

# The Triumph of "Formalism": Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s\*

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In *Survey of the School System*, published in 1925, J. H. Putman and G. M. Weir blamed the "state of intellectual torpor" that they found "markedly evident" in British Columbia education on the "formal discipline theory of studies current almost everywhere throughout the Province." Advocates of this theory believed that education consisted of training such "faculties" of the mind as memory and reasoning because such training generalized itself. Through studying algebra and formal grammar, for example, one trained the reasoning faculty and came to be able to apply this talent to actual situations throughout life. Putman and Weir also discovered that lay people in British Columbia "who regard education chiefly as learning out of a book" shared the formal doctrine with professionals. If a teacher, so parents believed, "drills incessantly on the formal parts of grammar and arithmetic or the facts of history and geography, he is . . . a good teacher."<sup>1</sup>

A major strain in the history of Canadian education during the first half of the twentieth century was the effort made by educational theorists and school officials to overcome the popularity of formalism. Hilda Neatby examined the results of these efforts as they manifested themselves in the curricula of the 1950s. Her survey of these materials indicated that the reformers had apparently triumphed and that the new fare, in contrast to the old, provided "so little for the mind."<sup>2</sup> However, when

\* This paper is a much revised version of one first presented to the Canadian History of Education Association Conference, Toronto, 1982. It is built out of the memories of about forty anonymous interviewees. Readers will soon discover my enormous debt to them, which I gratefully acknowledge. I am also indebted to John Calam, George Tomkins and John Murray for their comments and suggestions and to Denise Newton for her research assistance. The final form of the paper is also a product of the work of the Canadian Childhood History Project, to which both the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the University of British Columbia have given generous support.

<sup>1</sup> British Columbia, Department of Education, *Survey of the School System*, by J. H. Putman and G. M. Weir (Victoria: King's Printer, 1925), pp. 118-21.

<sup>2</sup> Hilda Neatby, *So Little for the Mind* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1953).

one looks behind the curricula at what actually went on in classrooms, one finds that formalism in anglophone Canadian education was as strong in the 1950s as it had been in the 1920s. In fact, most of the improvements of the Froebelians, the “new” educators, and the Canadian “progressives” — a transformed curriculum, improved teacher education, more thorough inspection and supervision, and the like — had worked to refine and strengthen traditional modes of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, Professor Neatby accurately characterized Canadian education not only as it was in the 1950s, but as it had been over the whole of the twentieth century: it did not and had never done much to train the minds it served.

To substantiate this argument I will employ elementary schooling in Vancouver — including South Vancouver and Point Grey — as a case study.<sup>3</sup> I will begin by looking carefully at schooling as it appeared to the pupils. To do so I will describe an elementary school that I have assembled mostly out of the memories of some who attended school in Vancouver between the end of the First World War and the end of the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> There I will follow the pupils through their day, their week and their school year, describing what they learned and how their teachers taught it. Next, I will explain how the school ensured its “peace, order and good government.” Finally, I will survey certain structural features of this school and its social context that, in my view, made formalism inevitable.

## I

To children just starting out, schooling was only one segment of lives that were already engaged in a round of activities associated with families, friends and congregations, and with playmates of yard, street and playground. While this new segment of the circle loomed large in the minds

<sup>3</sup> In 1929 the municipalities of Vancouver, South Vancouver and Point Grey were amalgamated. In 1923 British Columbia extended the regular elementary school program from seven years to eight. In the late 1920s school districts began to introduce junior high schools for grades 7, 8 and 9. The depression, however, severely retarded their growth. On the other hand, declining secondary enrolment provided more space for them after 1938. In 1945-46, 54 percent of grade 7 and 8 pupils in Vancouver attended elementary schools, 30 percent junior high schools and 16 percent junior-senior high schools. Vancouver School Board, *Annual Report*, 1948, p. 93; British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report*, 1945-46, pp. MM 173-75.

<sup>4</sup> The methodology that I am employing in my ongoing study of childhood in anglophone Canada from the end of the First War to the 1960s is described in “The Role of Memory in the History of Childhood,” an unpublished paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, June 1985. This paper will appear in a publication of the Canadian Childhood History Project.

of all children, it was only one part of it, a fact which must be kept in mind as one notes their recollections of schooling. For families who centred their lives around a religious or ethnic organization, then the congregation, or a congregation-like association, impinged on the school as well; pupils tended to find their first school friends and playmates among those already well known to them through those activities, such as Sunday school. While very few have forgotten the very first day of school — “I could *smell* how clean my clothes were that day” — many of those interviewed had much sharper recollections of events that happened outside school than they do of early days or even of any days inside school. One person’s only memory of his first two years of school, for example, is of the big bully of the grade 1 class: “I was petrified of him.” (The strength of this particular recollection is testified to by the fact that the bully’s name was the only one that he could recall from among his classmates of those early years.)

Most children starting school had been initiated into its ways long before they arrived for their first day. Parents, brothers and sisters, playmates and older children all helped to craft in the pre-school child expectations of a traditional sort of schooling. The characteristics of the teaching staff, the rituals of discipline and the content of the curriculum were part of the lore of childhood. On a bright summer day a brother, sister or an older playmate had taken the prospective beginner to the schoolyard. Together they had climbed the fire escape to peer into the shadowed classrooms; the neophyte heard exaggerated tales of “rubber nose,” or “weasel mouth,” or “Dynamite D,” or “the strap,” or “Mr. X,” who cast so all-pervasive an aura over the school of which he was the principal that in the minds of some pupils he and his school almost merged together as one being.

Some children — the less sceptical, the less realistic, the more gullible, perhaps — were afraid to start school and often remained intermittently frightened by it throughout the whole of their school careers. They knew about events which gave a grim touch of reality to the apocryphal lore: of W from down the lane being strapped for throwing a spitball, of X’s rash brought on by fear of physical education classes, of Y’s stomach cramps before each weekly spelling test, of Z’s outburst of tears when a page of her exercise book had been ripped out by her teacher. They expected such things to happen to them too. Some feared other children. Those whose families moved occasionally or frequently had to go through the ritual of “starting to school” a number of times. Some children recall

feeling “inferior” and “insecure” or even frightened after each move. Others felt only lightly touched by changing schools. One boy remembers a moment of concern at recess on the first day at a new school — his third — when one big boy said to another, about him, “Do you think you can take him?” but it was all talk that quickly faded away.

Most beginners were only partly taken in by ritual tales of “horrors” ahead; they recalled the carefree departures of friends and neighbours to school as recently as the previous June and themselves set off in the same way; typically, children were “very excited about school.” Most departed for their first day with their mothers. Some insisted that their mothers accompany them for the first few days and, very occasionally, the first few weeks. Some, even among those who were really keen to go to school, cried when their mothers left them on the first day. Most quickly overcame their initial shyness. And, however they came and whatever their expectations of how the school would be ordered, most beginners shared one very clear idea of what they would do in school. They were going to learn to read. After a half century many can recall stories such as “Chicken Little,” and even phrases and sentences such as “pretty pink ice cream from a pretty pink glass,” “Cut, cut, said the King,” and “I am a boy. My name is Jerry,” which were among the first that they decoded.<sup>5</sup>

Despite problems posed by periods of rapid growth, Vancouver generally provided substantial concrete and brick schools for its pupils. Well maintained, most stood out as the most impressive buildings in their neighbourhoods. The front of each school presented its best side to the community; the building was set back behind low fences which protected lawns and shrubs. At about eight o'clock each morning the janitor or monitor raised the flag in front of the school. Since most had above-ground basements, those using the main entrance of the school — forbidden to pupils — climbed a set of wide granite steps and entered on one side of a double door. Most schools had a boys' entrance and a girls' entrance, generally at ground level. Behind the school lay the main play-

<sup>5</sup> “Chicken Little” appeared in *The Canadian Readers: Book One A Primer and First Reader* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 74-80. I have not been able to find out from which books the first two sentences came, but the person who recollected the third is obviously recalling an early story in the reader by Henrietta Roy, Elsie Roy, P. H. Sheffield and Grace Bollert, *Highroads to Reading: Jerry and Jane: The Primer* (Toronto: Ryerson and Macmillan, 1932). On page 3 appears a story entitled “Jerry,” and beneath it “I am a boy. My name is Jerry. I am in the toy store.” British Columbia began replacing the “Canadian Readers” with the “Highroads Readers” in the mid-1930s. British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report, 1934-35*, pp. S64-65.

ing field. Since intensive use made grass impossible, this part of the playground was usually covered with packed earth and gravel, which meant that those who fell on the playing field often tore their skin or pitted their knees.

Most children arrived at school well before the bell. On all but the worst days they played outside. On very wet or very cold days they would gather in the basement play areas of those schools which had such facilities. Since basements were usually dark, noisy and unventilated, children tended to avoid them if they could. Unless they were one of those privileged pupils who had minor housekeeping or administrative tasks to perform before school, they were not admitted to the corridors or classrooms before the bell. If the school was a large one, the children would play in sharply segregated areas of the playground; the older boys monopolized the largest field, the older girls and the primary children played in their smaller areas. The duty teacher circulated from field to field, sometimes carrying the brass bell by its clapper. If she taught one of the primary grades she might have a small chain of girls attached to each hand.

