

'The Task Here Before Us Is Neither New nor Easy': William Blatz and Progressive Education at the Institute for Child Study in Toronto

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*Hope has come on hard times these days.*¹⁴⁹

William Blatz, the founding Director of the Institute of Child Study (ICS) in Toronto, was one of Canada's leading progressive voices with a wide-reaching influence. He had a unique role in reformulating and interpreting John Dewey's ideas in the Canadian context. Blatz's development of a theory of human security is, in particular, a framework that can ground a robust articulation of character education.

In this paper, using Blatz's many writings on the subject of security, I seek to construct a working theory of character education concentrating upon hope. This theory interlaces first-order hopes (those that relate to one's personal and particular ambitions) and second-order hopes (which are related to the broader, social, and political spheres).¹⁵⁰ Security, I will argue,

can ultimately best be understood as a second-order, pro-social, and democratic value.

John Dewey cast a long shadow on Blatz's work. Like Dewey, Blatz believed that democracy was a way of living that correlated personal and collective interests. Unlike Dewey, Blatz's primary lens for understanding democracy was through his notion of security. Human security, Blatz believed, depended on our collective ability to develop habits of mind and social practices that confronted the inevitable challenges of life. Blatz's understanding of democratic living closely paralleled Dewey's, who noted that one's personal well-being was inseparable from the well-being of the collective.¹⁵¹

Security, I will argue, can ultimately best be understood as a second-order, pro-social, and democratic value.

Blatz' notion of human security was framed within the broader context of progressive education and a social context ripe with flux and insecurity, influenced by the two world wars, changing conceptions of human development and psychology, confrontations with despair and hardship on the battlefield and in the cities, and efforts to make the world a better place through education, while fostering hope in the world to come.¹⁵² Canadian progressivists such

¹⁴⁹ Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. xv.

¹⁵⁰ Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, "The Morality and Politics of Hope: John Dewey and Positive Psychology in Dialogue," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XLI, no. 3 (2005): 675-701.

¹⁵¹ See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey: 1899-1924*, vol. 9: 1916, Eds. J.A. Boydston, P. Baysinger, P. Levine (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press: 1980). Here, Dewey states: "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of joint communicated experience," p. 93.

¹⁵² See Theodore Michael Christou, *Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario's Public Schools, 1919-1942* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

as Blatz worked with the hope that their work would facilitate social reform while shedding light on developmental psychology and child study.

Blatz: Doctor, Educator, Progressivist, and Social Reformer

A medical doctor by training, Blatz turned to education after World War I and pursued a PhD at the University of Chicago in the time after the departure of John Dewey for Columbia University. While Blatz did not encounter Dewey directly during his doctoral studies, he was influenced by his writings and ideas. Blatz would turn his attention to the budding field of developmental psychology and become one of the leaders in Canada's adoption of progressive education during the interwar period.¹⁵³

The ICS, which became both Blatz' laboratory school as well as a site for experimentation, exploration, and application of themes connected to education, democracy, and human security, stands as a Canadian counterpart to Dewey's own laboratory school at the University of Chicago. It is also a reflection of how Dewey's ideas travelled north of the US border and found root in Toronto.¹⁵⁴ The laboratory school, which includes a Nursery School, remains in operation as the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study. 90 years after its establishment it is enjoying a renaissance of building construction and program expansion.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ See Theodore Michael Christou (2013). "The Complexity of Intellectual Currents: Duncan McArthur and Ontario's Progressivist Curriculum Reforms," *Paedagogica Historica* 49 (5): 677-697.

¹⁵⁴ See Thomas S. Popkewitz, Ed. *Inventing the Modern Self and John Dewey: Modernities and the Traveling of Pragmatism in Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹⁵⁵ "Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study Laboratory School," University of Toronto, OISE, http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/ics/About_Us/New_Name_Future/index.html accessed September 2016.

The laboratory school currently has a teaching staff is comprised of more than twenty teachers along with the support of more than forty intern teachers, who are completing a two-year Masters of Arts program in Child Study and Education within the ICS. Its student body is comprised of fifty percent male and fifty percent female students with a total of approximately two hundred students along with an average class size of around twenty-two students per class; and it has an annual waiting list of two-thousand applicants.¹⁵⁶

Whereas the increasing specialization of training and the demands for professional education had led to the isolation of subjects from each other and from actual life, the ICS represented a form of learning that was organic and whole.

The ICS was a site wherein progressive education and developmental psychology were harmonized in the Canadian context.¹⁵⁷ It was heralded as an experiment in higher education that concentrated on studying human development apart from any "rigid departmental or faculty pattern."¹⁵⁸ Whereas the increasing specialization of training and the demands for professional education had led to the isolation of subjects from each other and from actual life, the ICS represented a form of learning that was organic and whole. Echoing Dewey, Mary

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Mary L. Northway, "Foreword," in *Twenty-five Years of Child Study: The Development of the Programme and Review of the Research at the Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto, 1926-1951*, Eds., Karl Bernhardt, Margaret Fletcher, Frances Johnson, Dorothy Millichamp and Mary Northway (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), p. viii.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. vii.

