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The complexity of intellectual currents: Duncan McArthur and Ontario’s progressivist curriculum reforms

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This paper concentrates on a seminal figure in the history of Canadian education who has never previously been the subject of historical examination: Duncan McArthur. As Deputy Minister, then Minister of Education, in Ontario between 1934 and 1942, he guided the province’s public schools during a period of dramatic reorganisation within a context transformed throughout the interwar years by modernity, economic instability, urbanisation and industrialisation. Under McArthur’s leadership, revised programmes of study formally introduced the rhetoric of progressive education into Canada’s most populous public school system. This rhetoric wove together three distinct themes – meliorism, efficiency and child study – articulating a progressivist educational vision for Ontario’s teachers and students.

**Keywords:** Progressive education; Duncan McArthur; Ontario; curriculum history; philosophy of education; Queen’s University

**Introduction**

Social virtues are not things merely to learn about. They are to be achieved only by practising them. They are to be accepted willingly as desirable forms of conduct; they cannot be developed by coercion. The school, therefore, must be organized to permit their exercise and growth in situations that require their practice. Hence, opportunities should be provided for children to work together in groups, each child sharing in the planning, execution, and completion of worth-while tasks.1

This paper considers Ontario’s progressivist reforms to the province’s programmes of study (1937–1938 and 1941–1942) in light of a complexity of intellectual currents and visions for reform. It situates these within a context that was transformed by modernity, world war and economic instability. Progressivist rhetoric emerged prominently as a response to these transformative forces. A new, progressive age demanded a new and progressive education. The revised programmes of studies must be understood within that context, as they addressed the perceived shortcomings of the established, traditional curricula, which were depicted as out of touch with contemporary reality.

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This paper introduces the figure of Duncan McArthur, whose seminal role in Ontario’s Department of Education between 1934 and 1942 has been acknowledged but never fully explored. McArthur was a driving force behind the revisions of the programmes of study which entrenched the rhetoric and themes of progressive education in the province’s formal curriculum. While progressive education had multiple interpretations, the Revised Programme of Studies sought to weave consistency and order out of these. Aspects of meliorism, efficiency and child study – three principal themes within Ontario’s progressivist rhetoric – were brought together meaningfully in the curriculum revisions under the leadership of Duncan McArthur.

Framing Ontario’s progressivist rhetoric

It is important to acknowledge the multifaceted and international scope of progressive education. As a movement, it is tied to a larger wave of progressivism sweeping across society in the final decades of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century. Progressive education, then, is an idea imported into the Ontario context.

The period following World War I in Ontario first revealed the influence of progressivist educational ideas in the province. During the interwar period, progressive rhetoric and reforms flourished across the country. In the words of John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, ‘the 1920s saw a flowering of the movement for progressive education in Canada’. By the early 1930s, the educational discourse in all Canadian provinces was beginning to reveal such influences. By 1919, in the

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4 There would be a later, neo-progressive iteration of reform discourse and policy in the 1960s and 1970s, but the interwar period is one where Ontario’s educationists initially adopted and interpreted the rhetoric of progressive education. Living and Learning, published by The Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario, appearing in 1968 and commonly referred to as the Hall–Dennis Report, is perhaps the best example of this neo-progressive discourse in the province.


wake of World War I, the social and economic effects of a sudden, dramatic increase in immigration and urbanisation had taken hold across Canada; in Robert Patterson’s words, ‘after World War I, Canadians entered a new era, characterized by industrialization, urbanization and increasing emphasis on democratic development’.7

The ideas of modernity and progress transformed the interwar period.8 If there is such a thing as a progressive era in Canadian education, it might be best situated in that period, where programmes of study across the country were revised to reflect progressivist themes in the space of less than a decade. Alberta’s curriculum reforms, published in 1936, were the first formal implementation of progressive education in the Canadian context. Ontario’s Revised Programme of Studies would be issued the following year.

Progressivist rhetoric was not of one sort. The picture that emerges of the progressive period is one ‘populated by hybrid discourses’, constellated and interacting in multiple spaces.9 Dewey, for instance – so often depicted as figurehead of progressivist educational thought – put forward a theory of education that could deal with the devastation wrought upon society by industrial capitalism.10 His seminal influence on pedagogy can, in large measure, be attributed to his theory’s ability to ‘encompass the terrific diversity’ of ideas espoused in various contexts, where education was under evaluation in light of dynamic social transformation.11 Dewey’s ideas consequently appealed to, and were adopted by, many groups, enabling their interaction with multiple and often divergent interests, contexts and motivations. Interpretations of progressive education were continuously reformulated, reframed and reconstructed as mediation between values of modernity and tradition.12 Ontario’s progressivist rhetoric concerned three principal themes: meliorism, efficiency and child study.13 The province’s educationists variously interpreted each theme, yet aspects of each were plaited neatly into the Revised Programme of Studies.

Robert Patterson believed it was ‘virtually impossible to provide a simple, capsule statement about how the nation was influenced by and dealt with the phenomenon of progressive education. Reflecting on the vastness of Canada, its internal

13Ibid.
diversity, the uniqueness of each province’s system of schools and the multidimensional aspects of progressive education, he was hesitant to define causes and effects of the movement.\textsuperscript{14} Patterson was, however, certain that progressive education affected Canadian schooling in a profound way.\textsuperscript{15}

Key to the implementation of this progressivist vision in Ontario is Duncan McArthur, whose transformative role in the province’s Department of Education merits the discussion that ensues. In 1934, when the shroud of the Depression started to lift in Ontario, Mitchell Hepburn, leader of the Liberal Party, was elected Premier of the province. Among his many campaign promises, Hepburn vowed to overhaul the public education system. He broke with tradition by naming Dr Leo J. Simpson Minister of Education. For the previous eleven years, Ontario’s premiers had held personal control over the Department of Education. The new Deputy Minister of Education and Chief Director of Education, Duncan McArthur, would become the driving force behind the Department’s push to reform Ontario’s schools.

