teachers requesting booklets about manufacturing in Canada: "Up to the present we have not been able to ascertain the reason for these inquiries. As they come from all parts of the Province we can only assume that some announcement has been made, but by whom we are unable to discover."⁶⁵ A year later, a bemused director of the Commercial Intelligence Service wrote, "For the past two years or three years we have been receiving a large and increasing number of letters from school children and school teachers in Alberta asking for information and literature on a wide range of subjects, and, most frequently, asking for lists of Canadian manufacturers of various

products together with booklets and samples illustrating manufacturing processes. We were at a loss to know why this service received so many letters of this nature.”⁶⁶

Letters of a similar nature came from the Department of Mines and Resources and the Dominion Forester. They included samples of letters received from Alberta teachers like Stella A. Nahirniak from Holden who wrote only: “Please send me the booklets on ‘The Forests of Canada’ and ‘The Structure of Wood.’ We need these books in school now.”⁶⁷ While assuring the Department of Education that “We are, of course, anxious to do everything in our power to co-operate with the provincial educational authorities in inculcating in the minds of the children the proper attitude toward measures of forest conservation and protection,” the Dominion Forester explained that many of their publications are too technical for the use of school children and asked that consultation occur regarding the preparation and distribution of appropriate teaching materials.⁶⁸ While this correspondence does not provide evidence of the quality of enterprise instruction in Alberta’s rural schools, it strongly suggests that some teachers showed remarkable initiative in searching for teaching materials that would help them successfully implement the program.

After 1945, it became easier for rural schools to address many of the issues that may have prevented teachers from implementing this progressive revision. The consolidation of 3,515 rural school districts into fifty divisional school boards meant that schools were more generously financed and had access to better teaching resources. A publication prepared by the Department of Education reported that all school divisions were required to provide library services to their schools. Schools that had had on average thirty books before consolidation now had 102, and they had access to circulating libraries that sent out boxes of books every month.⁶⁹ The divisional boards also provided radios, magazine subscriptions, phonographs and “media to assist the enterprise technique.”⁷⁰ In the postwar period, some rural school divisions were well equipped and the Enterprise well underway. In response to Patterson’s questionnaire, one retired superintendent said: “In 1947 when I went to Rocky Mountain House as superintendent I found little isolated rural schools which were thriving beehives of progressive education industry, beautiful models of the ‘activity program.’”⁷¹ In rural divisions where teachers had not adequately or appropriately implemented the program, the divisional superintendents were able to provide more support and direction for teachers than the school inspectors of the 1940s had. For example, Superintendent Schrag from Vulcan wrote to a colleague with Edmonton Public Schools because he wanted teachers to work together to create Enterprise activity units for the division: “I propose having a group of teachers of Grades 4, 5 and 6 in the County of Vulcan schools do some work on the preparation of Enterprise outlines for these grades. I would very much appreciate it if I could have samples of the work done in Edmonton along this line, as a help and a guide to these people in their work.”⁷² Teacher Maxine Sutherland remembered divisional superintendents as “much more competent to help us improve our classroom performance than those gentlemen who were called school Inspectors.”⁷³ Clearly in the post-war era, many rural teachers were not so neglected or isolated that they could not implement required programs.

After 1945, as the Department of Education grew, it was able to prepare teaching resources and materials that were sent to all areas of the province for use in professional workshops for teachers in order to assist them in developing appropriate Enterprise activity units. In 1947 the Department circulated an Enterprise Plan Book, essentially a template for creating units based on the scope and sequence recommended by the Department and including information to help plan the unit and assess students' growth in relevant curriculum areas.⁷⁴ In 1948, at the request of school superintendents, the Department began producing "experimental resource units" for classroom use. The first on the Red River Settlement was intended for use as a Grade IV Enterprise and was accompanied by a booklet of pupil reading material (not called a textbook), "profusely illustrated, and at an appropriate level of child interest."⁷⁵ In 1950 the Department produced a film, "Developing the Enterprise," that featured a successful Grade Five teacher working with her students at Garneau School in Edmonton so that teachers in all areas of the province could see a successful Enterprise in action.⁷⁶

