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JUSTIFYING CONCEPTUAL GENERALIZATIONS IN  
EDUCATION HISTORY: FRAMING EDUCATIONAL  
PROGRESSIVISM IN THE CONTEXT OF  
INTERWAR-PERIOD ONTARIO

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ABSTRACT

This essay justifies the use of Herbert Kliebard's historical framework and approach to the examination of public discourses on educational reform. It anticipates my doctoral research, which shall examine the reception and interpretation of 'progressive education' in the period between the two World Wars in Ontario. Kliebard's (1986) examination of educational reform discourses in the United States revealed divergent and competing interest groups, which undermined the concept of a unified 'progressive' movement. My preliminary readings of the source material in Ontario reveal that interpretations of educational progressivism were, similarly, divergent. Following a brief description of the historical context under examination and a short historiography of educational 'progress,' I explain why Herbert Kliebard's approach is best suited to my research aims. This explanation shall be undertaken in light of three critiques of conceptual categories in historical explanation.

THE CONTEXT: ONTARIO BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

Ontario, between 1919 and 1939, presents a context ripe with complexity, contradictions, and socio-economic crises. Two World 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, labor, economic strategy, and political organization. There was never one single impetus for these changes, but a long succession of disappointments contributed to the growing unease and unrest of Canadians (Thompson & Seager, 1985).

Soldiers returning from the First World War, for example, found their homes and worlds transformed. Many of their wives and sisters had left hearth and home, albeit on a temporary basis

in many respects, as opportunities made available during the war were often filled by returning soldiers; they gained the right to vote in the federal elections, they had entered the workplace, lobbied for temperance and prohibition of alcohol, and became 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 (Bothwell, 2006).

The trend towards urbanization that began at the end of the last century continued unabated. Municipalities wrestled with the growing need to cope with unemployment, city planning duties, and an influx of settlers (Spelt, 1955). Rural populations, seeing their world and worldviews vanishing, began to unite and fight for their values in a political sphere. The United Farmers of Ontario swept into power at Queen's Park, buoyed by the vote in rural areas of the province. Labor groups were also uniting in the face of worsening work conditions, and strike activity rises dramatically in the years following the war (Naylor, 1991).

Many of these changes were undertaken in the name of 'progress'. A Progressive party was born during the interwar period, drawing Agnes Macphail, who had been the first female elected Member of Parliament, into the Ontario Legislature. This party largely represented labor and farmer interest groups, but there was also a growing intellectual elite in the country interested in social and political policy reform (Owram, 1986). The growing civic unrest, the failures 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' (Drummond, 1987).

Schools, too, represented institutions wherein progress could be promoted. Education was, as it remains today, seen as a force for remedying ills and changing the future (Thompson & Seager, 1985). The youth, the future workers, politicians, and intellectuals, held the keys to 'progress'. The provinces, under the division of powers in the British North America Act, held power over education. 'Progressive' interest groups all turned their eyes to education at some point in the course of their rhetoric. As a consequence, the discourse on 'progress' in education must be understood in relation to the broader plight of progressivism that

so heavily influenced social, political, and economic domains during the interwar period.

This progressivism can perhaps best be pointed to by looking at the various pieces of legislation that represented breaks in the laissez-fair style of government non-action into the domains of public good and welfare. Unemployment insurance, pensions for war veterans, and the running of budgetary deficits to fund public works projects that could stimulate the economy are examples of what might be considered 'progressive' change in the orientations of federal and provincial governments to citizenry (Bothwell, 2006; Thompson & Seager, 1985). Similarly, in schools, reform initiatives such as the breaking up of the traditional, classical, and humanistic curriculum have been deemed hallmarks of 'progressive' reform (Tyack, 1974).

#### THE HISTORIOGRAPHY: FRAMING 'PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION'

My research aims are concerned with unraveling the intersecting strands of public discourse concerning the reception and interpretation of 'progressive education'. With this in mind, my analyses shall examine educational journals published by the Ontario Educational Association and the Ontario College of Education, mass-circulate magazines and newspapers, as well as newsletters published by teachers' federations. Preliminary readings of these sources show that despite many intersections of reform discourses, there were divergent representations of what 'progress' in education would entail.