\textit{Historical context}

Interwar Ontario presents a context ripe with complexity, contradictions and socio-economic crises. Two Great Wars fought in large part for the sake of democracy and freedom bookended nearly three decades of tension and change. Ontario was undergoing dramatic changes in the domains of public policy, labour, economic strategy and political organisation. In terms of the economic complex, for example, the \textit{new industrialism} was interwoven with \textit{modern} technological possibilities or innovations in the domains of fuels (petroleum, natural gas, hydro-electric), motive powers (combustion engines), transport (airplanes, trucks, cars), structural materials (aluminium, light alloys, alloy steels) and industrial processes (synthetic materials).\textsuperscript{16}

Despite at least two recessions in the decade following World War I, Ontario’s economy had benefited immensely from the exploitation and export of Northern Ontario’s vast softwood lumber and mineral reserves.\textsuperscript{17} The automobile manufacturing and steel industries stretching across the ‘golden horseshoe’ from Hamilton to


\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 95. Patterson notes: ‘Its principles and beliefs gained prominence in the rhetoric and writing of school officials, political leaders and social reformers. Throughout Canada, especially in the 30-year time span between the outbreak of World War I and the end of World War II, advocates of school reform relied heavily on the message of progressive education in their efforts to effect change. Curriculum reforms occurred in virtually every province, and the so-called new education became visible in the methodology and purposes of the schools of the nation.’


\textsuperscript{17}Ian Drummond, \textit{Progress Without Planning: The Economic History of Ontario from Confederation to the Second World War} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).
Oshawa in the province’s south-west also contributed to Ontario’s economic boom. The development of local and efficient hydroelectric power decreased the province’s dependence on imported coal and reinforced its status as an industrial hotspot.

The rapid and dramatic rise of automobile use in the province demonstrates one aspect of Ontario’s modernisation and change. The traffic of horse-drawn carriages dropped from 50% to 3% of transportation in the province in only eight years between 1914 and 1922. This necessitated increasing public regulation, including driver licensing (instituted in 1927) and regulation (of such matters as speeding, reckless walking and parking). Rising automobile use also made necessary public planning policies, such as those promoting the development of city parks that would provide children with safe places to play away from the streets and those redesigning and broadening roads. There was never one single impetus for these changes; rather, a long succession of disappointments contributed to Canadians’ growing unease and unrest. Ontario’s cities were growing and transforming, in large part due to the expanding automobile industries concentrated around the Golden Horseshoe (Hamilton to Oshawa, around the north-western shores of Lake Ontario).

Soldiers returning from World War I, for example, found their homes and worlds transformed. Many of their wives and sisters had left hearth and home; they gained the right to vote in federal elections, they had entered the workplace, lobbied for temperance and prohibition of alcohol and become active citizens. Moreover, a post-war economic slide and recession meant many veterans found themselves unemployed upon returning home. Others could not work because of injuries and disability brought on by the struggles in Europe.

The trend towards urbanisation that began at the end of the previous century, then, continued unabated. Municipalities wrestled with the growing need to cope with unemployment, city planning duties and an influx of settlers. Rural populations, composing 40% of Ontario’s population as late as 1921, began to unite and fight for their values in the political sphere as they saw their world and worldviews vanishing. The United Farmers of Ontario swept to power at Queen’s Park in 1919, buoyed by the vote in rural areas of the province. Labour groups were also

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18Ibid.
21Ibid.
22Ibid.
23Thompson and Seager, *Decades of Discord, 1922-1939*.
28Ibid.
uniting in the face of worsening work conditions, and strike activity rose dramatically in the years following the war.29 The All-Canadian Congress of Labour, the Canadian Federation of Labour, the Trades and Labour Congress, the Workers’ Unity League and the United Auto Workers were, along with individual unions, active during this period in Ontario and across Canada.30

Many of these changes were undertaken in the name of progress. A new Progressive coalition led by E.C. Drury and composed of United Farmers of Ontario and Independent Labour Party members won 55 seats in the 1919 provincial election.31 A growing intellectual elite in the country, as well as labour interests, buoyed this party and demonstrated a keen interest in social and political policy reform.32 Civic unrest, the failure of classic laissez-faire economic theory to deal with recessions and the Depression and the increasing evidence that the various levels of government needed to actively alleviate suffering and promote the public good led to a period of great intellectual debate concerning the nature and purposes of ‘progress’.33

Schools, too, could be reformed and made progressive.34 Education was, in other words – as it remains today – seen as a force for remedying ills and changing the future. The youth, the future workers, politicians and intellectuals, held the keys to progress. The provinces, under the division of powers in the Dominion of Canada, held the keys to schools. Progressive interest groups all turned their eyes to education at some point in the course of their discourse.

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**Duncan McArthur**

Duncan McArthur embodied many of the complexities inherent in the progressivist rhetoric espoused within the context. As a historical figure, McArthur’s story as an educational reformer is, curiously, untold. His writings were, surprisingly, difficult to uncover. At the Archives of Ontario, not a single file or folder is devoted to the man who spent eight years engineering substantive changes in the province’s system of schooling. One single picture exists in the online descriptions database, which until this past year one could find only by misspelling the former education Minister’s name (MacArthur). The Queen’s University archives prove a slightly

30Thompson and Seager, *Decades of Discord, 1922-1939*.
33Drummond, *Progress without Planning*.
better source of information, but only if the researcher is more concerned with McArthur the historian rather than McArthur the educationist. Manuscripts and essays not directly related to pedagogy form the substantive portion of his files at the university where he studied and worked for most of his life.