Throughout the 1950s the Department of Education modified the Enterprise curriculum, providing more specific direction in terms of a scope and sequence of unit themes, content to be included and students' skills to be developed.⁷⁷ While specifying these requirements might have undermined the spirit of exploration and child freedom that the curriculum developers of the 1930s called for, it assisted teachers in incorporating some activity-based and subject-integrated instruction in their classrooms. The papers of Leona Kully, a teacher in the village of Myrnam from the 1930s until her retirement in 1981, include a wide range of teaching materials and student work related to the Enterprise.⁷⁸ Her papers, available at the Provincial Archives of Alberta, indicate that like many teachers in rural areas, Kully made good use of published Enterprise units like "In Eskimo Land," and "Christmas in Other Lands." Samples of exemplary students' projects include neatly printed entries and nicely coloured pictures. Since the projects are all identical, one can assume that these Enterprise units did not provide much room for student initiative or the development of original ideas. Other samples, however, demonstrate Kully's efforts to have students complete research projects about relevant local topics. For example, students' Enterprise workbooks on "Our Community," include hand-drawn maps and pictures of important places in Myrnum, information about the village's history and short pieces of writing about places and jobs in the community. Kully's students also completed an Enterprise unit about a local Hutterite colony. Her planbook includes notes about the field trip they took. The students' completed workbooks list their group members' duties during the unit, and demonstrate enough variation that we can infer that students were able to research aspects of Hutterite religion and culture of interest to them. So while Kully may not have implemented the Enterprise consistently in ways that would cultivate students' originality and initiative, there is every indication that she remained faithful to the philosophy of the program itself. For example, she gave her students a set of engaging and relevant collaborative projects of interest that were examples of appropriate and reasonable adaptation of a curriculum suited to local conditions and circumstances.

Conclusion

H.C. Newland and his collaborators had many reasons to be disappointed in the short term with the impact of their progressive curriculum reforms on Alberta's schools. From the late 1930s to the end of the Second World War, schools had few resources and teachers were often young, inexperienced and perhaps inadequately prepared, particularly if they were teaching in rural schools. But to claim that the progressive reforms failed ignores the fact that the Enterprise and Social Studies endured in Alberta's schools. It also fails to appreciate that in many ways rural teachers were in a better position than their urban counterparts in implementing a subject-integrated, project-oriented program.

Curriculum historians agree that changing classroom instruction "has proven to be the most difficult kind of reform."⁷⁹ What Tyack and Cuban call "the grammar of schooling," has made teachers very resistant to changes in pedagogy. They identify elements of that grammar that undermined experimental reforms like the Dalton Plan in the 1920s, including the distribution of students into classrooms by chronological age, and the division of the school day into scheduled periods of study.⁸⁰ Kliebard identifies another element of school structure that makes pedagogical reform so difficult. Following Dewey, he argues that there is an inherent conflict between child-centred pedagogical reform and the external conditions, or expectations, of schools: "Extending great latitude to children to pursue a wide range of activities has the potential for chaos. The most persuasive single reason I can adduce for the persistence of the recitation as the predominant mode of teaching is that it is a reasonably effective way of keeping order."⁸¹ He concludes that the school structure and its emphasis on teacher control make any project-based pedagogy in which authority is shared virtually impossible to implement in any widespread fashion. But it must be acknowledged that rural schools had more flexible school structures and rural teachers had more autonomy than their urban colleagues, so in some sense they were in a good position to undertake teaching techniques that required multi-age groupings and student self-direction.

Stortz and Wilson, in their examination of rural teachers in north-central British Columbia in 1920s, list a litany of difficulties facing these teachers, but acknowledge that "Despite the generally poor living and working conditions, many teachers enjoyed the experience of being able to establish a degree of autonomy and independence."⁸² This sense of autonomy is a common theme in the memoirs of rural school teachers. For historians of education, this autonomy has often been interpreted to mean that rural teachers could continue to teach in traditional ways, ignoring the dictates of changing curriculum or new pedagogical fads. This assumes, of course, that the teachers were teaching in traditional ways. It ignores the fact that many rural teachers taught in ways consistent with "progressive" understandings of education as a matter of survival.

