

Theodore Christou explores two effective modes of extending the educational franchise to the rural peoples in Ontario, Canada, that arose from the progressivist impulse in education. He situates these innovations within a political context that promoted both educational innovation and Anglo-conformity as essential to Canadian national identity. Using the railway school car program as an exemplar, Christou explores rationales behind the rise and decline in political support for a distinctive initiative that increased educational access for isolated populations in Ontario between 1926 and 1967. The politics that led to the rise of school-on-wheels railway cars and correspondence courses are similar to the politics we have today regarding education.

## **The Railway School Cars and Ontario's Isolated Peoples**

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### **Introduction**

In Clinton, Ontario, east of Lake Huron, one can find the School on Wheels Railway Museum. The center of the museum is a Canadian National (CN) railway car modified to serve as a classroom on wheels for the students in Ontario. An early progressivist spirit led to the establishment of railway school cars, while a later progressivist tide led to their demise in 1967. This educational innovation began as an experiment in 1926 with a single car and expanded at its peak to seven cars. The first railway car school was CN #15071, which traveled a route that encompassed 237 kilometers, or 150 miles.<sup>1</sup> The program endured more than four decades and garnered inspections from visiting royals, including King George and Queen Elizabeth. The "fourth R of education" in Ontario was the railway cars.<sup>2</sup>

This article situates the rise of the school railway car program in the period between WWI and WWII. The program was tied to the themes and principles of progressive education and was introduced during the same year that another program, correspondence courses, began. While the focus of this article is railway school cars, discussion of the school cars program would be incomplete without some explanation of the correspondence courses. Both served as means of extending educational opportunity to isolated communities in northern Ontario and, simultaneously, were understood to be efficient means of promoting Canadian citizenship and Anglo-conformity.

### **The Progressive Impulse in Ontario**

Following World War I, successive educational authorities identified the expansion of schooling and the extension of educational opportunity as important aims for the province of Ontario. As Robert Henry Grant, minister of education, reported in 1919, “the awakened interest in the training of youth is one of the few beneficial legacies of the War, and there is little doubt that the people of Ontario will prove themselves equal to the educational problems that confront them.”<sup>3</sup> By 1923, Ontarians could “scarcely pick up a newspaper published in any part of the Province without reading an account of the opening of some new educational institution.”<sup>4</sup>

In the early years following World War I and even into the unhappy years of the Depression, Ontario’s Department of Education sought to extend the educational franchise to greater and more diverse populations. Educational rhetoric throughout interwar Ontario swelled with the ethos of the “new,” or “progressive,” education, which exemplified three themes: focussing on the individual child, promoting active learning, and relating schools to society.<sup>5</sup> It was believed that bringing schools and society into closer alignment could promote democracy at the expense of communism or socialism. Schools would emphasize the necessity of English-language fluency and fit students (as well as immigrant adults) efficiently into capitalistic industrialism. In the words of Rosa Bruno-Jofré, following the Great War “schooling was identified as the main agency to develop unity of thought, teach English to the new immigrants, educate them in Canadian ways, and generally to make

them proper members of the national polity.”<sup>6</sup> It was a position that gained added strength from social unrest throughout the interwar period.

At the core of progressivist rhetoric was an effort to align schools with the realities of the modern age, which was understood within a social framework that was being rapidly transformed by technology, industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.<sup>7</sup> The Department of Education sought to modernize Ontario’s curriculum, an effort that culminated in the *Revised Programme of Studies for Ontario’s Schools* in 1937. Its goals were to assimilate immigrant populations into the educational franchise, consolidate schools and programs, and use schools as social centers.<sup>8</sup> The introduction and rapid expansion of correspondence courses and railway school cars are two examples of the department’s efforts to reach the province’s rural inhabitants, who lived outside the booming urban, industrial cities located primarily on the banks of Lake Ontario in the South.

### **Correspondence Schooling**

By the start of the 1930s, six provinces—Ontario, Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba—were successfully using correspondence courses to reach students in areas without organized school districts. The initial emphasis was upon elementary education.”<sup>9</sup> To qualify for correspondence schooling, students had to meet at least one of the following criteria: live in remote parts of a province with no access to educational institutions; be unable to travel to school for the winter months because of severe conditions and isolation; or have a physical ailment preventing travel to school, despite the students’ mental ability to progress through the program.<sup>10</sup> The same criteria, by and large, applied to individuals who wanted to study in railway school cars. The policy was generally inclusive, as per its mandate to spread public education. In Ontario, the first correspondence course began in 1926, and by World War II, 2500 students were enrolled in the program. The Department of Education boasted that many graduates of the correspondence system were able to pass their high school examinations, and many did so in less time than students in the traditional program.<sup>11</sup>