Although the children were socially more or less integrated in their play, even on the playground they displayed characteristics that showed some of the sharp differences between them. To eyes accustomed to the present rich range of pupil garb, hairstyles, and so on, all pupils in this earlier era would appear very drab indeed. Even in the middling levels of society, children bathed less frequently than they do today. More children then than now did not bathe at all. Children had fewer clothes and changed them far less frequently. Some boys wore heavy boots, often with metal plates around the toes and with "blakeys" on toes and heels. Despite the admonitions of teachers and nurses, many wore only cheap "runners" in the summer and when it was dry, and "gumboots" when it was wet or snowy. A few wore runners whatever the weather. Some were unkempt and even dirty, while others wore clean but threadbare clothes. One of the latter recalls always having "hand-me-down clothes" and boots that at first were too big, for a time just right, and then, "for another interminable while, they were too small." Unlike the children of the employed working class or middle classes, such children "had nothing new . . . after Woodward's 95-cent day." Nor did they wear "Lindbergh" helmets, with their plastic goggles and straps that did up under the chin.

At about five to nine, those schools equipped with bell towers or electric bells sounded a warning ring. In other schools a senior pupil or a teacher

circulated through the corridors and on the grounds ringing the brass hand bell. At the bell, monitors collected the sports equipment. The children moved rapidly to the inside or outside assembly point for their classes. There they lined up in pairs; girls in front, boys behind. The younger children held hands with their partners. Many of the girls moved to an already-reserved place in the line. Since the front was a much-coveted position, those who wanted it reserved it by placing coats, lunch bags or other possessions there, or even lined up well ahead of the bell to ensure their prime positions. At the bell, the boys raced up and tussled either for first position behind the girls or for the very last position in the lines. The principal, vice-principal or the duty teacher appeared and stared — or even roared — the children into silence. He or she then signalled the classes one by one to march into their classrooms. The classes passed more or less silently down corridors, some of which had a line painted down the middle. Teachers stood vigilantly by the doors of their rooms. After the children entered their rooms they placed their coats and lunches in the right place — some classes had dark, high-ceilinged cloak-rooms which were often the scene of semi-silent scuffling, shin-hacking, and the like — and then moved to their desks. Those with problems in hearing or seeing — again more than now — sat at the very front of the room. In the 1920s some teachers arranged their pupils according to their academic rank in the class, a practice which had disappeared by the 1950s.

The children entered classrooms that were, by today's standards, somewhat dark and gloomy. Incandescent bulbs, usually encased in milky glass globes, hung from the ceilings. In a context of "constant watchfulness," these were only turned on when teachers or sometimes even principals made the important decision that artificial light was really necessary.<sup>6</sup> The left-hand side of the room was covered by windows which could be opened and closed. In all but the new schools of the 1950s, freshly washed black slate blackboards — on which white chalk was used — covered two or even three of the other sides of the room. On one panel of the blackboards the teacher or some favoured pupils had gently tapped chalk brushes on onionskin stencils to etch out a ghostly scene appropriate to the season — autumn leaves, or Santa Claus, or valentines — and coloured it with soft coloured chalk. Another panel displayed the

<sup>6</sup> See the comment on the cost of school lighting by R. H. Neelands, chairman of the Vancouver School Trustees Finance Committee for 1940; in Vancouver School Board, *Reports*, 1939 and 1940, p. 68.

list of classroom monitors, whose tasks included cleaning blackboards and chalk brushes (*never* on the side of the school), operating the pencil sharpener, filling ink wells from copper containers or glass bottles with delicate glass stems, watering plants, and so on. Beneath the monitors came the "detention" list which, first thing in the morning, held only the names of those miscreants who had collected more of these punishments than they had yet been able to serve. Other lists showed those receiving milk, those who had bought war savings stamps, or other unofficial records.

The morning's seat work covered much of the rest of the blackboard. In the upper grades this was sometimes concealed by a rolled-down map or maps; sometimes one of the world, British Empire in red, or Canada surrounded by Neilson's chocolate bars. Above the front blackboard hung a portrait of King George V and Queen Mary or, later, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. From 1927 onward children gazed at a sepia reproduction of Rex Wood's lifeless copy of Robert Harris' "Fathers of Confederation," which the Canadian Club had presented to schools in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Confederation. In 1940 it was joined, courtesy of the Kiwanis Club, by a coloured picture of the Union Jack, beneath which appeared the words:

"One Life One Fleet  
One Flag One Throne  
Tennyson"

In some classrooms these pictures were flanked by such scenes of British prowess as the capture of Quebec, the Battle of Trafalgar and the signing of the Magna Carta. Above the other boards hung model alphabets, health posters, or murals created by the pupils. Some open shelves holding atlases and class-set textbooks sat under the windows or in a corner beside the teacher's desk.

The floors were either oiled wood or brown "battleship" linoleum. Individual desks were generally screwed onto wooden runners. The seat in front of the front desks held texts and marked and unmarked exercise books. A metal ink well or glass ink bottle sat in a hole that had been bored into the top of the right hand corner of the slightly sloping desk. A pencil trough crossed the top of it. Below lay a shelf for storing pencil boxes, crayons, textbooks and scribblers. On the days when the windows could not be opened the characteristic classroom odour was particularly

<sup>7</sup> The wording is taken from a copy now in the possession of Jean Barman. See also Vancouver School Board, *Report*, 1940, p. 55.

strong: on the one hand, plasticine, sour paste, pencil shavings, orange peels in the waste baskets, chalk dust, oiled floors and dust bane; on the other stale bodies and sweaty feet, occasionally enriched by "fluffs." The air in the cloakrooms, which were rarely ventilated, often caught the breath of those entering them. Characteristic sounds complemented these smells: steam radiators clanked, "blakeyed" toes and heels clattered down the aisles, chalk screeched on the blackboard, and bells divided the day into its segments.

Each teacher began the day by calling the roll and marking the class register. The children responded, "Present, Miss X," or "Here, Mr. Y." In the 1920s and 1930s some teachers preceded roll call with a scriptural reading or Biblical story and, more often, a prayer. From 1944 onward, teachers read, without introduction or comment, a prescribed selection from the King James version of the Bible. After the reading the teacher said, "Class stand," paused for quiet, and the children recited "The Lord's Prayer" in unison.<sup>8</sup> Next, teachers conducted the daily health inspection; they looked for nits, clean hands, clean nails, clean faces, combed hair and possession of a handkerchief. Once a week they collected the milk money and, during the war, quarters for war savings stamps. They gave iodine tablets to those who had paid a dime for a year's supply.<sup>9</sup> Pupils who aspired to be nurses "would count out the tablets with a tongue depressor onto a tray and then carry them around the room, pushing out each kid's with the depressor." Monitors gave out new pen nibs to those who needed them, from which children had to suck the thin coating of wax off before they would hold ink. As these routines came to an end, the children took out their scribblers and texts for the first lesson. The timetable, in later years by law posted in a prominent position in the classroom, dictated the regular pattern of the events of the day and of the week.

Whether pupils attended elementary school cheerfully, apprehensively or in a state of fear, the curriculum, the teaching methods and the pattern of school discipline combined to press them into a single mode of learning. Even those who then enjoyed it now recall a system that put its rigour into rote learning of the times tables, the spelling words, the "Lady of the Lake," the capes and bays, "the twelve adverbial modifiers (of

<sup>8</sup> See British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report*, 1943-44, p. B30; British Columbia, *Statutes*, 1944, c. 45.

<sup>9</sup> In 1930, 3.9 percent of Vancouver pupils had goiter. By 1936 this had declined to 1.1 percent. Vancouver School Board, *Report*, 1937, pp. 31-32.

place, or reason, of time . . . )” and the Kings and Queens. It was a system based on teachers talking and pupils listening, a system that discouraged independent thought, a system that provided no opportunity to be creative, a system that blamed rather than praised, a system that made no direct or purposeful effort to build a sense of self-worth.

Teachers taught groups of children rather than individual youngsters. Except for classes in which there was more than one grade and for the teaching of reading in the lower grades, the whole class usually constituted a single group. Primary reading groups went, in turn, to the front of the room where they sat on little chairs or on the floor in a semicircle in front of their teacher. After the teacher conducted a “phonics” drill, she introduced and drilled the new words. Then, in what was often the highlight of the day, the children each read a short segment of the day’s story. “I enjoyed it when it was my turn to read,” recalls one; another explains that the dull repetition didn’t matter at all because “learning to read was such a fabulous thing.” While one reading group was at the front with the teacher, the other two or three did seat work at their desks. (One page of an unlined scribbler, completed in 1933, shows, in its owner’s printing, “the cat sits on the rug,” “the rug is by the fire,” “the fire is warm,” followed by a coloured drawing of a cat, a fire and a rug.) Some primary classes had library corners or “interest centres” or sand tables to which the children who had finished their seat work could go. Others had a dress-up box or store where children quietly practised using money made from cardboard circles or milk bottle tops.