Rural teachers, for example, always had to adapt curriculum to their local circumstances and their students' needs. Given the erratic nature of rural schooling, students were generally not reading or writing at the grade level typical for their age. Teachers

had to assess their students' grade levels and often focused on literacy and numeracy lessons. They did not teach the range of subjects offered in urban schools. In trying to teach a curriculum for at least nine grades simultaneously, subject integration and group work were simply survival techniques. Retired teacher Ernest Hodgson noted eighteen suggestions for teachers in one room schools, seventeen of which involved groups of students working together or involved ways of differentiating for various grade levels while teaching all the children simultaneously.⁸³ Reid Shields in recalling his experience teaching at Masinasin School in southern Alberta asked: "How did a teacher survive and manage with thirty-two pupils and nine grades? We just formed groups. Each group of two or three grades had a leader. Each leader exercised his responsibilities for a week. Their responsibilities varied a bit but usually consisted of reading stories to the class, dictating spelling words, supervising the correction of arithmetic, selection and distribution of library books."⁸⁴ While a certain amount of individual seat work and recitation was certainly part of the rural school routine, it is also likely that many teachers used to managing this kind of classroom would have adapted rather easily to a curriculum that required subject-integrated, multi-age project work.

A range of primary source evidence—teacher and student memoirs, newspaper accounts, Department of Education correspondence—demonstrates that rural teachers made significant attempts to implement the new Enterprise and Social Studies programs as they understood them. Moreover, over time the Department of Education and rural school divisions were able to provide useful teaching resources and appropriate direction to teachers so that they could better adopt and adapt subject-integrated and project-oriented techniques in their classrooms. An assessment of the impact of progressive curriculum revision on Alberta's schools must be guided by a fair and realistic understanding of the nature of curriculum implementation and an acknowledgement of the long-term impact of the program. With these considerations in mind, the judgment of one rural teacher on the legacy of the progressive revision seems apt: " 'Progressive Education' exploded upon us—with the usual shattering results of an explosion. But from that first 'THOU MUST' experience it began gradually to seep in, and I believe it did permeate every phase of our system in one way or another. In the main, it got us off that 'little slot' subject treatment ... I did learn to appreciate the Enterprise and have forever since made use of a 'project method' of teaching."⁸⁵

Notes

- 1 R.S. Patterson, "The Implementation of Progressive Education in Canada, 1930–1945," in *Essays on Canadian Education*, eds. Nick Kach, Kas Mazurek, Robert S. Patterson and Ivan DeFaveri (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Limited, 1986), 79–96.
- 2 John W. Chalmers, *Schools of the Foothills Province* (University of Toronto Press, 1967), 91.
- 3 David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 138.

- 4 Mike Corbett, "A Protracted Struggle: Rural Resistance and Normalization in Canadian Educational History," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 13, no. 1 (2001): 19-48.
- 5 R.S. Patterson, "The Canadian Response to Progressive Education," in *Essays on Canadian Education*, eds. Nick Kach, Kas Mazurek, Robert S. Patterson and Ivan DeFaveri (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Limited, 1986), 71.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 7 Legislative Assembly of Alberta, *Report of the Committee on Education in the Rural Districts of Alberta* (Edmonton: King's Printer, 1935).
- 8 Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for an American Curriculum, 1898-1958*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge), 24-25.
- 9 Rebecca Priegert Coulter, "Getting Things Done: Donald J. Dickie and Leadership Through Practice," *Canadian Journal of Education* 28, 4 (2005), 676-7.
- 10 Alberta Department of Education, *Programme of Studies for the Elementary School: Grades I to VI* (Edmonton: King's Printer, 1936), 287.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 290, 300.
- 12 Amy von Heyking, *Creating Citizens: History and Identity in Alberta's Schools, 1905 to 1980* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006), 70.
- 13 Alberta Department of Education, *Programme of Studies for the Intermediate School: Grades VII to IX* (Edmonton: King's Printer, 1935), 29.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 15 von Heyking, *Creating Citizens*, 71.
- 16 H.C. Newland, "Alberta's New Programme for the Elementary School," *Proceedings of the 17th Annual Convention of the Canadian Education Association* (Regina: Canadian Education Association, 1936), 75.
- 17 Amy von Heyking, "Selling Progressive Education to Albertans," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 10 nos. 1 & 2 (1998): 67-84.
- 18 Arrigo Chiste, "The Development of the Elementary Social Studies Curriculum in Alberta," *One World* 3, no. 4 (1965), 9.
- 19 Responses to Research Questionnaire, Education Kit: Progressive Education, Edmonton Public Schools Archives (hereafter referred to as EPSA), 84.24.2.29, Item 132.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 "New Curriculum is Discussed Before Trustees' Convention," *Chinook Advance*, November 14, 1935, 1.
- 22 "Aims and Objectives of Enterprise Education," *Didsbury Pioneer*, January 21, 1937, 4.
- 23 Patterson, "The Implementation of Progressive Education," 85.
- 24 Robert S. Patterson, "The Canadian Experience with Progressive Education," in *Canadian Education: Historical Themes and Contemporary Issues*, ed. E. Brian Titley (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1990), 110.
- 25 Paul J. Stortz and J. Donald Wilson, "Education on the Frontier: Schools, Teachers and Community Influence in North-Central British Columbia," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 26, no. 52 (1993): 265-290; J. Donald Wilson and Paul J. Stortz, "'May the Lord Have Mercy on You': The Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s," in *Children, Teachers and Schools in the History of British Columbia*, eds. Jean Barman, Neil Sutherland and J. Donald Wilson (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1995), 209-233. See also J. Donald Wilson, "The Visions of Ordinary Participants: Teachers' Views of Rural Schooling in British Columbia in the 1920s," in *A History of British Columbia: Selected Readings*, ed. Patricia E. Roy (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1989), 239-255.
- 26 Robert S. Patterson, "Voices From the Past: The Personal and Professional Struggle of Rural School Teachers," in *Schools in the West: Essays in Canadian Educational History*,