'Progressive education', because it embraces multiple, often contradictory, movements, has been difficult to define clearly. The literature associates 'progressive' pedagogy with diverse and different goals including, but not limited to vocational education, manual training, child study, scientific management, social consciousness, and mental testing (Kliebard, 1992, 2004). The core set of beliefs that most historians consider 'progressive' include the beliefs that learning should be active, individualized, child-centered, and holistic in the sense that instruction addresses more than academics and content (Rohrs, 1995; Zilversmit, 1993).

Throughout the interwar period, despite different alliances and political affiliations, the nature and purpose of 'progressive' reform was ripe with debate. Rural and urban Ontario interests did not always see eye to eye. Religious groups did not necessarily have the same 'progressive' vision for schools that the

growing number of professional social scientists in secular universities had (Naylor, 1991; Nelles, 1974; Owram, 1986). The problem of gathering primary sources that reflect the different orientations towards 'progress' in schooling, while difficult, is dwarfed by the Herculean task of making sense of it all. How does a historian conceptualize and frame educational progressivism in a context so laden with debate and dichotomy?

Certainly, many historians have tried. A student of educational history has the historiographic legacies of these different efforts from which to choose. Of course, not every approach will suffice to depict the complexity of intersecting pedagogic discourses. Consequently, the historical framework used must be subjected to careful scrutiny. The first approach to consider education and 'progress' historically is best characterized by Elwood Cubberley's *Public education in the United States* (1919).

Cubberley's instrumentalist approach set the tone for four decades of educational historiography. Education, the hallmark and triumph of democracy, was ever improving. This improvement, he argued, was intertwined with the betterment of American society. For Cubberley, the education system was both the result of 'progress' and the key to future progress' (Cubberley, 1919). One of his guiding principles was the search for relevance between the past and the present policies for problems in education. His celebratory history was intended to instill pride in the profession for teachers and teacher candidates. But by narrowing the field of vision to concentrate on matters of relevance to educators, educational history grew increasingly irrelevant to other historians. Also, he clung to the idea that he could develop a 'science' of education that could accurately depict the past despite the obvious anachronism of this view (Lagemann, 2005).

A wave of reform in the 1960s swept away such celebratory and instrumentalist approaches to writing history of education. Bernard Bailyn's *Education in the forming of American society* (1960) depicted education in terms much broader than those limited to schooling and saw it as the broad process of social, cultural transmission. His approach brought research in the history of education closer to social and cultural history than it had been in the past. The same can be said of Lawrence Cremin's *The*

transformation of the school: Progressivism in American education, 1876-1957 (1961).

Cremin's approach broadened the field of educational history by relating educational progressivism to larger political and social trends. He assessed the implications of 'progressive education' for the present, but was more interested in disciplinary values than scientific ones. Cremin characterized educational progressivism as the convergence of three trends. The first of these related to the expansion of school curricula and programs. The second trend saw the application of scientific principles to school organization, administration, and management. The third involved greater tailoring of instruction to individuals or groups of students (Cremin, 1961).

By integrating his study of educational progressivism with social and political progressivism, Cremin opened the door for Michael Katz (1968), Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1972), Joel Spring (1972), and David Tyack (1974) to question the ideological and political roots of 'progressivism'. These studies have taken Marxist (in the case of Katz), leftist (in the case of Bowles and Gintis), centrist (in the case of Tyack), and anarchist (in the case of Spring) positions on educational 'progress'. In relation to my research, the most relevant approach to educational progressivism emerges from this critical perspective on the social and political aspects of school reform. Herbert Kliebard, a former student of Lawrence Cremin's, abandoned the search for a framework able to characterize and depict the essence of a convergent 'progressive' movement.