Although the tone varied a great deal from room to room, the methods of teaching the whole class were remarkably consistent from teacher to teacher and subject to subject. Teachers began each lesson by reviewing what they had taught in the previous one. Often they worked — or had a pupil come up and work — an example on the blackboard. Then they went over, item by item, the exercise that was to have given practice in what had been taught. In arithmetic, language, spelling and grammar classes a number of boys and girls would move up to the blackboard to work a question from the exercise or spell one or more words from the week’s list. The rest of the class was supposed to watch for mistakes. Teachers would move along the board, releasing those who had the correct answer or taking those in error through the question again. In reading lessons teachers reviewed by correcting questions, *always* answered in sentences (“that were never to start with ‘Because’, or ‘And’, or ‘But’”), that tested pupils’ comprehension of the story, or had pupils

read aloud dictionary definitions of the “new” words that they had copied into their exercise books. In arithmetic, teachers conducted individual or group drills of the number facts or the times tables (“What a proud thing it was” to come first in an arithmetic race.) In history, geography and home economics classes pupils raised their hands to answer questions based on yesterday’s “notes,” or identified the places pointed to on a wall map, or passed exercise books forward or back for classmates for marking to ensure that the correct word had been placed in a “blank” in a paragraph, copied from the blackboard, that had summarized a section of the textbook.

When teachers decided that most of the class were ready for the next segment of the subject, they instructed the pupils to put down their pens, pencils and rulers, place their hands on their desks or behind their backs and “sit up straight and face the front.” With all eyes thus on the blackboard, teachers then demonstrated, sometimes through question-and-answer, the letter for handwriting, the syllables in, or the pronunciation of, the new spelling words, or took the pupils a further step in the language, arithmetic or grammar sequence. Again, some pupils would move eagerly and more would move reluctantly to work examples on the blackboard, or teachers would lead the class in chanting a “drill” of the spelling, or the times tables, or the number facts, or the capitals of the provinces. In reading, history, geography and science lessons, the pupils often read, in sequence, from textbooks. Some teachers conducted this reading in a regular and predictable pattern, up one row and down the next. Others, to keep the pupils alert, “called out our names at random and we would respond immediately.” In some classes, children were allowed to volunteer to read. Those who read well read long bits and those who read badly short ones. (“I could read with ‘expression,’ — but sometimes would say the wrong word, and would be embarrassed.”) Some teachers passed over the really poor readers altogether or had them read while the class did seat work. Some teachers or schools required pupils to stand by their desks or even at the front as they read or when they answered questions — a requirement that produced a certain clatter as they raised and lowered the seats of their desks and occasionally knocked pencils and books off their desks as they moved into the aisle. Teachers broke into the sequence to read themselves, to thrust a question at wandering minds or to explicate some point in the text. Most pupils found these sessions boring. Wool-gathering was common. Those who read well had long since read ahead and mastered the content. Those who did not worried

only about getting through their own portion. Some doubted that the period would ever come to an end.

Teachers occasionally varied this routine in science classes by performing experiments for their pupils. As they did so, they laid out what they were doing step by step on the blackboard according to a precisely prescribed form that called for tackling a "problem" through a sequence that led from a "plan" through "apparatus and materials," "method," "observations," to a "conclusion" sometimes written out even before the experiment was begun.<sup>10</sup> Similar presentations characterized the introduction of something new in manual arts, manual training and home economics.

Teachers closed the oral part of lessons with an explanation of the seat work which was to follow. In the upper grades, teachers often assigned exercises laid out in the prescribed texts to be completed in lined exercise books. Most "scribblers," as they were called, had solid-coloured covers made of heavier, shiny paper. In most classrooms pupils were expected to provide a scribbler for each subject. In some primary classes pupils used exercise books made of newsprint on which the children could only use pencils, which tore easily and which were hard to erase. Admonished to "keep between the lines," pupils wrote a couple of rows of "ovals," and other practice elements in writing, some rows of the letter in capital and then lower case form, and a list of words in which the letter appeared. In the rooms of teachers who were writing "purists," pupils had to use H. B. MacLean's "whole arm" or "muscular movement" method of handwriting.<sup>11</sup> They wrote a sentence to illustrate each of the spelling words or "syllabicated" the list. They worked many arithmetic questions that employed the new skill or wrote out and "diagrammed" sentences in ways that showed understanding of the newest wrinkle in usage or parsing form. They wrote out dictated drills in arithmetic and spelling. They wrote friendly letters, business letters and thank you notes. They wrote short essays ("Study pages 94, 95, 96, 97, 98 and the first paragraph on page 99 and write . . . a full account of Edward the III's reign . . .").

<sup>10</sup> See George H. Limpus and John W. B. Shore, *Elementary General Science* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1935), pp. 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> H. B. MacLean, *The MacLean Method of Writing: Teachers' Complete Manual: A Complete Course of Instruction in the Technique and Pedagogy of the MacLean Method of Writing for Teachers of Elementary Schools, Junior and Senior High Schools, Commercial Schools, and Normal Schools* (Vancouver: Clarke & Stuart, 1921). The note at the foot of the title page of the 31st edition says that it is authorized for use in British Columbia, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland.

Much seat work in science, history, geography, health and even home economics consisted of copying notes from the blackboard. In the upper grades these notes were characterized by systems of headings, sub-headings, sub-sub-headings and the like. Those whose older brothers or sisters had preceded them in the classroom soon discovered that some teachers used the same notes year after year. Often these notes were so copious — “reams and reams” of them covering board after board — that pupils groaned inwardly and sometimes outwardly at the sight of them, and even the recollection of them can still create a sinking feeling in some stomachs. One teacher “covered the blackboard with notes and that’s how we learned English.” Teachers often left blanks in the notes that pupils were to fill in by referring to the textbook. The straight pens with steel nibs that had to be dipped frequently in the ink well and which often blotted added a further arduous dimension to the task, especially for those whose motor co-ordination was not very good, who were left-handed, or whose teachers insisted on “muscular movement.”

Pupils freed themselves from the bonds of this routine as best as they could. Some learned to talk to neighbours in such a way that they were rarely seen or heard or to throw balls or wads of paper when the teacher was not looking. Some “mastered the skill of copying . . . without ever needing to comprehend” and were thus able “to dream outdoor matters while rarely missing a word.” Others travelled to the pencil sharpener as frequently as they felt they could get away with the practice. This activity was especially popular in classrooms where the sharpener was on the bookcase under a window; then one “could have a look out of the window.”

Pupils also welcomed such changes in routine as those which came in health classes when they were asked to copy diagrams and in geography when they sketched or traced maps (sometimes against the classroom window), recorded the names of mountains, rivers and cities from a blackboard list, and then coloured these maps. Occasionally pupils did history or geography “projects” on such topics as British Columbia, or totem poles, or logging, or “our new allies, the Russians.” Some recall that they occasionally made models, such as a fort in history class, using plasticine and card paper. Most recall that they made butter in grade 1 or 2. (“We each took a turn shaking.”)

While the pupils worked, some teachers moved about the room correcting questions, checking on the neatness of the work and adding to explanations. In primary classes they awarded gold, blue and red stars or

coloured stickers to those whose work reached a high standard. Other teachers increased the store of notes on the blackboard, erasing and adding new material to one panel after the other — sometimes more quickly than some pupils could copy — in what in many rooms became an endless sequence. Still others sat at or on their desks or watched the children from a favourite standing place by the window. All regularly surveyed the class to ensure that heads were down, that no whispered conversations took place and that no notes were passed. They acknowledged the hands that were raised, answered questions or permitted pupils to go to the pencil sharpener or the lavatory, one child at a time. As the period drew to a close, some teachers summarized the main points that they had tried to make in the lesson. They reminded the pupils of what was to be finished before the next period, they assigned even more material for homework or they dispatched monitors to collect exercise books for marking. Over the course of the day, and especially in the lower grades, teachers collected many piles of scribbles.

Music, art, industrial arts, home economics and physical education had welcome or unwelcome characteristics that made them somewhat different from the other subjects. First, children generally found their classes in these subjects somewhat livelier than the others. Second, they often brought their competence to the classroom rather than learning it there. Finally, their competence, or lack of it, often made the children look upon them as either high or low points in the weekly routine. Aside from a small amount of what was called “music appreciation” — that is, listening to a classical piece played by teacher or pupils or on a recording or school broadcast — most school music consisted of singing. Classes began with vocal exercises using the tonic sol fah scale, often displayed on such commercially produced cards as “Curwen’s Modulator.” Taking their cue from the piano or tuning fork, the children moved first up the scale — “doh, ray, me, fah, soh, lah, te, doh” — and then down it again. Next the teacher took the pupils through parts of it: “doh, ray, me, ray, doh.” Sometimes the teacher would have the children run through their songs in this form first, before teaching the words. In many classrooms pupils then sang such “ridiculous songs” as “Hearts of Oak” and “Early One Morning” from Sir Ernest MacMillan’s inaccurately titled *A Canadian Song Book*.<sup>12</sup> Some teachers could make this bill-of-fare enjoyable. “We had a good music program, with lots of British songs,” one person recalls.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Ernest MacMillan, ed., *A Canadian Song Book* (Toronto: Dent, 1937). The first edition of this text appeared in 1928.