Before entering the Department of Education as Deputy Minister and Chief Director of Education on 11 July 1934, Duncan McArthur was professor of history at Queen’s University. He was born in 1884 in the township of Dunwich, located in Elgin County, not far from Kingston, Ontario. His family descended from the United Empire Loyalists and had settled the area during the American War of Independence. After attending elementary and high school in the rural village of Dunn, Ontario, he began undergraduate studies at Queen’s University in 1904.

Following his graduation from Queen’s with a Bachelor of Arts, in 1907, McArthur began graduate studies, working in political science and history with celebrated social scientist Adam Shortt. McArthur won gold medals at Queen’s for his studies in three subjects: political science, history and philosophy. Following his graduate work, he began working at the Canadian Archives with his mentor, Dr Shortt. In this capacity, he collaborated with Drs Doughty and Shortt to write and publish a number of constitutional documents on the Canadian political context.

In 1912, McArthur began to study law at Osgoode Hall, University of Toronto, and graduated three years later. He began practising law immediately afterwards and continued to do so until 1917, when he was named manager of estates for the London, Ontario-based Canada Trust Company. Two years later he became assistant general manager of the London and Western Trusts Co.; three years after this, in 1922, the chair of Queen’s University’s history department, J.L. Morrison, retired and McArthur was offered and accepted his position.

Over the next 12 years, Duncan McArthur was involved in educational matters at Queen’s, where he helped begin the summer programme for archival and historical study in the city of Kingston. During this time, he was a member of the Board of Education and participated in several special committees at the Department of Education. In the early 1930s, McArthur helped the Education Department to develop and implement midsummer examinations for high school students. His experiences in this regard would provide him with sound experience, upon which he based his educationally progressive philosophy.35

Many of the ideas that characterised McArthur’s progressivist views on education were consistent with the increasing significance and prevalence of social scientific study in the academy, particularly at Queen’s University. His contemporaries there, for instance, included George Grant, John Watson, Adam Shortt and John Harold Putman. The latter, like McArthur, studied at Queen’s before bursting onto the scene of progressive education as Chief Inspector for schools in Ottawa, and was to write widely about social responsibility, schooling and citizenship.36

Queen’s was a sea rich with many intellectual currents, particularly idealism and civic humanism – emphasising both individual freedom and social conscience – which flourished primarily under the influence of renowned philosopher John Watson. This intellectual cross-pollination of ideas reflected a ‘particularly Canadian … mixture of idealism and individualism thus posited a world in which the free will

of man was untrammeled by the institutions around him", while the individual could only be fully realised through society. The liberal concern for the individual was thus restrained by social needs, which ‘could override individual rights in the name of community’.38

At a time when change and inconstancy seemed normal, ‘Watson offered students a solution to the problems of life in a complex intellectual and social world’.

His idealism, as a philosophical system, appeared to provide a comprehensive approach to thinking about and examining a bewildering and complex world.40

It met the needs of a changing age, but it also made an explicit effort to take philosophic and reflective inquiry out of a purely academic and abstract realm and apply it to matters of human and social experience or reality.41 Idealism, in confronting lived experience, faced the relationship between individuals and the society in which they lived.

A.B. McKillop explains: ‘The morality of Watson and other Ontario idealists was a social morality ... the freedom that flowed from it depended on a commitment to the larger good of the community’.42 McKillop points to the way that John Watson’s idealism seemed to embody and articulate the ‘fundamental premises of early practitioners of social science in Ontario, and ... inspired a generation and more of students to serve’.43 Watson’s An Outline of Philosophy (1901), which calls for morality in action, intelligent inquiry into society and service for the community at large, can help us conceive of how a new group of social scientists, such as Duncan McArthur, would envision their role in public service.44

B. Anne Wood argued that under the influence of Watson and Queen’s University’s Principal Grant, the idealist spirit ‘infused Queen’s at the time. It was a spirit characterized by a strong sense of commitment to the community and dedication to

38Ibid., 8.
40Ibid., 188-189. Baskerville states: ‘Idealism was, first of all, a philosophical system that was confident in the face of the multiple forms of modern scientific investigation. It rejected the problematic dualism of common sense while affirming the moral nature of man. It provided a renewed sense of design in the natural and mental worlds, a sense of purpose, and ... in fact, it sought to do nothing less, in Watson’s formulation at least, than to provide a way of encompassing and understanding naturalistic science within the larger framework of the essential rationality of a moral universe, thereby circumscribing and taming it.’
41John Watson, “Edward Caird as Teacher and Thinking,” Queen’s Quarterly 1 (June, 1909): 304–05. In Watson’s own words, philosophy was seen as having “[e]xpanded into the nobler discipline of an interpretation of social and political life and institutions, of art and religion, as these developed into ever higher and more perfect forms in the great secular process of history ... [which is] in no sense divorced from the concrete life of man’.
42McKillop, Matters of Mind, 191.
43Ibid.
44John Watson, An Outline of Philosophy (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1901). Watson states: ‘It is still true that only by identifying himself with a social good can the individual realize himself. And the reason is that in the community the idea of humanity as an organic unity is in process of realization ... the individual man can find himself, can become moral, only by contributing his share to its realization. He must learn that, to set aside his individual inclinations and make himself an organ of the community is to be moral, and the only way to be moral’ (p. 232).
service for the public good’. In this environment, according to Watson, freedom was not the pursuit of personal pleasure; it entailed voluntarily doing ‘what one ought. But what ought one to do? We ought to aim at making ourselves and others perfect citizens, i.e., citizens who share in all that tends to make the life of a man a perfect whole’.

Social scientific inquiry absorbed McArthur’s early career and research into Canadian constitutional and economic history. This research shaped the textbook on Canadian history that he would later pen, and demonstrates the heavy influence of Adam Shortt, McArthur’s mentor and friend, who was to become the first economic historian to work as a professor in a Canadian university. Shortt was an unusually influential teacher, representing ‘the new breed of social analysts who were emerging at Canadian universities [and] provided detailed accounts of the impact of social change’. Shortt maintained that ‘Canadian society could deal with the economic problems and social justice issues by heeding social scientific reform principles and advocating state interventionism’. McArthur was recognised as ‘probably one of the greatest of Shortt’s disciples’.