#### HERBERT KLIEBARD'S FRAMEWORK: FOUR DIVERGENT CONCEPTS AND REFORM PLATFORMS

Kliebard's (1986) *Struggle for the American Curriculum* reframed the way that the 'progressive education' could be described by identifying, comparing, and contrasting the reformist perspectives within 'progressivism'. He claimed that there was no single, unified movement seeking 'progress' and he pointed to four competing perspectives on educational reform as proof of divergence of discourse and reform initiative. Kliebard explored the notion of 'social efficiency' in educational reform as being predominant. This built on historical work done by Edward Krug (1964, 1972), who would later share his basement office at the

University of Wisconsin-Madison. Kliebard explored the idea, first examined by Edward Krug, that the 'progressive era' was an age of criticism and debate directed at establishments. He came to see 'social efficiency' as a dominant ideology in educational reform (Kliebard, 2004; 1964, 1972). Here, there is agreement with Kliebard when the latter historian arrived at the university (Kliebard, 2004). On the overarching influence of 'social efficiency', David Tyack also found Tyack's assessment that it was 'administratively progressive' reformers who affected the most change (Tyack, 1974).

Kliebard's deconstruction of the notion of 'progressive education' was also influenced by Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution* (1975). Williams argued that the nineteenth century curriculum in British schools was a compromise of three competing perspectives—the public educators, the industrial trainers, and the old humanists. Kliebard, in his examination of the discourse surrounding American curricular reform, identified four different interest groups embroiled in a struggle for influence on educational policy (Kliebard, 2004). In his opinion, the groups were divergent and could in no way constitute a single, 'progressive' movement. The reform that each interest group represented meant 'progress' towards one of four different ideals—social efficiency, social improvement/meliorism, developmental psychology, and humanistic discipline of mind. Because this last domain actually dominated the 'traditional' school curricula, the first three were actually considered, to varying degrees, 'progressive' (Kliebard, 2004).

Humanists, alternatively referred to as mental disciplinarians, believed that all students were able to develop mental reasoning (Kliebard, 2004). The mind, like a muscle, needed exercise and training to get stronger in different areas. School subjects provided that exercise while teaching the canon of Western culture. Passing down a heritage of thought and culture was more important, by inference, than social reform. In general, there were five windows of the soul, or subjects that provided the best training for young minds, (Kliebard, 1992). These included grammar, literature and art, mathematics, history, and geography. Framed in this manner, the classics were also important tools for cultural transmission.

The 'progressive education' movement was, according to Kliebard, a dismantling of the humanists' hold on the education

system. This meant that the curriculum needed to include more choice for individual students, more of a focus on modern languages, and a more practical orientation than provided solely by the humanities and arts (Kliebard, 1992). Mass schooling, the industrial revolution, the rise of scientific inquiry as a scholarly ideal, and the increasing secularization of society contributed to the increasing dissatisfaction with the humanists' order of subjects, which was associated with its aristocratic origins (Kliebard, 2004). Lastly, a series of studies from experimental psychology at the turn of the twentieth century by William James, Edward Thorndike and other psychologists demonstrated that the disciplining and training of mental faculties was not possible (Kliebard, 1992). James, for example, reported that a modest experiment with his students at Harvard which did not improve overall memory at all. Thorndike's experiments, likewise, led him to conclude that it was impossible to transfer or generalize skills learned in one context to another.

The implication of these experiments was quite evident for educational design and curriculum theory; if learning was to be relevant and practical to life, it had to be specific and contextual; transferability of skills learned in one context to another was impossible. This meant that the arguments for the maintenance of humanistic subjects on the grounds that they developed mental faculties (e.g. mathematics built reasoning and the philosophy taught the art of thinking) fell apart. Since skills learned in one context could not be transferred to new situations, educational activities needed to develop students' abilities in very concrete and specific situations (Kliebard, 2004). The humanist interest group did not expire during the interwar period, but it lost the dominant position that it held in schools. Ancient Greek was no longer a required course of study and, likewise, Latin requirements were all but abandoned.