- eds. Nancy M. Sheehan, J. Donald Wilson and David C. Jones (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Limited, 1986), 110.
- 27 Jean Burnet, *Next-year Country: A Study of Rural Social Organization in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), 135.
- 28 Ernest Hodgson, *North-west of '41* (Edmonton: printed by author, 1987), 26-27.
- 29 Responses to Research Questionnaire, Education Kit: Progressive Education, EPSA, 84.24.2.29, Item 132.
- 30 Alberta Department of Education, *Annual Report* (Edmonton: King's Printer, 1936), 53. Hereafter referred to as *AR*.
- 31 *AR*, 1937, 63.
- 32 *AR*, 1938, 61.
- 33 *AR*, 1936, 59.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 36 *AR*, 1939, 72.
- 37 *AR*, 1945, 24.
- 38 Alberta Department of Education, *Elementary Curriculum Guide for Social Studies-Enterprise*, interim ed. (Edmonton: Curriculum Branch, 1964), 5-6.
- 39 See "Alberta Programs of Study, Social Studies K-Grade 12, 2005," Alberta Education, accessed August 29, 2011, <http://www.learnalberta.ca/ProgramOfStudy.aspx?lang=en&ProgramId=564423#>. While other provinces offer senior high school courses in Social Studies, Alberta's program continues to reflect its "social reconstructionist" roots. The three compulsory senior high school courses are organized around multidisciplinary investigations of the issues of globalization (Grade Ten), nationalism (Grade Eleven), and ideology (Grade Twelve). A popular Social Studies education textbook asserts that in contrast to programs in Ontario and British Columbia, "Alberta has a more socially active vision of the ideal citizen." See Roland Case and Penney Clark, Eds., *The Anthology of Social Studies, Vol. Two: Issues and Strategies for Secondary Teachers* (Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press, 2008), 23.
- 40 Quoted in Elizabeth McLachlan, *With Unshakeable Persistence: Rural Teachers of the Depression Era* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1999), 85.
- 41 Hodgson, *North-west of '41*, 27.
- 42 Henry Pylypow, "Two First Days," *Alberta History* 27, no. 3 (1979), 34.
- 43 Example of advertisement appearing in 1937 Alberta Teachers' Association Magazine included in Education Kit: Progressive Education, EPSA, 84.24.2, Item 121.
- 44 *AR*, 1937, 62.
- 45 Tyack and Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, 137.
- 46 Quoted in McLachlan, *With Unshakeable Persistence*, 135.
- 47 Penelope Stephenson, "'Mrs. Gibson looked as if she was ready for the end of term': The Professional Trials and Tribulations of Rural Teachers in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley in the 1920s," in *Children, Teachers and Schools in the History of British Columbia*, eds. Jean Barman, Neil Sutherland and J. Donald Wilson (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1995), 238.
- 48 Roberta Volker, "My Angel, My Mentor," in *My Most Memorable Teacher: 100 Alberta Stories for 100 Years* (Calgary: Red Deer Press, 2005), 89.
- 49 Interview with Mildred Rasmussen, Red Deer, Alberta, October 7, 1995.
- 50 Gordon Littke, "Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye," in *My Most Memorable Teacher*, 57.
- 51 Elizabeth McLachlan, *With Unfailing Dedication: Rural Teachers in the War Years* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2001), 111.
- 52 Maxine E. Sutherland, *From Desk to Desk in Canada, 1914-1974* (Hubbards, NS: Aurora Press, 1993), 55.