McArthur’s obituaries make clear that he took this commitment to public service seriously. A few days before his sudden death, it was reported, he had informed the media that he would do no more political campaigning ‘but was remaining in public life in the hope that he could complete some reforms on which he had set his heart’. For years prior, ‘ill health had dogged him and impaired his powers for work’, yet he was committed to continuing with his commitment to the Department. In fact, ‘overwork brought on’ the serious illness to which he eventually succumbed. McArthur had, it was openly recognised, never sought political honours before 1934, but he ‘eagerly embraced the opportunity for increased authority to promote school reforms’ when the opportunity was offered to him by Liberal Premier of Ontario Mitchell Hepburn.

His 1934 appointment as Deputy Minister of Education, which wooed him from the Faculty position at Queen’s which he had held between 1917 and 1922, also led to a position as Chief Director of Ontario’s schools several months later. It was in 1940, following the passing of Leo Sampson, that McArthur was appointed.
Minister of Education and former Chief Director George F. Rogers came back to the Department as his Deputy.\textsuperscript{56}

Despite Sampson’s de facto leadership of the Ministry from 1934 to 1940, sources are in agreement that McArthur was the driving force behind school initiative and reforms. Robert Stamp noted confidently ‘actual leadership was assumed by the new deputy minister … the outstanding educator Hepburn had been seeking for over a year’.\textsuperscript{57} McArthur was a member of the Kingston Board of Education and, Stamp explains, had already earned the respect of the province’s teachers. The expectation was that McArthur, ‘perhaps because of his professorial background, might make a difference’.\textsuperscript{58} His educational leadership would put an end to an ‘era of drift’.\textsuperscript{59} McArthur, it was expected, could usher in changes that promised to ‘be definitely for the better’.\textsuperscript{60}

This paper will now turn to the Revised Programme of Studies, first issued in 1937 in the province under McArthur’s leadership. These reforms introduced progressive education into Ontario’s formal curriculum, tying together various threads of progressivist educational thought.

**The Revised Programme of Studies**

As W.G. Fleming argues with respect to Ontario’s curriculum reforms, the *Programme of Studies for Grades I to VI of the Public and Separate Schools, 1937* ‘was an event of considerable importance of the evolution of curriculum in elementary schools in Ontario because of the progressive outlook defined in the introduction and embodied in the recommendations’.\textsuperscript{61} The Ontario programme had been developed by a committee of educators led by Thornton Mustard and S.A. Watson and was heavily influenced by the Deputy Minister of Education, Duncan McArthur.

In 1936, McArthur had selected Mustard, of Toronto Normal School, and Watson, from Keele Street Public School, and instructed them to lead the committee. These two educationists ‘were pragmatists, convinced by the realities of the depression that a different approach to class-room learning was necessary to prepare students for an uncertain future’.\textsuperscript{62} In light of the dramatic effects wrought by modernity, faith in a stable, predictable future had been shaken.\textsuperscript{63} Their report and the ensuing Revised Programme drew many ideas and much phrasing from the reports of the Consultative Committee of the Board of Education in Great Britain,

\textsuperscript{56}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60}*Saturday Night* (July 28, 1934), cited in Robert Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario*, 155.
\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{62}Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario*, 167.
\textsuperscript{63}The preparation of students for an uncertain future, as well as the overall concern for trying to manage or control education in a mutable, unpredictable world was a common theme in progressivist texts, including John Dewey’s. See, for example, Richard D. Mosier, “Progressivism in Education,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 29, no. 5 (1951): 274–81.
which dealt with the topics of adolescence, primary schooling and nursery schools.64

The curriculum of Ontario’s schools did undergo considerable change, most notably in 1937 and 1938. The reforms to the programme of study in those years represent an attempt to institutionalise progressivist thought in schools. E.J. Transom from the Central Public School in Timmins, trying to be objective in his assessment of Ontario’s curriculum revisions, explained the primary difference between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ courses of study as follows: ‘The old course stressed, almost exclusively, subject matter to be learned. The new course introduces other factors, like personality development, and socialization or citizenship.’65 It also brought together many of the concerns raised in progressivist journal articles since 1919, including the study of extant social problems, the fostering of community, enterprise learning, health studies and opportunities for students to have options regarding their courses of study.66 The progressivist character of Ontario’s Revised Programme of Studies can be seen as weaving consistency and order around three distinct progressivist themes – meliorism, efficiency and child study – in a coherent vision for reform.

**Meliorism as an aspect of the Revised Programme of Studies**

Not only did McArthur’s educational philosophy emphasise community and cooperative study – ideas rooted in the promotion of social service, which he experienced at Queen’s – it advocated for the development of independent and critical thinking that would challenge, rather than acquiesce to, social conventions. In a democratic state, one that would deal with the contingencies and precariousness of life intelligently, children needed to be given opportunity to exercise choice, which would build experiences using critical, rational thought. A curriculum of compulsion had to give way to one permitting self-direction and activity. Both these qualities would be dominant features of the 1937 and 1938 Revised Programme of Studies for Ontario, for which McArthur was largely responsible.