Another remembers that her music teacher made it "so enjoyable we really wanted to sing for him." In many schools teachers sorted out the best singers to prepare, some thought endlessly, for the annual music festival. Many who took part in the festival remember it as one of the really great days in the school year; we "got at a minimum a complete day off!" Others, especially self-styled "crows," did not enjoy music very much but only really disliked it when they were asked to sing alone. One or two teachers apparently punished misbehaviour in the music classroom by requiring the guilty to sing solos to their classmates.

In physical education teachers concentrated on those who already could perform well. They paid less attention to basic skills than they did in reading and arithmetic. If the facilities were available and their parents had provided the strip, pupils changed into white shirts, blue shorts for boys, tunics and bloomers for girls, and running shoes. If the class was conducted on a hardwood floor in a gymnasium or school auditorium the school would insist on rubber-soled shoes as the minimum acceptable strip. The class would line up in rows or teams and the teacher would take them through such exercises as touching toes or astride jumping of the sort originally laid out in the Strathcona Trust *Syllabus*.<sup>13</sup> Next the teacher would take the class through some activities that practised skills related to whatever sport was emphasized at the moment. In softball season, for example, pupils tossed balls back and forth and practised batting and bunting, and teachers batted "grounders" out to be retrieved. The period then culminated in the playing of one or more games of softball. In some classes teams would be picked to last over the season; in others the best players were picked as captains each day and, as captains selected their teams, the children received a finely honed demonstration of exactly how their peers evaluated their compe-

<sup>13</sup> Strathcona Trust, *Syllabus of Physical Exercises for Schools* (Toronto: Executive Council, Strathcona Trust, 1911). This was the first edition of the Canadian version of this British manual. In the 1960s Lorne Brown recalled that he had been taught at the Vancouver Normal School in the 1920s to take his pupils through a calisthenics sequence which he had memorized as IT AB LAB:

I — for introductory activity

T — for trunk exercise

A — for arm exercises

B — for balance activity

L — for lateral trunk exercise

A — for activity; usually a form of relay

B — for breathing

Lorne E. Brown, "Personal Reflections — Physical Education in B.C. . . . 1927 to 1967," unpublished paper, n.d. (1967?).

tence. Those who were picked towards the end still recall the self-contempt this system engendered. Sometimes, however, even the incompetent were lucky. One less-than-athletic student still has a "vivid recollection of when I was on third base and just reached out and caught the ball; what a fabulous feeling it was, just to catch a ball."

Since the subject had neither a text nor a festival to ensure consistency, art programs in these years differed more than most subjects from teacher to teacher and from school to school. Recollections of art in the primary grades, often supported by artifacts, focus on craft activities, especially those involving making such things as woven place mats, book marks and pen wipers out of burlap. Intermediate grade pupils also sewed burlap, measured, folded and pasted cardboard and sometimes made things out of soft wood. In art, as contrasted to "manual arts" classes, pupils sketched still lifes, copied drawings illustrating perspective, made designs that "always involved a ruler" and did a variety of paintings. Tasks tended to be specific; there was "no free-lancing at all." In painting many recall a misordered sequence that began with water colours — in their "little Reeves tins" — in the early grades and only permitted the most senior and capable to work with the easier-to-use poster paints. Some had art teachers who made the subject really exciting for the pupils; we did "all kinds of sketching, water colours, poster paints; we put up big displays at one end of the school ground on sports day for our parents to see the work."

Most former pupils recall their home economics and manual training classes with pleasure. While they may not always have enjoyed these subjects, only really nasty teachers could make them actively dislike them. Those who had some practical bent often looked on them as the high point of the week and remain grateful for what they were taught. ("She was fussy, and taught me to be fussy.") Girls who had already learned some cooking or sewing at home sometimes became impatient at the slow pace of their classes, but they also enjoyed the annual tea or "parade of fashion" at which they showed off their skills to their mothers. In industrial arts, one less-than-handly lad remembers that "you got to make the occasional simple object that had a use. . . . So we did pencil boxes, simple stands for mom's flower pots, some sort of wall bracket, etc. I remember spending five or six months alone remaking the lid to my pencil box until I managed one that fit snugly. Meanwhile more adept pupils finished small end tables in time for Mother's Day."

Beginning in the mid-1920s, Vancouver made traditional practices

more efficient by "platooning" some of its schools.<sup>14</sup> In platooned, or "departmentalized," schools pupils moved from room to room, some of which had special equipment, to visit specialist teachers, many of whom had some extra training leading to a provincial "specialist" certificate. Others seem to have "specialized" in what they were good at doing or teaching, what they enjoyed teaching or what the principal assigned to them. Platooning also had its special set of routines. On the bell, or in those rooms in which the teacher regularly said, "The bell is for me, not for you," on his or her signal, the pupils would gather up their materials. The children then lined up in pairs to move from room to room. Although officially forbidden to talk in the corridors, most pupils looked upon moves as pleasant breaks in the day. However, those moving to the rooms of the vicious fretted at what was ahead and those leaving them were sometimes giddy with relief at having survived another day in their presence.

Friday brought some variation in school routines. Pupils did the final draft of the week's writing exercise in their "compendiums." In spelling and other subjects the teacher dictated the weekly test, which the children wrote out on thin strips of foolscap. Some teachers then "read out the results of these weekly and other tests so all would know who came first and last." The tests might be followed by spelling bees or games such as arithmetic baseball. For some children Friday afternoon brought a relaxation in the rigidity of the week's work. Teachers read stories or perhaps a chapter from a novel by Walter Scott or Charles Dickens — sessions recalled with special warmth. In many schools pupil officers conducted the weekly meeting of the Junior Red Cross.<sup>15</sup> In others older pupils dispersed to a range of "clubs" for the last period of the day.

Many schools also marked the end of the week with a school assembly. After the pupils had filed, class by class, to their appropriate place in the school hallway, on the gymnasium floor, or into auditorium chairs, the principal or music teacher led the school in "O Canada." (For many

<sup>14</sup> Lord Tennyson School pioneered platooning in 1924. By 1938 all elementary schools employed some form of specialist teaching. Vancouver School Board, *Report*, 1925, pp. 11-12; *ibid.*, 1937-38, pp. 64-65. The origins of platooning are described in Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces That Have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 128-36.

<sup>15</sup> A "demonstration" Junior Red Cross meeting conducted by a class at Tecumseh School in May 1936 is described in "Practical Citizenship," *B.C. Teacher* (June 1936), pp. 17-19. By 1945-46, 253 Vancouver elementary classes had Junior Red Cross branches. British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report*, 1945-46, p. MM 77.

years Vancouver schools used the Laurence Buchan version, in which they pledged to be "At Britain's side whate'er betide."<sup>16</sup> Two or three classes then presented items that they had prepared: a song that they would later sing in the music festival, a play taken from a reader or some acrobatics learned in physical education. Sometimes assembly programs drew attention to talented individuals who would play or sing a classical piece or perform a dance. Classes which had had the best turnout or parents at the last Parent-Teacher Association received a banner. During the Second World War the principal or a visitor would honour the classes which had bought the most war savings stamps or collected the most metal or paper for the regular salvage drives. Sometimes Henry MacLean himself would demonstrate fine handwriting, do some magical tricks and present MacLean's writing certificates to those whose writing came up to standard. ("Getting a MacLean's . . . certificate was a big deal!") In some schools the pupils would all join together to sing a hymn, a patriotic song, a Christmas carol or a round such as "Row, row, row. . . ." In nearly every school the penultimate item on the program was the principal's message: he — or, in a very few high schools, she — usually addressed some problem of school or community governance.<sup>17</sup> The principal explained that some pupils were "hanging around" too long after school, or that there was too much talking in the halls, or that there was too much fighting to and from schools, or that the police were about to crack down on those who rode their bicycles on the sidewalk or who had not renewed their bicycle licences.<sup>18</sup> Finally the children all stood to sing "God Save the King" and then marched back to their classrooms.

Some events broke irregularly into class and school routines. Pupils enjoyed those occasions when the teacher wandered or was drawn from the subject into discussion. "The room hushed" because pupils did not want to break the thread. Some teachers told war stories or recounted

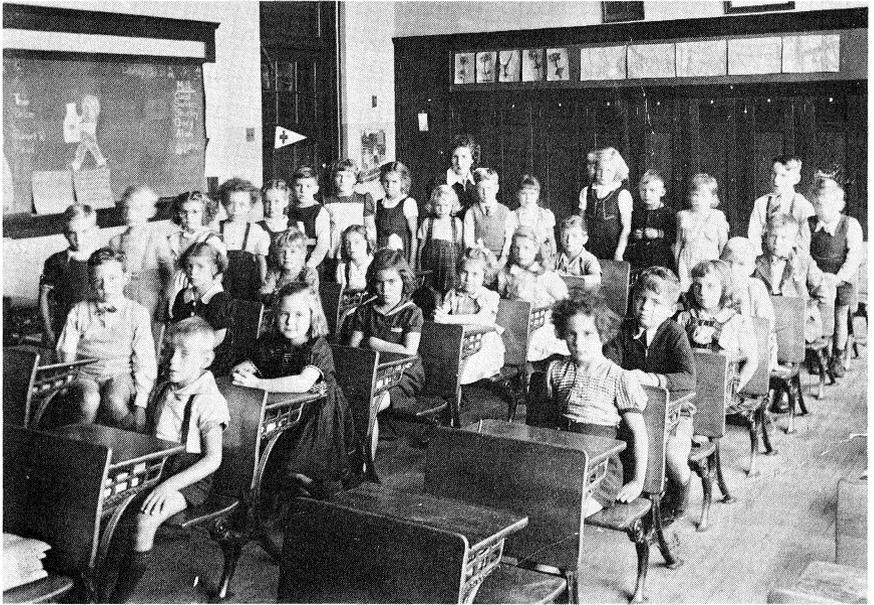
<sup>16</sup> In some schools the Buchan version was pasted onto the inside cover of the Mac-Millan *Song Book*.