- 53 *Ibid.*, 77-78.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 86-87.
- 55 Edith Van Kleeck, *The Way it Was: Vignettes from my One-Room Schools*, ed. Thelma Jo Dobson (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007), 116.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 139.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 164.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 194.
- 60 "Modern Trends in Education in Province," *Lethbridge Herald*, February 11, 1939, 10. The article was slightly revised and published in the October 1939 edition of the journal *School Progress*.
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 E.L. Fuller to G.M. Stewart, October 30, 1936, Provincial Archives of Alberta (hereafter PAA), 79.334, Box 4, File 31. I must extend many thanks to R. Gidney and W. Millar for discovering this correspondence and drawing it to my attention.
- 65 C.H. Payne to G. Fred McNally, September 7, 1937, PAA, 79.334, Box 4, File 31.
- 66 H.W. Cheney to G. Fred McNally, October 19, 1938, PAA, 79.334, Box 4, File 32.
- 67 This letter is attached to Cameron to N.M. O'Brien, April 24, 1937, PAA, 79.334, Box 4, File 31.
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 Alberta Department of Education, *School Divisions in Alberta: Pioneering in School Administration* (Edmonton: Department of Education, 1945), 20.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 71 Responses to Research Questionnaire, Education Kit: Progressive Education, EPSA, 84.24.2.29, Item 132.
- 72 Schrag to A.G. Bayly, Director of Elementary Education, Edmonton Public School Board, November 9, 1954, EPSA, Elementary Education Files 1945–1955, 85.100.11.
- 73 Sutherland, *From Desk to Desk*, 55.
- 74 See the example in the EPSA, General Curriculum Committee Minutes 1945–1949, 86.234.1.
- 75 Memo Morrison L. Watts, Director of Curriculum, Department of Education to Divisional and City Superintendents, April 15, 1948, EPSA, General Curriculum Committee Minutes 1945–1949, 86.234.2.
- 76 See the "Commentary to Accompany the film 'Developing the Enterprise'," in EPSA, Elementary Education Files 1945–1955, 85.100.6.
- 77 See Alberta Department of Education, *Bulletin 2a: Elementary School, Methods, The Enterprise* (Edmonton: Department of Education, 1954).
- 78 All of the examples noted here are in the Leona and Michael Kully Fonds, PAA, PR1197.0306/0046, Grade III Enterprise, Box 4.
- 79 Tyack and Cuban, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, 135.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 94-97. The Dalton Plan was an individualized learning plan for high schools developed by educator Helen Parkhurst. It eliminated graded classrooms and scheduled class times. Instead, students signed monthly contracts negotiated with their teachers outlining the learning tasks they would complete in the month. Students budgeted their own time and moved through learning tasks either individually or collaboratively as they chose. They could seek assistance from teachers and learning resources in learning laboratories. While few schools adopted the plan as originally formulated, many adapted features of it to suit local circumstances and school organizations.
- 81 Herbert M. Kliebard, *Changing Course: American Curriculum Reform in the 20th Century* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 132.

- 82 Stortz and Wilson, "Education on the Frontier," 285.
- 83 Ernest Hodgson, "A One Room School," personal communication, February 11, 2005.
- 84 Quoted in Judy A. Crawford, *From Slates to Cyber: A Century of Schools in the Horizon School Division #67* (Taber: Horizon School Division #67), 369-370.
- 85 Responses to Research Questionnaire, Education Kit: Progressive Education, EPSA, 84.24.2.29, Item 132.