Howard Ferguson, Ontario’s progressive conservative Premier, who also held the education minister’s portfolio, boasted about the program’s success:

The lessons returned are examined by well-qualified teachers in the employ of the Department, who find that the majority of those taking these lessons make just as good progress as they would in a well-conducted school. . . . In fact, the general results have been successful beyond all expectations, and too much cannot be said in praise of the co-operation of the parents, and the perseverance of the children in carrying out this work, no doubt, in many cases, under very unfavorable circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

## **Railway School Cars**

When initiated in 1926, correspondence courses were viewed as having great promise for expanding educational opportunity. A creative Ontarian alternative—railway school cars—was also introduced that year.<sup>13</sup> Whereas correspondence courses depended largely for success on the self-direction and self-motivation of learners, railroad school cars were believed to be more effective in meeting rural children’s needs. Unlike correspondence courses, they offered students an opportunity to cultivate relationships among themselves and with their teachers.<sup>14</sup>

Howard Ferguson’s discussion of the inception and introduction of the province’s “School Cars for Isolated People” depicts the program as an unmitigated success.<sup>15</sup> The minister describes how these schools on wheels were outfitted with basic classroom, cooking, and sleeping accommodations for the teacher. They were moved along the transcontinental railway system by Canadian National Railway steam engines, stopping for short periods in small hamlets along the way. The teacher would provide direct instruction for several weeks before distributing assignments for students of varying ages and moving on to the next stop. On the return trip, the teacher would have the opportunity to evaluate students’ learning and provide further instruction. Ferguson even reported that “two boys, living far from the railway line, journeyed forty miles to the car, set up an old tent in mid-winter, thatched it with balsam boughs and lived in it while the car was near.”<sup>16</sup>



Aboriginal, Finnish, Norwegian, French, and British children in a school train at Nemigos, near Chapleau, Ontario. The picture (c. 1950) is a testament to the relatively diverse ethnic school population in Ontario's rural North. Courtesy of the Canadian Film Board.

The Annual Reports of the ministers of education are populated with stories highlighting the experiences of immigrant children with the railway cars. In 1928, the following anecdote was offered as an example:

Joseph Ruffo, a little Italian, came to this country in spring; after only twelve weeks' schooling in English he worked up to Second Grade. . . . Settlements shift, old groups disappear, new ones arrive, but the School Car has proven its adaptability to this special work for which it was designed. Extension of the service to other needy areas is warranted. It should become a permanent institution.<sup>17</sup>

We do not hear the voices of children like Joseph Ruffo, who attended the railway car schools described in the government documents, but the Department of Education did seek to personalize the positive narratives that it disseminated to the public. The annual reports gave credit to the individual students' initiative as well as to the teachers' devotion. Joseph Ruffo's story, and others like it, served as a justification for the investment in the railway school cars.

## **Anglo-Conformity**

Well over three million people had immigrated to Canada in the three decades following 1894, including many European farmers and laborers.<sup>18</sup> Industries such as forestry and mining drew these new Canadians with the promise of work.<sup>19</sup> Canadian officials believed it was important to integrate these new populations into the Canadian context and social structure efficiently and expediently. The school was depicted as a socializing panacea. It not only brought immigrants of different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds into the Canadian fold (see Figure 1), regardless of age and gender, it served as a powerful force for democracy. Hence, the minister of education boasted: “Bolshevik propaganda finds no place or acceptance wherever the school car operates. . . . There is no doubt that the next generation will fall naturally into their places as loyal citizens.”<sup>20</sup>

While a great deal of progressivist rhetoric extolled the expansion of schooling as a necessity in the modern age, Ontario’s Department of Education also used this expansion as a means of achieving Anglo-conformity, the core of English Canadian national identity.<sup>21</sup> This identity required the assimilation of immigrant populations into the dominant model of citizenship propagated by the British Empire and Commonwealth. This notion of Anglo-conformity, demanding assimilation of new Canadians to British mores and behaviors, was always being negotiated and resisted in various ways.<sup>22</sup>

Many students in the railway school car program were immigrants from Europe whose instruction concentrated not merely on English literacy, but also on Canadian citizenship.<sup>23</sup> In 1927, the Department of Education initiated a review of the railway school car program, reporting that 95 percent of learners were non-English speakers, most with mid-European origins. The review described the “wholesome Canadianizing influence” of the school car program in that both students and parents were learning to appreciate Canadian “history, values, governmental institutions, political documents, and civic life.” The school car was, Ferguson noted, “adding its quota to the loyal and intelligent citizenship of Ontario.”<sup>24</sup>