The social meliorist reform initiative and discourse was one of three groups vying for increased influence in education (Kliebard 2004). Concentrating on the social and economic inequities wrought by the industrial revolution, economic recessions, and the Depression, social meliorists were primarily concerned with social justice and equity. This interest group took aim at capitalistic individualism and the "religion of prosperity" (Kliebard, 2004, p. 151). There were three main aims of reform targeted by social meliorists. The first targeted inequities in

standards of adult life. The second concentrated on the immediate health and welfare of children. The third aimed to reconstruct society by remedying the ill effects of an individualistic and capitalistic society (Kliebard, 2004). Social meliorists subscribed to the notion that individuals' futures were not predetermined by gender, race, socio-economic, or heredity; instead, they were tied to abuses of economic privilege and power. They believed that education could equip subsequent generations with the means to democratically remedy social abuses (Kliebard, 1992).

While many of the ideas presented by social meliorists offered visions of a reconstructed society, the reforms of social efficiency advocated promised stability (Kliebard, 2004). One perceived way of realizing that promise was the development of school programs that could prepare students for their specific niches within the social and economic order. The curriculum and methods of instruction needed to be retooled to maximize the social and economic utility of each individual (Kliebard, 2004). Schools should be run as efficiently as factory plants operated. 'Scientific' testing and needs assessments, as well as guidance programs, were advocated for on the grounds that they could assist school administrators to develop more individualized and efficient instruction. During the First World War, intelligence testing had been an important way for ascertaining military assignments; similarly, streaming of children according to intelligence became common practice in Ontario's schools during the interwar years. Vocational and training programs were seen as ways of creating closer ties between society's economic markets and the schools (Kliebard, 2004). The curriculum itself could be composed of minute parts that could be pieced together on an individual basis of differentiated instruction (Kliebard, 1992).

Developmentalists, the representatives of a fourth interest group examined by Kliebard, also supported an increasingly scientific attitude towards schooling. The models of science pursued by developmentalist reform initiatives were natural and biological (Kliebard, 1992). The emotional and behavioural qualities of children needed to be tended to by the schools. This aim necessitated research into the stages and laws of human development. The sequence and structure of curriculum expectations then needed to be aligned with these stages (Kliebard, 1992). Developmentalists were thus interested in coordinating education and nature. 'Nature' meant two different things, and the

meanings were often conflated—biological/natural and rural/pastoral. Reverence for the second meaning is closely connected to the developmentalists' concern for children's physical health (Kliebard, 1992)

Of course, the idea of fostering health was not the exclusive terrain of developmentalists; however, it can serve as an example of the interest groups' divergent agendas. The developmentalists, for starters, thought that rural environments where children could exercise, be active, and live wholesomely were healthier than unhygienic and potentially dangerous urban schools. Social meliorists were more concerned with cleaning up the cities and improving the living conditions within urban centers in order to improve and equalize the physical and psychological conditions of social life. Humanists argued that a healthy mind was developed by harmonious and balanced instruction that left neither the aesthetic, nor the mental arts to wither. The social efficiency advocates perceived of health in terms that allowed the same individualism and efficient pursuit of personal goals evident in free market capitalism to reign in schools (Kliebard, 1992, 2004).

Kliebard's four interest groups are concepts that he constructed in order to represent the very different and contradictory reform interests pursuing 'progress' in education. All four groups framed their arguments in terms of "democratic rhetoric", but each had its own particular "community of discourse" and conveyed a unique platform for reform (Kliebard, 2004, p. 285). What remains to be seen is how well these concepts hold up to some of the more fashionable critiques of historical categories voiced by postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers. In a related sense, we must see how the framework itself might be useful for examining the complexity of Ontario's debate on educational reform in the interwar period.