<sup>17</sup> In the 1920s one woman in Vancouver, one woman in Point Grey and nine women in South Vancouver held school principalships for one or more years. By the school year 1930-31 only one woman — a former South Vancouver principal — still held the role. After Miss E. M. Dickson retired in 1934, all forty-nine Vancouver elementary schools had male principals. British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report*, 1935-36, pp. H165-H182.

<sup>18</sup> A junior high school annual of the era, however, notes that at the school assembly the student chairman always called on the principal, P. N. Whitley, "for some of his brief remarks. These may be in the nature of admonition, commendation, but rarely condemnation." Vancouver, Point Grey Junior High School, *The Explorer*, 1942, n.p.



*Lord Tennyson School, Division 3, ca. 1923*



*Cecil Rhodes School, 1949, Grade 1*

personal adventures. Others talked about their families; one told "about all the people in her family who had t.b., and how terrible it was." All pupils spent part of a day early in September carefully covering their textbooks with covers provided by the Royal Bank, on the back of one edition being the verse: "Lay this to heart among your rules: — / Wisely I'll save and wisely spend; / Make pennies, dimes and nickels tools / That fashion fortune in the end." Especially deft and well-behaved girls in the upper grades finished their own covers and moved on to a primary classroom to help out the children there.

During outbreaks of such infectious diseases as measles, chicken pox, mumps and scarlet fever, or during the seasonal visit of lice, the school nurse would inspect each of the pupils. Sometimes the teacher, principal or nurse would warn children about men hanging around the school grounds, admonishing them to go directly home after school and not talk to any strangers on the way. At other times individual children would be called out of class to visit the nurse, the school doctor or the school dentist or to attend a toxoid or vaccination clinic. Pupils particularly welcomed fire drills. They enjoyed not only the events themselves but also preparing for the music festival, for the Christmas concert, for maypole dancing on May Day, for a tea or fashion show in home economics, for a production of a play or operetta and for sports day. Those who attended one elementary school in the 1930s remember the delight they took in their production of "The Mikado."

Occasionally events outside of the school impinged on what went on in it. Influenza closed the schools for some weeks in 1918, and a fuel shortage did so in 1943. One interviewee recalls forming up to see the Prince of Wales in 1919 and giving him a cheer when he gave them the day off.<sup>19</sup> Another remembers being urged to listen to the coronation of George VI on the radio and making in class a little crown to wear while doing so.<sup>20</sup> More remember the royal visit of 1939. Some made scrapbooks of it in their classes or learned to sing "Land of Hope and Glory." All classes went out to watch, with great excitement, "as they whisked by" on their drives about the city.<sup>21</sup> During the Second World War pupils

<sup>19</sup> See *Vancouver Province*, 22 September 1919, for the role children played in this visit.

<sup>20</sup> "On May 11th, 1937, every school in the city entered wholeheartedly into the observance of the crowning of H.M. King George VI and H.M. Queen Elizabeth, and many fine programs were given." Vancouver School Board, *Report*, 1937, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> The routes, with each school's place along them, are laid out in *Vancouver Sun*, 25 May 1939, p. 3.

knitted for the Red Cross and bought war savings stamps. In some schools that early casualty among the elements of the "new" education, the school garden, reappeared for a time as the "victory garden." "We planted things that grew quickly"; pupils were supposed to persuade their parents to plant such gardens at home. Some school gardens had short-term and long-term effects. "I persuaded my parents to plant potatoes in our yard; to this day my hobby is vegetable gardening." On a more serious and more frightening note, pupils practised what they would do in an air raid; in one school they went to the school basement, in another they filed out into the playground, where "the principal blew a whistle and we would all fall down." In another the principal gave a vivid description of just how bombers would destroy Vancouver in air raids. In a fourth the janitor added to the fear occasioned by a Japanese submarine shelling the lighthouse at Estevan Point, in June 1942, by telling the children it was "the beginning of the end."<sup>22</sup>

## II

The ways in which pupils and teachers behaved toward each other were what bound them and the curriculum together to make a school. Thus recollections of what was taught, how it was taught and who taught it lead naturally into an elaboration of what is implicit therein about how elementary schools controlled their pupils and how the pupils responded to that control. First, an overall observation. Discussions of "fair" and "unfair," usually initiated by interviewees, often burn through with an intensity that belies the fact that the events discussed took place not the day before but sometimes four or more decades ago. One teacher "was very annoyed and took four of us into the cloakroom where she used the ruler on our knuckles. It was grossly unfair: she had watched a note go through the four people before she intervened." Another marked a set of tests without noting anything on the papers, returned them to the children to mark their own, asked the youngsters to call out their marks and then excoriated those who had yielded to the temptation to pad. Another, who believes that corporal punishment is a "beneficial" device and that schools would be better places if strapping were restored, "to this very day feels wrongly punished" on two out of the three occasions he was

<sup>22</sup> The minutes of a staff meeting held at Charles Dickens School on 5 October 1942, note "Re Air Raids (1st) If there is time — Send class home. (2nd) If there is only a little time, send pupils to the basement. (3rd) If there is no time, pupils and teachers under their desks. N.B. If you hear any anti-air craft fire, there is no time to go home."

strapped. In this context one must note that children of these years seem to have been predisposed to accept the consequences of just about any code of conduct so long as the school administered it fairly.

People's recollections of their teachers divide into four rough categories. Many children could classify some teachers even before they went to school; the rest quickly learned the process. They gave — and as adults generally continue to give — their highest rating to those teachers who emphasized the fundamentals, who drilled frequently and tested often, who concentrated on having their pupils learn those things that both community and educational tradition told them were the “core” curriculum. These teachers knew their business and they taught this curriculum thoroughly and systematically. “Good” teachers also taught this curriculum in a particular way. They had dominant, overpowering personalities. They conveyed a sense that what they did, and what they wanted their pupils to do, was of immense importance. They were sometimes harsh, severe, humourless and frightening. They sometimes yelled at their pupils. They ran “no nonsense” classrooms in which routines were all-pervasive and cast in a code that itemized many “thou shalt nots.” Some pupils also knew that these were good teachers because “you KNEW you’d learned a thing. The evidence was there because you could REPEAT the learning accurately — even years later.” Good teachers, however, were also fair teachers. They dispensed their rebukes, their detentions, even their whacks with a ruler or more severe forms of corporal punishment rarely, in an even-handed way and in strict accordance with the rules. It was appropriate, it was fair, for these teachers to give special attention to the best pupils — to those who learned the rote packages, obeyed the rules meticulously and did everything neatly — so long as these children did not receive blatant favouritism. Good teachers did not pick on children unfairly. In this regard, pupils believed it was “fair” for teachers to ride herd on those who did not do their homework or who were often unruly, and even on those who were not very bright, so long as the teachers did so without malice and so long as the breach in the rules was evident to all.

A much larger group of teachers were “nice.” Such teachers are remembered less sharply, less vividly than the others; recollections of them tend to be enveloped in a pleasant haze. One was “always warm and friendly”; another was a “lovely person, an excellent teacher”; a third was “a very quiet man; we kids thought he was really nice”; a fourth was “a very kind man, the first one who really challenged us; he

made you think about things." A principal of the 1930s is remembered as "not at all a fearsome man; he was very gentle, and had the children's respect." Such people apparently taught well and easily; they mothered or fathered their charges without all the elaborate apparatus that characterized the classroom of the "best" teachers. They did, however, use a pedagogy almost identical to that of their more overbearing colleagues. Although few people remember them in this way, I hypothesize that they were probably as effective in carrying out the bread-and-butter tasks of teaching as were their more famous and martinet-like colleagues. (One former pupil, however, argues that, in contrast to the efforts of the "good" teacher, what the "nice" teacher taught didn't seem to have the same mental precision or self-evident value and worthiness as the product of the "good" teacher's teaching.)

If the above are memory's satisfactory elementary teachers, two other sorts also stand out. One was made up of teachers and principals who were mean, nasty, sarcastic, cruel or even vicious. They constantly put their pupils down. One recalls a teacher who called her, alternatively, "Dummy" and "Fatty"; and another who described her classmate as a "filthy little pig" because she ate garlic. There was also Miss W, who "smiled when you stumbled, and then waited for the moment to pin the truth on you," Miss X who announced that she was "sick and tired of calling out 'foreign' names," Miss Y who mocked those who stuttered until they cried, and Mr. Z, a principal who "ruled by fear . . . ; the whole place cringed while he was around." On the really dark side there were, as well, the principal who fondled girls and the school physician who sexually assaulted some of the boys. Such teachers usually employed a pedagogy that was not very different from other teachers. They differed from their colleagues mostly in that, instead of being respected or liked by their pupils, they were feared and hated. Only in retrospect did these people achieve a dubious sort of merit; some former pupils gradually came to look upon the fact that they had "survived" these teachers as evidence that they had in their classes taken a major step towards adulthood.