64*Programme of Studies for Grades I to VI of the Public and Separate Schools, 1937* (Toronto, ON: Department of Education, 1937). The British publications are most commonly referred to as the *Hadow Reports.*
65E.J. Transom, “Time Off for Thinking,” *The School* (February 1941): 507. Transom believed the new, progressive schools drew their principles from the study of contemporary society: ‘The work of the teacher, principal, or supervisor now is to study society, ascertain modern trends and movements, learn the fundamentals of personality, child development, and child psychology.’
66These concerns, on the whole, are dominated by those espoused by meliorist and developmentalist journal articles. The Department of Education’s concern for efficiency was predominately directed at reforming the system of taxation and consolidating school boards. See, for example, “Summary of Dr. McArthur’s Address,” *The Canadian School Journal* (May 1940): 192–93.
The provision of electives and options for students in the province’s high schools was one way of allowing for individualisation of study.67 The subjects, like the students themselves, were to be grouped together in order to promote cooperation and to demonstrate the relations between them. Social studies, for example, integrated a number of humanities and social science subjects and marshalled them towards some goal relating to civics, citizenship or democracy. At no point was the individual seen in isolation from the community in which he or she lived. Further, providing learners with freedom and choice in the course of their studies promoted social responsibility; for the student, freedom was ‘the unquestioned basis of his standard of conduct, and hence of responsibility’.68 Schools, McArthur believed, had ‘permitted, too frequently, the place in the procession to be considered of greater consequence than the direction in which the procession is moving’.69

Duncan McArthur, in a number of addresses, praised the British Empire for the role it played in social and economic development across the Commonwealth. The Empire was, of course, still one of the major economic and military powers in the world. In an address to the Empire Club of Canada on 28 November 1940, McArthur reminded his audience of what he deemed the most significant contribution that their British heritage had made to the modern, progressive world. ‘First,’ McArthur explained, ‘I would place our democratic system of parliamentary self-government. This has been the bulwark of our civil liberties’.70 Participation in the ‘British tradition of service’ was, for McArthur, an aim of civic education and the hallmark of civilization. The ‘creation and development of an intelligent and enlightened Canadian citizenship’ had to be an essential feature of education in a democratic state.71

The cultivation of intelligence was never to be strictly a selfish and an individualist pursuit. Examinations were solitary and anti-social institutions, forcing fierce competition amongst students who should have been, ideally, cooperating to build learning. Departmental examinations were indicative of ‘a ruthless individualism’ that had led to unhealthy academic competition and ignored the individual learner’s interests and aptitudes.72 Examinations were in large part responsible for the crea-

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67T.M. Christou, “Elementary Schools’ Courses Overhauled, Simpson Announces,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 31, 1937. Other ‘improvements’ to the curriculum included: ‘Greater attention to English subjects; less number work in the primary grades, and a more practical course in arithmetic throughout other grades; greater emphasis on health teaching; a closer correlation among subjects such as civics, history, and other social studies; more suitable completing courses for those who must leave school at the end of Grade IX or Grade X at the age of 16; more detailed outlines of the worked to be covered in each subject or group of subjects in each grade, and a closer grouping of subjects.’

68Ibid.


72McArthur, “Education for Citizenship”, 264. McArthur decried how this unhealthy individualism has ‘been permitted to creep into our schools through practices designed originally to satisfy a thoroughly legitimate demand of parents to know the rate of progress of their children. Instead of measuring the extend of the development within the child of interest and initiative, of effort and appreciation, our system of gradation too frequently has become the men’s of self-glorification of the child or of its parent, and the creation of an attitude of mind which is fundamentally selfish and anti-social’.

tion of conditions that ‘encouraged, too greatly, the spirit of competition; the desire to “come first” has provided, too frequently, a more powerful motive than the ambition to master a particular field of knowledge’.

It was not the solitary and solipsistic acquisition of knowledge that represented a progressive system of schooling. More important elements for the cultivation of democratic and meliorist habits of mind were individual choice and the realisation of the need for social service. Fostering social interdependence required ‘the vital task of acquiring a broader view of human possibilities’ and a ‘realization in public education of the new emphasis ... given to the ideals of democracy and the broader conception of national life’.

The cultivation of individualism needed limits. MacArthur’s awareness of the tensions between the aim of cultivating strong individuals and increasing social cooperation is clear as he attempts to negotiate the two. Social responsibility and opportunity, he argued, had to transcend class boundaries. Addressing a graduating class of students, McArthur noted that ‘too much emphasis had been placed upon the laudation of people who attained wealth or influence through the selfish exercise of their powers of acquisitiveness’. ‘Forget yourselves in service to your fellow-men’, McArthur implored the crowd. The key to cooperation was, he continued, a willingness to understand and appreciate others’ problems.

This sentiment was at the core of the new subject introduced in the 1937 Revised Programme of Studies: social studies. The primary objective and mark of success for schools had to be the extent to which individuals could build meaningful relationships with others and practice habits of mind that would enable them to act judiciously in matters of public concern. Duncan McArthur realised quite early on that his educational vision would require, at the most basic level, the support of teachers in the classroom. No matter what policies were instituted by the Department of Education, and no matter what was reported in media and in teaching journals, the teacher was key to the actual implementation of an educationally progressive philosophy of education. As such, McArthur emphasised the importance of building a teaching corps that was committed to democratic principles of schooling and the promotion of reform for the improvement of all Ontario’s schools, urban and rural. Teacher education, predictably, also became a subject of reforms. As a start, trainer-teachers were promised they would not feel as if they had ‘sacri-

73Ibid.
75Ibid., 264. McArthur states: ‘The old wine of unrestrained individualism, of laissez faire, the “God’s in His Heaven, all’s well with the world” complacency of the Victorians will not be contained within the new bottles of respect for human rights of a planned economy, and of subordination of individual freedom to the well-being of the community. If the school of to-day is to discharge adequately its responsibilities, it must recognize that the old order has changed and prepare the new generation to adjust itself harmoniously in an independent and integrated society.’
77McArthur, “Education for Citizenship,” 286. McArthur expressed this as follows: “The creation of an understanding of the fundamental relationships subsisting between the individual and the community and the promotion of habits of mind which, against this background of understanding, will make possible the exercise of sound judgment in matters of public concern.”
ficed’ their future by devoting themselves to the improvement of educator standards.78 ‘You can easily bankrupt the community intellectually and spiritually’, explained McArthur, ‘with consideration for the lot of the province’s teachers, by too drastic reductions in teachers’ salaries’.79