#### DEFENDING KLIEBARD: CRITIQUES OF CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES AND JUSTIFICATIONS FOR THEIR USE

To begin with, let us consider the claim that historical categories can be seen as impositions of constructed concepts upon the past. Life is messy and slippery, whereas historical concepts reach for and portray an "essence of the past" (Ankersmit, 1997, p. 289). It should be made clear that Kliebard's analyses took a bottom-up approach to the construction of his

concepts. Rather than imposing ideal types upon the subjects, he devised categories in order to conceptualize the divergent strands of 'progressive' discourses (Kliebard, 2004). Looking at this point in relation to my research aims should make this clearer. If I were to use Kliebard's concepts without ascertaining their feasibility for the context in Ontario, it could be construed that I was imposing categories upon the examined data. But because the context and sources differ, my analysis may not yield the same concepts. Top-down conceptual categories, particularly ones that set up dichotomies between mutually exclusive ideas, impede the possibility of middle positions. They limit the historian's ability to understand and to frame concepts' intersections and hybridity. An example might be to predetermine that all reform language betrayed either a socialist or rugged individualist attitude towards schooling. Where might the fascist or the anarchist rhetoric belong in such a rigid framework of concepts?

An attractive feature of Kliebard's categories is actually their lack of rigidity. While divergent, they are not exclusive. This means that they do not preclude the possibility of shifting; temporary coalitions could be established between seemingly different interest groups. As an example, developmentalists supported efficiency advocates' calls for increased vocational preparation in schools with respect to agricultural training (Kliebard, 2004). The interest in efficient alignment of schools and vocations coincided with the interest in preserving a healthy and rural form of life.

A second criticism of historical concepts is that they are reductionist and "inescapably structural" (Fox-Genovese, 1997, p. 86). That is, they reduce complex events into static categories that portray a false "fixity of the past" (Himmelfarb, 1997, p. 158). By categorizing data, historians compartmentalize and restrict, or mask, complexity. In reality, life is far from static. Certainly, intellectual debates surrounding all kinds of 'progress', including educational progressivism, were prone to inconsistencies and variances. Kliebard's approach to educational progressivism assumes a certain complexity about past phenomena that enables the historian to seek out and describe divergence in life. By conceptualizing the ideological debates on school curricula as a struggle, Kliebard necessarily sets up his concepts as dynamic. The categories 'social efficiency', 'developmentalist', 'meliorist', and 'humanist' are presented as armies upon a discursive

battlefield. As noted earlier with respect to the idea of health, Kliebard's framework of concepts necessitates examination of data from multiple and conflicting perspectives. There is complexity here, and the results of each confrontation are messy. Even victories can be Pyrrhic.

One example relates to the multifarious influence of John Dewey's writings upon the reform movement in schools. Dewey argued (among many other things) that school instruction should be more child-centered. Developmentalists used Dewey's position to argue for more individualized instruction on the basis of a learner's psychological stage of development. Efficiency advocates justified mental testing as a means of ascertaining a child's learning, level of understanding, stream, and niche. Social meliorists argued that centering instruction on the child had to involve elements of equity and social justice. While enthusiasts were interpreting Dewey's writings and using them to justify very different agendas, they were largely ignoring his efforts to reiterate his statements in order to limit unrestrained, excessive use of his ideas (such as classrooms where the teacher gave absolutely no direction, guidance, or instruction to children). Kliebard, unable to fit Dewey strictly within any of his four concepts, classified his ideas across categories (Kliebard, 2004). This seeks to demonstrate the fluidity of Kliebard's categories and enables an understanding towards the meaning of 'progressive education' that is not linked to discretely and statically to individuals but rather to the concepts and beliefs.

By assuming from the start that 'progressive' matters are complex and that ideas are a battleground, Kliebard's framework enables the historian to seek out and give voice to alternative and multiple perspectives. Each category represents a heuristic for device the critical examination of source material. X exists in order to reveal Y. Kliebard's concepts are useful because they reveal divergent, public reform discourses. This is a point made in response to the critique that historical concepts reveal more about the personal biases of the historian than they do about the data. Thus, this third critique argues that the use of categories reveals no historical truth that is not subjective to the writer and to the reader. There is an "inexpungeable relativity" (White, 1997, p. 392) in all representations of the past. This relativity is linked to the postmodern understanding of language as selfreferential, having no extra-linguistic reality (Derrida, 1976). The "dissolution

of the materiality" of language is "necessarily also the dissolution of history" (Spiegel, 1997, p. 184). History is fiction and, consequently, each new interpretation is as good as the last one was at representing the past.