Finally, pupils looked on a few teachers with contempt. These unfortunates displayed their ineffectiveness or their incompetence in a variety of ways. They could not explain things clearly. The oral parts of their lessons rambled, their notes were incoherent. They could not keep order; they sometimes broke down and wept. Some tried to bribe the children to behave with candy or even money. While most disappeared in a year or

less, a few persisted to become almost legendary objects to be scorned by class after class of pupils. Whether they stayed or left, they received no compassion or mercy from either pupils or parents.

Two main themes characterized overall school discipline in this era. The first and dominant mode was that imposed by the school. It displayed itself in a continuum that at one end had the presence, the personality, the aura of the teachers and the principal and at the other, the strap and expulsion. School staffs held back the latent barbarism they perceived in the children with an increasingly severe range of sanctions that began with displeasure and ended with corporal punishment. Teachers and parents justified this range of measures by appealing to a very long-standing tradition; to the proverbial "Spare the rod and spoil the child." The second mode saw some schools introducing a range of practices through which the children were to learn what was sometimes called democratic self-control. Through a system of door, stair, hall, playground and other monitors, the older and abler in fact enlisted with teachers and principals in the task of teaching and maintaining appropriate standards, especially among the younger children.<sup>23</sup> Thus democratic self-control was tightly circumscribed by traditional disciplinary means which were brought in these years to a peak of effective performance.

The presence of the seasoned teacher was clearly the first line of defence against barbarism. Teachers had presence; pupils and their parents expected them to possess it. Teachers with this quality said, "Do this," and the children did it. All but ineffectual teachers exerted their personalities with more or less intensity on their pupils and expected, and received, a reasonably automatic compliance with their directions. Even those who created a loving atmosphere in their classrooms did so in this broader context. The woman who now recalls, "I knew who the teacher was and did as I was told," speaks for her classmates as well as herself. Presence surely came with experience, but neophytes set out, self-con-

<sup>23</sup> A student at Point Grey Junior High School put the case for student government in the school annual very well: "Citizens of Canada should practise the principles of democracy. It is wise to start early. Is the Student Government of our school of value to us? Yes! It is a great help. It teaches us the laws of democracy easily and thoroughly. Everyone has the opportunity to express his opinions freely. What more can a student ask! As the years go by, this practice of democracy learned in school becomes more valuable to the citizen. There may be a student here who will become a member of parliament. There are others who will fill important public offices. As citizens we will help to elect the members of parliament. Each student should be thankful for the opportunities given him at school, and should make use of these opportunities to improve his school and later his country." Vancouver, Point Grey Junior High School, *The Explorer*, 1940, p. 38.

sciously, to acquire it. Eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds stare at us from Normal School annuals of these years with an intensity that makes them look older, more severe, and altogether more formidable than the twenty-two or twenty-three-year-old beginning teachers of the 1980s.<sup>24</sup>

Teachers backed up their demands that pupils meet certain standards of behaviour and work habits with an armoury of sanctions. They gave children “the ray.” They gave them the cutting edge of their tongues; they spoke sharply, they made nasty and sometimes sarcastic remarks, they spoke more and more softly, coldly, ominously; they shouted and even raged against their charges. (“She really lambasted us; she had a short fuse”; “I recall his scarlet face and his ferocious temper.”) Many maintained full control solely through verbal means. Others made children sit or stand in a corner, or even on the floor under the sand-table; they kept children in at recess, at lunch hour and after school. One person recalls being kept in after school, asking to leave the room, being refused, and then wetting his pants. “I stayed away for three days.” Teachers made pupils sit up straight, motionless, with hands behind their backs, for periods of time up to half an hour. They forced chewers to put their gum on the ends of their noses or behind their ears. They gave extra work of an excruciatingly boring and valueless sort, such as eight or nine digit long division questions and their proofs, the writing of lines — some wrote such things as “I will not chew gum,” or “Silence is golden,” five hundred to a thousand times —, the copying of pages out of textbooks or dictionaries, and the memorization of poems (“Mr. X gave me two weeks to memorize all . . . of Poe’s ‘The Raven’ or be strapped by the principal”) and assigned those classroom and school chores not popular with “monitors” such as picking up paper and other garbage in the school and on its grounds. They sent miscreants to school detention halls, where the duty teacher or vice-principal imposed sanctions, often with great severity of tone. Some teachers and schools kept elaborate systems of “demerit” records, through which offending pupils progressed through an increasingly severe range of sanctions. Fewer schools and teachers employed the opposite of this system by giving out merit points for good behaviour and providing minor rewards — such as being dismissed first — to those pupils or rows of pupils which collected the most points.

<sup>24</sup> John Calam drew my attention to what old annuals and class photographs tell us about the determined maturity of beginning teachers of earlier eras. Perhaps this characteristic reinforced the view of pupils that all their teachers “were as old as the hills.” One, recalling a teacher of the 1930s who “wore her hair in a bun and had dark clothes,” was really surprised when she read that this teacher had just retired.

Teachers and principals kept corporal punishment as their ultimate sanction short of expulsion. Classroom teachers often employed less formal — and unlawful — sorts of physical punishment. Former pupils recall teachers who spanked youngsters on the bottom or slapped them on the hands or about the shoulders and, occasionally, on the face. Other teachers pinched the upper arm or the earlobe or hit victims on the top of the head with tightened knuckles. Still others used pointers, rulers, chalk brushes, gym shoes or other bits of school equipment to hit children on their bottoms, hands, knuckles, shoulders, elbows — especially on the “funnybone” — and, rarely, heads. A somewhat fondly remembered grade 1 teacher, who enrolled forty-six pupils in the year recalled, “stepped on their toes as she hit them with a ruler.” A few, carried by temper almost beyond control, sometimes dragged children from their desks to shake them, to bang them against walls or even to manhandle them out of the classroom. Unlike the cold formality that so often characterized corporal punishment by a principal, classroom teachers sometimes struck out in a high pitch of unleashed emotion. A few teachers tried to be light-hearted, even affectionate, in their physical punishment. On these occasions the ritualized rules of the “game,” especially as it was played between boys and men teachers and in such all-boy classes as those in physical education or industrial arts, required that the victim enter, however reluctantly, into the game-like spirit with which they tried to characterize these events. In the same jocular way, some teachers threw chalk, chalk brushes and even textbooks at their charges.

For really serious violations of class or school codes, children were sent to or summoned by the school principal. Pupils found these interviews with the principal to be extremely stressful occasions; some were tongue-tied into silence. Being strapped was not an inevitable product of a trip to the “office,” but it happened often enough for youngsters to be extremely wary of visiting there. Once a principal decided to strap a boy or, more rarely, a girl, he followed a routine — almost a ritual — laid down by the department of education.<sup>25</sup> The principal summoned a witness, explained the crime and punishment to the latter, positioned the subject carefully, administered the strokes and counted them out in a firm voice, and then recorded the event in a special book. Some princi-

<sup>25</sup> Corporal punishment was rooted in the Canadian Criminal Code. Statutes, precedents and reported cases are discussed in Peter Frank Bargen, *The Legal Status of the Canadian Public School Pupil* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 125-33; see also *Manual of the School Law and School Regulations of the Province of British Columbia* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1944), pp. 127-28.

pals removed their jackets and hung them up on a coat hanger. Others emphasized the formality of the occasion by buttoning their jackets. If there was more than one victim, those waiting their turn either watched or listened from just outside the door. The worst thing was when friends were there "because then you couldn't cry." One person, recalling his first four on each hand, says, "I couldn't understand the pain, it was so intense." Since principals used these events as much to deter as to punish, they often permitted the sounds to carry their warning through the school; the appearance back in the classroom of a red-eyed and red-handed victim quickly reinforced the message. A few even prolonged the misery by administering punishment over more than one session or by announcing it and then postponing its administration to noon hour or after school, or even to another day.