## Adult Education

While the railway school cars were initially designed for children, they evolved almost immediately into social hubs that offered English instruction for adults in the evenings. In Ferguson's words, "the foreign-born, both parents and children, trained in an atmosphere inimical to Canadian ideas of citizenship are quickly developing into loyal and law-abiding Canadians."<sup>25</sup> The 1928 annual report notes that the program had:

proven its worth, not only to children, but to the communities as a whole. . . . The School Car is a welcome visitor month by month and has become the real social centre of these isolated settlements. Through night school work in English and associated services, the communities are being wrought over into the fabric of loyal Canadian citizenship.<sup>26</sup>

The following year, the government elaborated upon the subject of adult education through evening instruction. The program was effectively and efficiently teaching the English language to children in isolated areas; it had "fully vindicated itself" by serving as a "socializing and Canadianizing influence."<sup>27</sup> Ferguson continued:

Under the night classes the parents and older members of the families . . . have acquired power not only to read and write English, but to understand and carry out intelligently their business responsibilities such as letter writing, making systematic reports in railroad work and computations in connection therewith. The teachers' wives have likewise exercised a helpful influence in directing the female section of these communities in home craft and other needful services.<sup>28</sup>

V. K. Greer, chief inspector of public and separate schools, reported in 1933, that the railway school cars served the purpose of "weaving the homes into the fabric of the social and national order." He continued, "The parents are profiting almost equally with the child. At the inauguration of the service 90 percent of them were non-British; today 90 percent are naturalized citizens of Canada."<sup>29</sup>

Adult education and citizenship training were thus extended via the railway school cars to northern rural Ontario. In urban centers, also, adult schooling was directed at immigrant Canadians as a way of teaching English language and citizenship.<sup>30</sup> The broad goal of extended adult education programs was to provide "the labouring classes with

liberal education designed to fit them for their role as citizens.”<sup>31</sup> Even when the adult learners were involved in technical or vocational training or re-training, W. L. Grant of Queen’s University remarked that the “alliance between labour and learning is not technical training, nor even technical education. Its aim is social education, a training in citizenship; it is liberal, not technical, education.”<sup>32</sup>

## **Program Decline**

While the railway school cars were founded, then flourished, in a post-World War I progressivist context that sought new technologies to expand and modernize educational opportunities, later progressivist ideas provided the context for the railway school cars’ demise. The 1960s in Ontario saw a strong turn towards progressivist rhetoric and experimentation in education. The progressive conservative governments led by John Robarts and Bill Davis, each of whom served as minister of education prior to assuming the Premier’s title, engaged in policies that mirrored the progressivist themes and initiatives undertaken during the interwar period.

Within a decade, efforts were taken to close the teachers colleges and move all of teacher education to university faculties. A new university, Trent, was founded in Peterborough, and a committee was struck to review and revision Ontario’s public schools. This committee published a controversial document titled *Living and Learning*.<sup>33</sup> This document, as well as the broader educational context in which it was born, linked explicitly to the progressivist ideas that had transformed the province’s public education system four decades prior.

Once novel, the schools on wheels of the 1960s seemed like relics from the past. Further, the population served by the railway cars had dwindled precipitously, and the annual reports demonstrate that the number of students served had been reduced to double digits by 1962.<sup>34</sup> The railway school cars were no longer considered an aspect of modernity. On the contrary, within a progressivist framework, they were costly, inefficient, and outdated.



## Conclusions

Ontario's railway cars served numerous functions in the Department of Education, including the expansion of educational opportunity to rural parts of the province and the promotion of Anglo-Canadian values and language to immigrant populations. The railway school car program became a symbol for educational innovation in Ontario. This is demonstrated by the persistent discussion of the school cars in the reports of the ministers of education, who used their annual reports as a means of drawing the public's attention to the progressivist ethos and commitment to growth that the department exemplified.

As a technology of schooling, the railway school cars were thoroughly progressivist. They emerged as alternatives to correspondence education, which sought to extend public education to individuals—largely immigrant populations—living in rural Ontario. Throughout the late 1920s and the 1930s, the cars were touted as being interactive and efficient means of educational extension; they enabled relationships to be cultivated between the teacher and the child, and they brought schooling to rural communities in a very literal sense. The experimental ethos in which the school cars were developed fits within the broader paradigm of progressive education. Their relative longevity was testament to their popularity, to the enduring commitment to Anglo-conformity as citizenship education for immigrants in Ontario, and to the relatively slow growth of Ontario's rural population in the North.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.schoolcar.ca/history/significant-dates--events.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Murphy, "The Fourth R of Education," *The London Free Press*, July 23, 1988, B3.