In relation to teaching candidates themselves, McArthur announced that ‘more varied opportunities will be offered for observation and practice teaching, and permanent certificates will be granted only to those young teachers who, in the opinion of the inspectors, are doing creditable work’.80 Ontario’s educators thus needed to have a firm commitment to social service if they were to be able to successfully nurture a spirit of social responsibility in the students that were in their charge. In an October 1934 article addressed to all of Ontario’s teachers, entitled Education for Democracy, McArthur made this position clear, articulating a concern that the universities and the teacher education programmes had as important a role to play as the public schools in fostering an ethos of social cooperation and counteracting the glorification of ‘unbridled individualism’.81 Responding to McArthur’s quote, The School put out the following call to educators: ‘Whether you teach in a one-room rural school, or in a city collegiate institute, a future prime minister may be in one of your classes this morning. Future voters and fellow citizens are sure to be’.82

Appropriate instruction, along with the development of a moral and democratic citizenry through the schools, put great stresses on the teacher. For starters, McArthur cautioned in 1938 that Ontario was moving towards a scarcity of teachers and that ‘if school boards wished to secure good teachers, they must give them adequate remuneration’.83 He consequently established minimum salaries of $500 for educators in rural areas.84 Further, he reinstated ‘the annual increment schedule for normal and model school teachers, which was suspended in 1931’ due to the Depression.85 The increased attention given toward elevating the standards of the teaching profession was a constant theme for McArthur, who also drafted a Bill of Rights for teachers. His concentration on the rural schools, moreover, bore heavily political notes, which necessarily address inequities between urban and rural schooling.86 The responsibilities of teachers involved a cultivation of empathy, not merely the ‘training of

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78Ibid.
81“Editorial Notes,” The School (November 1934): 186. The full quotation merits citation, as McArthur proclaims: ‘The associations of the school form the earliest social relationships of our boys and girls. If the influence of the school, either through the content or the method of its instruction, tends to glorify and encourage an unbridled individualism, we need not be surprised if the product of the school manifests little evidence of the recognition of social obligations. The attitude and outlook of the teacher becomes of fundamental importance, and with it the outlook of the university as the training ground for teachers.’
82Ibid.
83“States School Grants Raised to Cut Taxes,” The Globe and Mail, April 21, 1938.
84“Dr. D. McArthur at the O.E.A.,” 834.
Further, McArthur stressed that ‘there is need not only for accuracy in thinking but for a capacity to understand human relations’.

McArthur himself believed that ‘young people in our schools are not separate, self-contained persons; from the time they draw their first breath, they are social beings, members of a community’. This spirit intimately relates to McArthur’s views concerning democracy, which bear the contradictions implicit in the balancing of both the personal and the social – between individual and communitarian interests. These views are related to the belief that schools are vital contributors to the development of a rational, moral and democratic citizenry.

McArthur believed that the cultivation of democratic ‘habits of mind’ begins in the schools, which are incredibly important for the development of moral and intelligent citizenship. ‘Democracy is essentially a thing of the spirit,’ announced McArthur. Ontarians had to recognise their human right to individual liberty, but with the understanding that rights cannot be enjoyed apart from community.

Efficiency as an aspect of the Revised Programme of Studies

Social scientists at the time did, as already noted, see their role as studying social conditions, analysing trends and guiding or directing policy. As with all aspects of his progressivist thought, McArthur was knitting together seemingly contradictory views on what constituted educational progress in an attempt to weave greater order and consistency out of them.

McArthur’s position aimed to steer the Department of Education’s reforms between any extreme positions, such as the Scylla of utilitarian practicality and the Charybdis of extreme communitarianism. He openly ‘admitted that it is the function of the school to equip the young man and the young woman for the performance, in a creditable manner, of the tasks of life’, yet felt that it was ‘equally true that the business of life is not conducted in a vacuum’. McArthur conceded, in other words, that he believed education needed closer correlation with social structures and realities, but not at the expense of individual interests or communitarianism.

The financial concerns of school boards were not the only space of tension between local interests and overall reform concerns. Concern from the rural communities regarding the preservation and continuity of work on the farm forced the Department of Education to arrange ‘for the release of school pupils early in April to permit them to assist in seeding and other farm duties’. Such arrangements, involving between 50,000 and 100,000 students, were no minor task. Minimum wages were set, examination dates were rescheduled and communication needed to...
be established between the Department and farmers, dairies, cheese factories, canneries and meatpacking houses.95

Such news stories circulating in the latter half of the 1930s and early 1940s relating to the Department of Education’s efforts to make schools more useful for particular communities, while maintaining some general progressive orientation, are reminders of the inherently complicated nature of educational reform. Centralising the administration and organisation of schools promoted efficient management of the whole province’s education, but it was not necessarily the best way to address the needs of local communities. It is one thing for individuals such as McArthur to talk about educational systems that are both efficient and communitarian, but quite another to administer such systems.96 As McArthur himself lamented, the basic requirements of such a system had led to ‘a system of rigid control and minute regulation’.97

The administration and reorganisation of Ontario’s schools certainly proved cumbersome, and consumed much of McArthur’s attention. Dealing with the matter of raising and equalising grants from the province to the schools proved an important issue, garnering the attention of the ratepayers’ associations, the media and school administrators. Newspaper coverage of modifications to the tax and grant system announced Deputy Minister McArthur’s intention to take ‘over the income tax’ and efficiently manage funds for schools.98 McArthur further initiated and participated in a number of committees, researching issues and aiming to take ‘complete survey and report on the entire system’.99