Although girls sometimes received corporal punishment of the informal classroom sort, they rarely took part in the ritual in the office. However, all were aware of its place in the school. Some of the older girls were perhaps thrilled by its happening to the boys. When one looks at this difference between the sexes more systematically, however, one sees that it appears to be the product of two sorts of influences. On the one hand, teachers seem to have demanded more docile conduct from girls than they did from boys. On the other, children themselves structured much of the different ways that boys and girls behaved. Most beginners of both sexes probably came to school disposed to conduct themselves appropriately. However, as they got to know other children, as they formed same-sex friendships, groups and gangs, as they integrated themselves into the playground pecking order, the sexes came to have different norms as to how they should behave toward each other and toward the school. These norms seem to have almost completely governed what happened to children between their homes and their classrooms. Further, they seem to have had more influence even inside classrooms than many teachers were aware.<sup>26</sup>

If parents and teachers often justified stern discipline and corporal punishment by appealing to proverbial wisdom, their approach was also deeply rooted in fear. On the one hand, they feared that without severe sanctions, family, classroom, school and society would quickly descend into disorder and even barbarism; on the other hand they feared for the

<sup>26</sup> In another phase of the work of the Canadian Childhood History Project I am looking at the "culture of childhood" and how it structured much of the lives of children.

future of the unchastened. Many still believed that the "old Adam" was very close to the surface in boys and especially in early adolescence. In the eight-grade elementary school some teachers in the upper couple of grades seem to have seen a barely suppressed violence in some of the boys; in responding to it savagely they perhaps transformed their own fears into realities. In turn, these violent episodes communicated such beliefs and fears to the younger pupils and gave them notions of a sort of behaviour that one day they might well perform. The school's informal communication system passed down and exaggerated stories of epic disciplinary events in the upper grades. These tales seem to have kept certain youngsters in a state of anticipatory tension over much of their school days "feeling that the certainty of it occurring to you was not only high, but pre-ordained." Many now recall the paradox in this system; it terrified the good children who only very occasionally got caught up in its machinery but gave those who were often punished and who "could take it" an heroic status among their peers. X, for example, was one of those boys "who was strapped two or three times a year." One day he kicked a football at a school window; "it took him three kicks to get it through the window. He just stayed there until the teacher came and took him away" for the usual punishment.

By the 1920s nearly all school-aged children in Vancouver spent at least a few years in school. Despite the general belief that they all would benefit from the experience, a few may actually have been worse off than their counterparts in earlier times. In the era before attendance laws were vigorously enforced, fractious boys — and, occasionally, girls — who fell behind because of large classes, poor teaching, irregular or poor attendance, or little or no disposition or perhaps ability to learn, dropped out of school and disappeared into the community. Now their parents or economic conditions or truant officers forced them to stay in school. Some may have benefited from the extended experience; others, no better taught or able to learn than their predecessors, were oppressed by it. Some withdrew entirely into themselves; they became those ciphers in class photographs whose names no one can now recall. Others, such as X above, found their outlet in being "tough." They moved along the very edge of forbidden practices and behaviours, they dominated the cloak-room and the boys' playground, they used bad language just at the edge of earshot of the teacher, they fought each other and they carried "roll-ings" or cigarettes in their pockets which they smoked just out of sight of the school. They quit school as soon as they were old enough to do so or when they received the school's ultimate sanction and were expelled.

Learning to survive was thus an important part of the hidden curriculum of the school. Its pupils had first of all to learn how to deal with their fears: their fear of the other children in their own class, their fear of the bigger children who might harass them to and from school or on the playground, their special fear of "tough" boys and girls, their fear of teachers and the principal, their fear of the strap. Most children obviously learned to manage, or at least to live with, their fears. It is important to note that those whom I interviewed reported that, overall, they enjoyed much of their school experience. ("I sure enjoyed my days at school, even if I wasn't good at it.") A few were less fortunate. What was school really like for those who decline to talk about it because they still do not want to conjure with memories they say are really unpleasant?

### III

According to Putman and Weir, the alternative to formal discipline was "the project method." They pointed out that it was paedagogically sound to select "big projects of study as cores of interest, from which the child's investigations radiate in [as] many directions as the spokes from a wheel." Thus older youngsters might investigate "the various factors that have built up the Okanagan fruit industry and describe the industry as it is now carried on" or younger children "might spend a whole term on a study of what the people of Vancouver eat and wear and where their food and clothing came from."<sup>27</sup>

Since Putman and Weir's recommendations were very much in the mainstream of then-current educational theory, British Columbia gradually put many of them into effect. In a series of what were really administrative reforms, the province standardized the curriculum and the time allotments for each subject, adopted the notion of the junior high school, eliminated high school entrance examinations, tightened standards for admission to the Normal schools and promoted school consolidations. After the Liberals won the provincial election of 1933, Weir became Minister of Education. In 1935 he embarked on a major revision of the curriculum. By 1937 his department produced a new course of study which was over 1,600 pages long. In the words of one of its chief architects, H. B. King, the philosophy characterizing this new curriculum "may be briefly expressed as the promotion of individual growth and

<sup>27</sup> *Survey of the School System*, pp. 118-21.

social adjustment through purposeful activity.”<sup>28</sup> The philosophy of the new education — now generally called progressive education — thus lay at the heart of the new program. Nonetheless, if my interviewees are to be believed, then all of the changes that took place in education outside of the classroom had very little effect on what went on behind its doors. The “good” teacher who “drills incessantly” kept Vancouver elementary schools in a torpid formal state for at least three decades after Putman and Weir made their report.

Why Canadian education had become formal lies outside of the scope of this paper.<sup>29</sup> What is of interest here is why formalism persisted and even extended its sway in Vancouver — and elsewhere in Canada — despite the fact that most theorists attacked it so vigorously and, indeed, its opponents had come to dominate the provincial department of education and the upper levels of the Vancouver school system.<sup>30</sup> A good part of the answer to this question lies within the school system itself. To introduce integrated learning of the sort and on the scale envisioned by Putman, Weir and King, schools must have appropriately educated and trained teachers and appropriately sized classes. In these years Vancouver met neither condition.

To organize “big projects of study” in such a way that the children’s “investigations” led to intellectual growth placed two demands on teachers. First, they themselves must have received the sort of education that showed them the connections between the different branches of knowledge; and second, they must have had the sort of professional training that taught them to structure activities through which children could come to see the connections. In fact, however, and as table 1 demonstrates, the vast majority of Vancouver’s elementary teachers had only high school level academic training. From the early 1920s onward, those with second-class certificates had their junior matriculation, and those

<sup>28</sup> British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report, 1939-40*, p. B32. For the Putman-Weir report and its results, see F. Henry Johnson, *A History of Public Education in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1964), ch. 7, 8 and 12 and Jean Mann, “G. M. Weir and H. B. King: Progressive Education or Education for the Progressive State?”, in J. Donald Wilson and David C. Jones, eds., *Schooling and Society in Twentieth Century British Columbia* (Calgary: Detselig, 1980), ch. 4.

<sup>29</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of this question, see George S. Tomkins, *A Common Countenance: Stability and Change in the Canadian Curriculum* (Toronto: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

<sup>30</sup> Robert Patterson clearly shows that the Vancouver experience was representative of the situation in other parts of Canada. See his unpublished paper, “Progressive Education: The Experience of English-Speaking Canadians, 1930-1945.”

TABLE 1

*Qualifications of Elementary School Teachers and Principals in  
Vancouver, South Vancouver and Point Grey in  
1924-25, 1934-35, 1944-45 and 1957-58*

<i>Qualifications</i>	<i>1924-25</i>	<i>1934-35</i>	<i>1944-45</i>	<i>1957-58<sup>1</sup></i>
Academic Certificate	106	99	138	
First Class Certificate	260	377	424	} Over 60 percent
Second Class Certificate	370	219	103	
Third Class Certificate	21	13	6	
Others Enrolling Classes	6	6	10	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>763</b>	<b>714</b>	<b>681</b>	

<sup>1</sup> Changes in the way that the data was reported make it impossible to make exact comparisons of the 1950s with earlier years. However, of the 2,606 elementary school teachers and principals in school districts of over 100,000 people — thus including Vancouver — about 60 percent, or 1,551, had either one or two years of education and training past grade 12. Since many of those with higher qualifications were principals, one can still say that the substantial majority of elementary teachers had an education and training very similar to their earlier counterparts. British Columbia, *Report of the Royal Commission*, p. 192.

Compiled from data in British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report*, 1924-25, pp. M32-M48, M68-M70, M76-M83; *ibid.*, 1934-35, pp. S43-S59; *ibid.*, 1944-45, pp. Y-210-Y227.

with first-class certificates their senior matriculation. Although the latter had taken what purported to be the equivalent of a first year of Arts, most had done so in a high school, with their high school teachers merely extending on the sort of knowledge they had taught them in the years up to junior matriculation. Few if any Vancouver or other Canadian high schools, whose classroom life Robert Stamp has characterized as “circumscribed by a prescribed curriculum of traditional subjects, authorized textbooks, deductive reading, and external examinations,” taught even their best students a modicum of the sort of independent thought that is

a prime product of a liberal education.<sup>31</sup> At best, students came to “love” one or more of their subjects. That love, however, did not include any independent or systematic way of extending their competence in these subjects. Nor, to use modern jargon, did it give them any sense of their disciplinary “structures.” “I didn’t think a thought in the whole of school,” recalls one student with an excellent academic record; “I just regurgitated.”