<sup>3</sup> "School Car No. 1," in Karl Schuessler and Mary Schuessler, *Schools on Wheels: Reaching and Teaching the Isolated Children of the North* (Erin, ON: The Boston Mills Press, 1986), 33.

<sup>4</sup> "Need Craft Training," *The Canadian School Board Journal* (January 1928): 13.

<sup>5</sup> See Theodore Michael Christou, *Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919-1942* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Rosa Bruno-Jofré, "Citizenship and Schooling in Manitoba, 1918-1945," *Manitoba History* 36 (1998/1999): 102.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore Michael Christou, "The Complexity of Intellectual Currents: Duncan McArthur and Ontario's Progressivist Curriculum Reforms," *Paedagogica Historica* 49, no. 5 (2013): 677-697.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>9</sup> Robert Patterson, "Society and Education during the Wars and Their Interlude: 1914–1945," in *Canadian Education: A History*, ed. J. Donald Wilson, Robert M. Stamp, and Louis-Philippe Audet (Toronto, ON: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1970), 364.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876–1976* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 138.
- <sup>11</sup> See, for example, G. Howard Ferguson, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Year 1929* (Toronto, ON: Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1930), x.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876–1976*, 137–38.
- <sup>14</sup> See, for instance, G. Howard Ferguson, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Year 1926* (Toronto, ON: Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1927).
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., xiii.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> V. K. Greer, "Report of the Chief Inspector of Public and Separate Schools," *Report of the Minister of Education for the Year 1928* (Toronto, ON: Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1934), 6.
- <sup>18</sup> Howard Palmer, "Reluctant Hosts: Anglo-Canadian Views of Multiculturalism in the Twentieth Century," in *Cultural Diversity and Canadian Education: Issues and Innovations*, ed. J. R. Mallea and J. Young (Ottawa, ON: Carleton University Press, 1984), 21–40.
- <sup>19</sup> Peter A. Baskerville, *Ontario: Image, Identity, and Power* (Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press, 2002), 159–60.
- <sup>20</sup> This is a common trope, which ministers of education repeated in their annual reports. See, for example, George S. Henry, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Year 1931*, vi.
- <sup>21</sup> Rosa Bruno-Jofré, "Manitoba Schooling in the Canadian Context and the Building of a Polity: 1919–1971," *Canadian and International Education* 28, no. 2 (1999): 1–22.
- <sup>22</sup> Howard Palmer, "Reluctant Hosts: Anglo-Canadian Views of Multiculturalism in the Twentieth Century," in *Cultural Diversity and Canadian Education: Issues and Innovations*, ed. J. R. Mallea and J. Young (Ottawa, ON: Carleton University Press, 1984), 21–40.
- <sup>23</sup> "School Car No. 1," in Karl Schuessler and Mary Schuessler, *Schools on Wheels: Reaching and Teaching the Isolated Children of the North* (Erin, ON: The Boston Mills Press, 1986), 33.
- <sup>24</sup> G. Howard Ferguson, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Year 1927* (Toronto, ON: Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1928), 6.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> G. Howard Ferguson, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Year 1928* (Toronto, ON: Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1929), ix.
- <sup>27</sup> G. Howard Ferguson, *Report of the Minister of Education for the Year 1929* (Toronto, ON: Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1930), xi.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> V. K. Greer, "Report of the Chief Inspector of Public and Separate Schools," *Report of the Minister of Education for the Year 1933* (Toronto, ON: Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1934), 14.
- <sup>30</sup> Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876–1976*, 137–38.
- <sup>31</sup> Patterson, "Society and Education during the Wars," 365.
- <sup>32</sup> W. L. Grant, "The Education of the Workingman," *Queen's Quarterly* XXVII, no. 2 (1919): 163.
- <sup>33</sup> *Living and Learning* is more popularly remembered as the Hall-Dennis Report, in commemoration of the committee's two chairs, Emmet Hall and Lloyd Dennis. For further reading on the *Living and Learning* document, see W.G. Fleming, *Ontario's Educative Society, Vol. III: Schools, Pupils, and Teachers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971); Robert M. Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876–1976* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); R. D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); and Josh Cole, "Alpha

Children Wear Grey: Postwar Ontario and Soviet Education Reform,” *Historical Studies in Education* 25, no. 1 (2013): 55-72.

<sup>34</sup> *Report of the Minister of Education for the Year 1962* (Toronto, ON: Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 1963), S-44. A footnote to Table 33 in the Appendix notes that the “Other” category refers to the two railway school cars, which had a population of 32 students.

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