But the fact that historical concepts are interpretations that change through time does not change the fact that they are contingent upon and "guided by evidence" (Lorenz, 1999, p. 574). Kliebard's concepts represent a cautioned and reflexive approach to the data, but they do not change the actual evidence that they explain. His identification of four social languages was made on the basis of historical evidence. Kliebard demonstrates that these social languages were slogan systems for divergent interests competing for influence on educational matters. His conclusions, like all historical explanation, are provisional and hypothetical—always liable to be replaced by better theories or new data. Other historians may examine the same sources and refute his claims, but they must do so on the basis of the evidence examined.

The "profession of history" imposes "relentless institutional criticism, at least in terms of the verification of facts" (Kellner, 1989, p. 407). The community of historians can reject texts on the grounds that they are not sufficiently accurate, or that they have misrepresented or ignored the source material (Lorenz, 1999). The onus of proof is upon the historian, who must justify his/her conceptual categories via the marshalling of evidence. There are two implications here. The first draws a clear distinction between the criteria constituting 'good' fiction from 'good' history. The aims, aesthetic and linguistic, are not the same. The second implication is that historical truth needs to be understood not in terms of absolutes and eternal, but in a provisional, Deweyan sense of 'warranted assertability' (BrunoJofré & Schiralli, 2002; Dewey, 1960)

Kliebard's identification of 'progressive' subgroups was undertaken in light of the sources and it reasonably justifies the existence of divergent reform programs in education, each of which has a high degree of ideological/discursive coherency and consistency. His refusal to define 'progressive education' in broad terms or in terms of a single subgroup or program was done because of the burden of proof. The primary sources evidence Kliebard examined did not justify the claim that there was a single, broad, and unified 'progressive education' movement because

there were too many inconsistencies and contradictions in the sources.

The source material evidence also demonstrated that an examination of a single reform group and the identification of that program as 'progressive' was too narrowly ideological to do justice to the entire body of literature (Kliebard, 2004). The dynamic framework that ties together Kliebard's concepts enables the historian to examine data from multiple perspectives and give some structure to the analysis by showing the interrelationship between those perspectives. A category's explicative force depends on its ability to describe the complexity of phenomena with some clarity, within a context.

Between 1919 and 1939 in Ontario, for example, a sense of disappointment and disillusionment pervaded and stimulated reform initiatives. A concept like 'social meliorism' has a different potency when viewed in relation to Depression-era vagrancy, labor unrest, hunger, and unemployment in the heart of Toronto than it might in a rural one-room schoolhouse situated in a community booming because of the pulp-and-paper industry explosion in the early 1920s. In the former case, the concept would be a priority for individuals whose children had to quit school in order to find work or leave home in order to cease being a financial burden. In the latter case, the meliorist spirit might have invigorated a feeling of 'brotherhood' and led to cooperation, unionization, or fellowship.

#### CONCLUSION: FITTING THE FRAMEWORK TO THE QUESTION AND TO THE CONTEXT

Ultimately, I must reflect back on the aims of my research in order to assess the usefulness of the categories and framework employed. I am considering a period of social, political, and economic contradictions. Ontario was undergoing a period of rapid transformation because of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and immigration (Thompson and Seager 1985). In this time and place, reform was sought out in many aspects of life, particularly education. The spirit of educational progressivism was, like the context, ripe with contradictions and unease.

Herbert Kliebard's framework, which assumes complexity and struggle, fits. It enables the construction of concepts that will emerge from the context and give light to the

multiplicity of perspectives voiced in the historical sources. By presupposing divergence of opinion, I anticipate that the emergent concepts will relate to the social, political, and economic concerns of the people in Ontario. These concepts, like Kliebard's four interest groups, shall then be the heuristic tools that will enable me to unravel the intersecting but divergent interpretations of 'progressive' education in the province.

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