In addition to their junior or senior “Matric,” elementary teachers had one year of Normal school which they may have taken in two or three segments spread over a number of years or, after 1922, in a single nine-month term.<sup>32</sup> The first task of the Normal school was to ensure that its students knew what they were going to teach; that their spelling, handwriting, grammar, arithmetic skills, and so on, were up to the grade 8 level. Its next task was to initiate its students in practices that would enable them to teach these subjects first in a multi-graded rural classroom and then in a graded consolidated or urban school. Thus training for much of the new as well as the traditional education was limited and perfunctory. Nonetheless, the time spent in an environment in which a discussion of teaching dominated both formal and informal discourse probably helped well-disposed young people to make the transition from one role to another in the highly structured system.<sup>33</sup>

In their practice teaching and in their early years in the profession these young people naturally modelled themselves on the best practitioners who had taught them and on the best they saw in their schools; they became proficient at their craft by doing it in the way it had been done to them. Most modelled themselves on those teachers, described above, who emphasized the fundamentals and rigorous discipline in equal measure. Most forged themselves in the crucible of the one-roomed rural school. Hard work, dedication and concern for their pupils clearly characterized most of the products of such training and early experience. Although many undoubtedly had the ability, very few had the training to

<sup>31</sup> Robert M. Stamp, “Canadian High Schools in the 1920’s and 1930’s: The Social Challenge to the Academic Tradition,” Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers*, 1978, p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Public Education in British Columbia*, pp. 86, 210; for an analysis and an evaluation of the Normal schools, see John Calam, “Teaching the Teachers: Establishment and Early Years of the B.C. Provincial Normal Schools,” *BC Studies* 61 (Spring 1984): 30-63.

<sup>33</sup> See Irene Howard, “First Memories of Vancouver,” Vancouver Historical Society *Newsletter*, v. 13 (October 1973), for a brief account of Normal schooling from a student’s perspective.

introduce their pupils to the joys of intellectual activity of any sort, let alone those which were supposed to emerge from projects. Indeed, as the traditional system became more efficient, more systematic and more effective, it simply co-opted the elements of the new education as it ignored its goals.<sup>34</sup> Further, most teachers — even the growing corps of “specialists” — conveyed to children, to colleagues and to parents the sense that there was in each subject only one right way of doing things.

Even if those with academic certificates or other forms of advanced education had somehow acquired a theoretically sound and practical approach to progressive or other new ways of organizing classroom learning, they would have found enormous difficulty in putting it into practice. In addition to the almost insuperable problems posed by trying to function independently in a system that pressed pupils, teachers and principals into the formal mode, the very size of classes made other forms of teaching and learning virtually impossible. In classes that averaged for most of these years about forty pupils — see table 2 — teachers could not get to know their charges as individuals. Class size forced them to teach to the whole class, to let the good look after themselves and to let the weakest fall by the wayside. Their responsibility for so many children probably also forced all but the ablest teachers to take a stance in their classrooms that emphasized children’s weaknesses and propensity to err, to capitalize on their vulnerability, and to keep an extremely wary lookout for bad behaviour. In these circumstances, when some teachers introduced “projects” or “activity units” into their classrooms they did so merely as an occasional change of pace in such subjects as social studies, science or art. Like their other colleagues, they continued to teach, to apply again modern jargon to what they did, factual material from the lower levels of the taxonomy. They tested their pupils’ memories and evaluated their work habits; what they did is best epitomized in their answer to a question common in classroom discourse until relatively recently: “Yes, neatness *does* count.”

And neatness also “counted” in the community as a whole. Pupils, parents and employers in Vancouver continued to believe that education was “learning out of a book.” While I have learned from interviews less on this point than I have on others, such evidence as I have suggests that parents of all social classes shared in this common viewpoint as to the nature and value of elementary schooling. They knew what children

<sup>34</sup> See Timothy A. Dunn, “The Rise of Mass Public Schooling in British Columbia, 1900-1929,” in Wilson and Jones, *Schooling and Society*, ch. 1.

TABLE 2

*Class Size in Vancouver, South Vancouver and Point Grey in  
1924-25, 1934-35, 1944-45 and 1957-58*

Number of Pupils Per Class	Number of Classes			
	1924-25	1934-35	1944-45	1957-58 <sup>1</sup>
Over 60	0	1	0	
55 - 59	4	0	0	
50 - 54	27	7	3	
45 - 49	120	67	14	
40 - 44	249	287	82	
35 - 39	213	239	178	Average size about 34
30 - 34	93	78	241	
25 - 29	29	13	115	
20 - 24	6	9	22	
15 - 19	17	9	21	
10 - 14	2	3	2	
Under 10	2	0	3	
<b>TOTAL NUMBER OF CLASSES</b>	<b>762</b>	<b>713</b>	<b>681</b>	

<sup>1</sup> In Vancouver, 35,918 elementary pupils were divided into 1,064 divisions, making an average class size of 33.78. British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report*, 1957-58, p. W18.

Compiled from data in British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report*, 1924-25, pp. M32-M48, M68-M70, M76-M83; *ibid.*, 1934-35, pp. S43-S59; *ibid.*, 1944-45, pp. Y210-Y227.

Closure of classes in 1924-25 and 1935-36 accounts for the different totals in tables 1 and 2.

should learn, they knew how teachers should teach it, and they knew how principals and teachers should maintain order. Indeed, because parents and employers lacked the daily empirical testing of their expectations against the real world of the classroom, they often held — and over these years continued to hold — the most rigid of formalistic expectations of what school should be like.

That working-class parents apparently held the same views on elementary education as did their middle-class counterparts may, at least initially, seem somewhat surprising. As such contemporary analysts as Henry Giroux and Michael Apple have argued, both the “objectified” knowledge of the provincial curriculum and its concomitant pedagogy represent a middle-class view of the world.<sup>35</sup> If their analysis is correct, then the Vancouver school system presented middle-class elementary schooling in a way that did not differ quantitatively or qualitatively from one part of the city to another. While my interviews revealed considerable differences among aspects of the non-school lives of Vancouver children from one neighbourhood to another, recollections of schooling were surprisingly similar. Thus Vancouver schools sorted children within schools rather than between schools.<sup>36</sup> As we have seen, they continually told those who were not as able as their peers that they were not going to climb very far up the educational ladder. Nonetheless, formal schooling of the sort offered in Vancouver schools met, in a rough and ready way, somewhat different class needs. At the political level, organized labour in the city supported free public education, and working-class people ran for, and were elected to, the school boards.<sup>37</sup> At the personal level, in a city composed of people born elsewhere, or their children, parents took particularly seriously their role as educational strategists for their children. In this role most parents insisted that their children at least get their “entrance” — still in common parlance long after the actual examinations had been abolished — as their basic educational credential. For those who left school at the end of grade 8 or over the next couple of years, “entrance” certified that they had well and truly mastered the three “R’s.”<sup>38</sup> For those who aspired to the wide range of occupations and other

<sup>35</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *Ideology, Culture & the Process of Schooling* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981); Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (London: Routledge P. Kegan Paul, 1979.)

<sup>36</sup> This statement is supported both by my interviews and by an examination of such data as class size and teacher qualification for selected schools from different neighbourhoods in the city.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Barman, “Neighbourhood and Community in Interwar Vancouver” in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> Between the 1920s and the 1950s Vancouver children significantly increased the number of years they spent in school. While exact retention rates are extremely difficult to compute, enrolment and related data provide a clear indication of trends. Of the cohort born in 1918, about one-third stayed in school to enrol in grade 11; of the cohort born in 1928, over 40 percent did so; and of the cohort born in 1938, over 60 percent did so. These percentages are provincial ones, but other compilations suggest that Vancouver youngsters stayed in school for slightly

levels of training for which matriculation was necessary, entrance admitted them to the high school.

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On 5 September 1934 the teachers of Charles Dickens School assembled for their first staff meeting of the school year. The principal, J. Dunbar, introduced the exchange teacher from Ontario, outlined the procedure for getting new sand for sand tables, discussed how a teachers' badminton club could function and explained how to get boots, shoes and school supplies for desperately needy children. He also reminded the teachers about such policies as those regarding substitutes, posting their names on the doors of their classrooms, keeping their class registers and turning in their previews to him every week. A quarter of a century later the staff of Queen Elizabeth School gathered, on 6 September 1960, for their first staff meeting. The principal, I. D. Boyd, introduced the five new teachers and the new nurse, explained that French would be taught to grades 5 and 6, and asked that all teachers attend the first meeting of the Parent-Teachers Association. He also reminded the teachers about such policies as those regarding substitutes, signing in in the morning, keeping their daybooks and seating plans up-to-date and preparing previews for each two-and-one-half monthly period in the school year. These staff meeting minutes both clearly display a similar administrative underpinning for formal learning. Visits to classrooms in both schools would have revealed that nearly all teachers believed in, and followed, traditional practices. Further, their stance received strong support from the provincial Royal Commission on Education, the Chant Commission, that in its 1960 *Report* endorsed a traditional view of education.<sup>39</sup> Over the 1960s, however, pupils, parents, teachers and employers abandoned the long-lived consensus on elementary education. Some began to take seriously the child-centred rhetoric of contemporary child-rearing and educational literature and to insist that it be employed in the schools. Elementary teachers gradually became well enough educated that they could structure the learning in their classrooms in the context of new theories about learning and teaching. Some families came to believe that the school has so downplayed formal learning that transfer training was no longer taking

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longer periods of time than did those for the province as a whole. British Columbia, *Report of the Royal Commission on Education* (Victoria: n.pub., 1960), pp. 43-49.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, passim.

place, and they lamented its passage. A decade of changes in curricula and teaching practices would transform elementary schooling in Vancouver. If formalism did not entirely disappear over these years, by the early 1970s one could no longer use the term to characterize elementary schooling in the city.