The reliance on committees to study extant conditions as necessary precursors to reform reveals McArthur’s faith in social scientific research to enlighten progressive reform and, more significantly, demonstrates the increasing influence of social science analysis on industrial and governmental policy in Canada. Following the Department of Education’s first announcement of upcoming reforms, when McArthur stepped into the media light to replace an ailing Leo Sampson, it was reported that ‘not only did he represent a new government, but [McArthur] had already announced that very considerable changes would be made in the educational system of the province… It was hardly to be expected’, the report continued, that he ‘could so soon announce many definite changes’.100 During the same speech reported above, McArthur put media and educators on notice, preemptively proclaiming that ‘before any important changes are made in the school system or in the courses of study, committees will make very thorough surveys and will receive suggestions from any who wish to offer them’.101

Sometimes McArthur’s speeches had to settle the anxieties of a public fearing that the increased centralisation and involvement of government would throw the system out of balance, and that the drive for increasing efficiency would make schools less relevant to particular communities’ interests or needs. There ‘will be

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95Ibid.
97Duncan McArthur, “A New Deal In Education in Ontario,” (handwritten note retrieved from Duncan McArthur Fonds (1929-1940), Queen’s University Archives).
98“States school grants raised to cut taxes,” The Globe and Mail, April 21, 1938.
100Dr. D. McArthur at the O.E.A.,” 833.
101Ibid.
no interference, says Deputy Minister’, announced the subheading of one article in *The Globe*, which went on to explain how McArthur effectively ‘calmed the fears of urban Trustees with regard to interference of Municipal Councils to school estimates, which they announced in a resolution’.102 This direction was, in large part, aimed at making schools more practical, as the correlation amongst subjects and between those subjects and actual life was crucial. It was principally the ‘social significance of subjects’ and the ultimately utilitarian relation they bore to citizenship instruction that shaped the new courses of study in Ontario.103

**Child study as an aspect of the Revised Programme of Studies**

With regard to child study and developmental psychology, there were two relevant currents that dominated McArthur’s progressive educational vision. The first involved his interest in building an activity curriculum that related more intimately to the development of students. The second involved a commitment to allowing for greater choice in the course of study for students, so that the curriculum could relate more to an individual learner’s interests. Both currents shall be discussed here, beginning with McArthur’s aim to correlate school studies more with children’s ‘own personal experience’ and ‘the ordinary process of their growth’.104

The belief that personal development and interest were important motivational aspects proved particularly influential in McArthur’s decision to begin loosening the language requirements for university admission.105 As A.B. McKillop noted, McArthur ‘championed French as opposed to Latin in the province’s high schools. Soon Latin was denied to students in the first year in the secondary school … [and] students were allowed to choose between Latin and mathematics as the language of entry into university’.106

McArthur ‘was convinced that the greatest service that could be rendered … the study of these languages was to make them optional rather than compulsory’.107 He was doubtful that compulsion motivated students to learn. When confronted publicly about this position by J.F. MacDonald of University College in Toronto, McArthur appealed to a new way of thinking about education, which valued student interest as a means of fostering interest in learning; he accused MacDonald of pursuing and “absolutely antiquated” educational philosophy, which emphasized discipline at the expense of all else.108

It is for similar reasons that McArthur spearheaded fundamental changes in Ontario’s system of departmental examinations. A reduction in the stress upon external exams would liberate the teachers and students to pursue learning that was not tightly restricted and confined. In the emphatic words of Dr George Rogers, a member of the Committee on High and Vocational Courses of Study, which surveyed the examination systems in the province: ‘I don’t think examinations in

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102Ibid.
107Ibid.
English composition have been worth anything—they have been a total loss.'109
Exams were depicted as impositions that ignored students’ interest in the subject or
their actual use of it in real life.110
Consistent with his position on Latin and examinations, the hegemony of a single,
authorised textbook was condemned during McArthur’s tenure at the Department of Education. Textbook learning, he continued, is not only narrow; its
mandate enforced a compulsion on teachers to push through it at the peril of ignoring broad student interest, activity and exploration.111 Further, the facts and figures contained within textbooks, once ‘committed to memory are soon forgotten. The information temporarily acquired is seldom related to the structure of knowledge or experience possessed by the pupil’.112
Of all McArthur’s progressive and reformist perspectives, and despite their consistency with his advocacy for loosening of examination requirements, McArthur’s attack on textbook instruction is amongst the most interesting in light of the fact that he wrote and published a history textbook for high school study in 1931.113
The apparent discrepancy between McArthur’s rhetorical and de facto orientations towards textbooks can be reconciled by appealing to his constantly unfolding conceptualisation of self-activity, his belief that subjects had to be taught in a relevant manner and his desire that teachers be allowed the freedom to make the curriculum interesting for their students.
Over-reliance on textbooks can provoke passivity of mind, whereas education should be more concerned with the promotion and ‘encouragement of initiative in thought and independence in judgment’.114 Instruction that merely pursues the ‘presumed necessities of examinations … is degraded to the mere reciting of the facts set forth on the pages of the text’.115
It seems that McArthur’s attacks were not aimed at textbooks themselves, but at educators’ tendency to treat them like authoritative annals of facts to be memorised and recited in isolation from their relationship to human social life.116 The teacher and student should use many sources, some of which may be better at promoting a progressive mindset than others. If authorisation of textbooks was to be undertaken, there should be more than one option. Key, at all times, was the provision of learning that was interesting and relevant to the actual lives and experiences of Ontario’s children.
Realising these ideals meant more than a change in orientation; it required complete revision of the curriculum. The new course of studies would have a number

