

THE ORIGINS OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION IN LONDON: CONTEXT, CONCERNS AND CURRICULUM, 1910–1915

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Around the turn of the twentieth century, a new movement swept public schooling in both the United States and Canada. Known conventionally as vocationalism, it was based on the belief that state-sponsored education ought to be more oriented towards occupational destination. Reformers criticized the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools for imparting the cognitive and cultural skills that were required primarily for the professions of law, medicine, teaching, and the ministry. They maintained that it was undemocratic to deny future industrial labourers, office workers, and homemakers the kind of schooling that prepared them for tasks they would eventually perform after their formal education ceased. Vocationalism was a significant movement in Ontario, reaching its peak in the 1920s when municipalities across the province built vocational high schools or added technical departments to already existing collegiate institutes and high schools.

In recent years the history of vocational education¹ in Canada in general and Ontario in particular, has drawn increasing attention. Some historians, like T.R. Morrison, Timothy Dunn, and Marvin Lazerson, have argued that vocational educators were more interested in training public school pupils to be deferential, docile, and efficient industrial citizens than in equipping them with the manual and mental skills that would enhance their socioeconomic mobility (Morrison, 1974; Lazerson and Dunn, 1977; Dunn, 1979, 1980; Stamp, 1970). More recently, Nancy Jackson and Jane Gaskell have contended that much the same features characterized commercial education in Ontario, except that the crucial historical variable was gender: women in clerical occupations, they argue, have been subordinated and segregated in the present century according to the performance of standardized and routine office tasks, part of a larger and unless otherwise indicated more general social process through which positions of power and privilege in twentieth-century capitalism have been reserved for men (Jackson & Gaskell, 1987). Similarly, in his account of Adelaide Hoodless and the origins of domestic science in Ontario, Terry Crowley has argued that the introduction of courses in dietetics, nutrition, sewing, and home management was essentially a “conservative” development which failed to challenge male dominance in business and reinforced gender roles that dated back to a preindustrial past (Crowley, 1986). The common theme in these accounts of vocational education is that industrial, commercial, and domestic schooling was

organized principally to discipline and control the segment of the youth population designated as “dangerous” and earmarked for low-status and low-paying jobs within a capitalist economic system.

This explanation fits the history of vocational schooling in Ontario as far as it goes, yet it fails to do justice to the more complex historical reality. Before students can be trained in this fashion, they have to be enticed into attending vocational schools. Passing compulsory school attendance legislation, as the Ontario government did in 1912 and 1919, does not in itself ensure that young people of high school age will enrol in technical education programmes. If vocational education around the turn of the century was to meet its goals of increasing the pool of skilled industrial labour and maximizing the acceptance of citizenship values among the nation’s adolescents, it was necessary to generate popular consent for the basic message of vocationalism - that schooling is most efficient when it fits pupils for their future jobs. To achieve this in the early years of vocationalism, educators in Ontario sought to attract the best students as well as those who ostensibly had the highest aptitudes for manual work. In fact, the period from roughly 1910 to the early 1920s witnessed a concerted campaign on the part of certain politicians, educators, administrators, and businessmen to encourage high school age students to register in vocational schools. To do this, proponents of vocational education publicized the capacity of the new technical school curriculum to provide a general education consisting of an even balance between academic and practical subjects. By following this policy, it was hoped, large numbers of students could be convinced that a high school education at a vocational school would be a valuable academic experience as well as lead to gainful employment.

To illustrate this development, this paper focusses on the London Technical High School, founded in 1912 as the London Industrial School, and housed in the basement of an elementary school building. The school affords an excellent example of the challenges and imperatives characterizing the campaign to establish vocationalism as an integral part of the public school system. The case study reveals that London businessmen and educators worked assiduously to both engender public support for vocational education and discipline through schooling a pool of labour for the city’s industries and businesses. Moreover, it reveals that industrial purposes did not constitute the sole consideration influencing the growth of vocational education in London: the substantial number of girls enrolled in the domestic science program at the school indicates that London’s vocational proponents were as concerned with the moral regulation of females as with working-class males. The result of these efforts of administrators, businessmen, politicians, and educators was the creation of a form of secondary schooling that met the requirements of Ontario industrial capitalism for manually and morally efficient workers and those of the state for citizens who complied with the reconstruction of the labour process upon a new social, technical, and disciplinary basis.

The significance attributed to the academic component of the technical school curriculum also sheds light on the way in which influential and powerful constituencies have often resisted moves to “de-stratify” or give equal value to different