110 Ibid.
111 Ibid, p. 268.
112 Ibid.
115 Ibid.
116 “Editorial Notes: Canadian Educational Association,” The School (October, 1936): 93. McArthur states: ‘It is very questionable whether uniform courses or uniform text-books would be blessings. They might lead to unprogressive conservatism [sic] rather than progress, for the course for the book to which everybody will agree is likely to be old fashioned or mediocre.’
of influences, including the child study movement in education and the corollary field of developmental psychology. As such, McArthur’s first public announcement concerning reforms to the elementary and secondary curricula at the Ontario Educational Association 1934 gathering signalled the Department’s intention to correlate the subjects of study more closely with ‘the mental development of pupils’.117 To this end, ‘pupils should be promoted to the high schools, as far as possible, on the recommendation of their teachers’, who were more familiar with the particular and individual development of children than administrators guided only by data from departmental examinations.118 The British Hadow Report, which is cited in the Revised Programme of Studies, signalled an acknowledgement of the rising importance of child study within educational contexts outside the province of Ontario.119

This Report had emerged from an organisation in Great Britain, The Association for Education in Citizenship, that initially aimed to be a clearinghouse for teachers concerned with fostering citizenship and developing a richer understanding of children’s development in terms of ideas and experiences. Sir William Henry Hadow, whose work was discussed in Ontario’s periodicals, was president of the Association.120 As reported in The School, for instance, The Education of the Adolescent (1926), one of six commissioned reports that we now collectively refer to as The Hadow Report, recommended that: ‘At the end of the school year in which he reached the age of eleven, every child should be transferred from the primary school into some sort of post-primary school’.121 The adolescent child was a qualitatively different learner, and an intermediate school was a progressive measure that school boards needed to take in order to align instruction greater with the development of learners. The province’s intermediate schools, which had begun to be organised during the Depression, became an important part of Ontario’s educational agenda. Greater concern for the ‘adolescent’ child, in particular, was stressed.122 Alignment with the Hadow Report was thus praised as ‘progressive’ and thoroughly ‘forward-looking’ along developmentalist lines.123

Reforms to the course of study in the province, consistent with this orientation, would create ‘a central core of subjects to be open to all pupils. These might include English, geography, history and civics, one science, mathematics and a sec-

118Ibid.
119Patrice Milewski, “‘The Little Grey Book’: Pedagogy, Discourse, and Rupture, 1937,” History of Education 37, no. 1 (January 2008): 91–92. Milewski, drawing on the work of Robert Stamp, believes that there were political reasons for citing the Hadow Reports as opposed to the work of John Dewey. These reasons, we can infer, relate to Canada’s role within the British Empire and its sometimes nervous relationship with the United States.
122“Notes,” The School (October, 1934): 96. The editorial notes phrased the matter as follows: ‘Reorganization of the elementary school system of England on the basis of recommendations of the Hadow Report on the Education of the Adolescent appears to be making satisfactory progress. According to the latest Report of the Board of Education for England and Wales, on March 31, 1933, approximately 50 per cent of pupils aged 11 and over were in reorganized schools, corresponding roughly to what are known in Canada as Intermediate Schools, and in the United States as Junior High Schools.’
The provision of freedom for students to choose subjects which were interesting and relevant to their own stage of thinking and learning necessarily extended ‘beyond this group of subjects’, so ‘options might be offered in a wider range of subjects than is at present available’. It is not only the provision for, but also the expansion upon, options of study that would be later characterised as a defining characteristic of progressive reform initiatives across North America.

Conclusion
McArthur’s progressive reforms manifested a firm conviction in the management and weaving together of seemingly contradictory visions of reform into a coherent and comprehensive vision. He, for his part, openly acknowledged the coexistence of contradictory viewpoints and perspectives on pedagogical reform. McArthur felt that ‘a great deal of the clamoring for changes’ in schools ‘could be interpreted as a sign of the times, and had no doubt been stimulated by the change in Government’. He felt the effort to ‘coordinate … opinions … so varied and diversified’ would be immense. It would be ‘a tremendous problem’ for the Department of Education to ‘understand the contradictory views expressed on many things’ and produce ‘some satisfactory practical change’.

McArthur’s educational perspectives contained seemingly contradictory or divergent visions of progress. Progressivist documents and policies influenced in large measure by child study and the democratic orientation towards free choice would sweep into the province. Yet these reform currents never resembled a flood of unrestrained individualism, as they were restrained by a faith in the importance of maintaining standards of efficiency, building social service and fostering democratic citizenship. The complexity of intellectual currents examined reflects the very complicated constitution of progressive education. McArthur championed a progressivist educational vision, which interlaced aspects of meliorism, efficiency and child study. Aspects of each were embedded in the Revised Programme of Studies, Ontario’s first formal articulation of a curriculum that embraced the themes of progressive education.

In conclusion, it seems fitting to revisit an obituary article written by James F. Kenney in honour of Duncan McArthur that was published in The Canadian Historical Review following the Minister of Education’s passing in London, Ontario on 20 July 1942. Kenney expresses ambivalence about McArthur’s reforms even as he praises his late friend’s contributions to education as a teacher, professor and public servant. His comments on the subject of McArthur’s move from the academic to the political sphere are particularly enlightening, as they reiterate his colleague’s

125 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
great concern for studying and taking action upon contemporary social and political issues.\textsuperscript{129} It is suggested that McArthur’s attention to education was ‘inevitable’, and that he was somehow fated to reform Ontario’s schools.\textsuperscript{130} A.E. Prince, Professor of English History at Queen’s and a former colleague of McArthur’s, believed that McArthur was almost predestined to play a role as an educational reformer; what was generally agreed upon, Prince argued, was that despite all tensions or contradictions, McArthur’s ‘lode-star of education was guiding him’.\textsuperscript{131}

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\textsuperscript{129}Kenney, “Duncan McArthur (1885-1943),” 450. Kenney notes: ‘It may long be debated whether his transfer from academic to political life was a loss or a gain. It may be debated whether the radical reforms in education which he was pressing forward would have been for better or for worse. But the transfer was inevitable, for, fundamentally, McArthur was not the pure scholar. His primary interest was in the great forces, the pressing problems, of Canadian political and social life today; and his primary interest in history was because of the light it threw on the genesis and development of those forces.’
\textsuperscript{130}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{131}Ibid.