Northway, faculty at ICS, noted that if education is to “preserve its real character, if it is to be an organism and not merely an organization. We must constantly be on our guard against the forces which tend to destroy its unity.”¹⁵⁹

The development of the ICS came during the postwar period in Canada, a time of great change to the economic, political, social, and intellectual landscape of the country. More than 650,000 Canadians served in the armed forces during the First World War. More than a tenth of these, about 68,000, lost their lives—and approximately as many Canadians returned from the war with mental and physical traumas, all of which made any seamless resumption of life difficult, if not impossible.¹⁶⁰ The wounded survivors entered a vastly changed society, where “medicine, psychology, and related social services were ill-prepared to ease their civilian re-adjustment.”¹⁶¹

The work of these services “intensified the interest in psychological studies that dealt not only with war veterans but with the development of individuals longitudinally through the whole span of life.”¹⁶² It also demonstrated a need for personnel educated and trained in meeting the needs of children whose home life had been disrupted by the war. How could injured soldiers and their families wrestle with such despair? In such a scenario, it is rather easy to see how Blatz’s focus on the concept of security might emerge. Psychology’s possible role in helping individuals develop the character traits needed for healthy re-adjustment in a quickly changing society is also easy to spot.

Understanding the larger social context aids in understanding how Blatz’s work on human security can be seen as a unique interpretation of Dewey’s conceptions regarding the relationship between democracy and education. Blatz never cited Dewey directly in his writings on the subject of security, but the influence of the latter upon the former is undeniable. Blatz wished to respect an individual person’s striving for a better world while understanding that every person must attend to the collective world around them.

Blatz emphasized that developmental psychology, one aspect of progressive education, had a significant role to play in the facilitation of social progress, individual character development, and democratic life. Considering the interrelatedness of individual people with the social spheres of democratic living, deeper understanding of the development of individuals, across the lifespan and beginning with infancy, would serve a social purpose. As Blatz noted, “it has been a fascinating experience to have participated in the beginning of a movement which is wholly constructive; in which the future has far more hope of fulfillment than the past.”¹⁶³

Clearly, Blatz himself was hopeful that his own work might survive the chaos of the postwar era to sustain something more lasting. His work denotes an early articulation of positive psychology, even as it anticipates the challenges—epistemological, theoretical, and pragmatic—that mark the field today: “the task here before us is neither new nor easy; in fact it is extremely complicated, but extremely practical.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Northway, Foreword, p. viii.

¹⁶⁰ Cynthia Commachio, *The Infinite Bonds of Family: Domesticity in Canada 1850-1940*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 70.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² E. A. Bott, “Founding of the Institute of Child Study,” *Twenty-Five Years of Child Study*, p. 15.

¹⁶³ William E. Blatz, *Bulletin of the Institute* (Toronto: Institute of Child Study, No. 50, 1951), cited in E. A. Bott, “Founding of the Institute of Child Study,” p. 13.

¹⁶⁴ William E. Blatz and Helen MacMurchy Bott, *Parents and the Pre-school Child*, p. v.

The Institute of Child Study: Learning, Opportunity, and Hope

The ICS sought to cultivate meaningful learning opportunities that related to society in order to prepare students to engage students meaningfully with its challenges and uncertainties. One might despair about the social, political, and intellectual changes wrought by the various forces associated with modernity, or one might look to face them confidently and through the development of habits of mind and action that would seem reasonable in light of projections regarding the future. Blatz believed that intelligent shaping of the future could only be realized through the integrated learning, rather than dissecting it into particular subjects. Learning was only meaningful in its application within the scope of social and democratic life.

Readjustment, or adjustment, understood as the concentration of school work upon contemporary society, is a dominant theme of progressive educational ideology and rhetoric in interwar Ontario.¹⁶⁵ School life should mirror social, political, and intellectual life. In this case it meant engagement in a modern democratic society. Hope was not understood as an abstract concept. Rather, it was endemic to an active existence within an ever-evolving society.

Developmental psychologists' role was seen as one that ought to concentrate on societal needs even as it considered individuals' particular requirements and aspirations. W.C. Kierstead has framed this as the problem of "adjustment." Individuals were, he argued, "the centre of all intelligence, of initiative, of discovery, of creative thinking, and therefore the pivot of social progress."¹⁶⁶ Yet he asked: how might individuals contribute to the well-being of the

democratic society in which they lived even as they improved themselves?

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The practice of adjustment was necessarily an iterative one in which the learner learned to adjust his or her behaviours in order to "fit into the existing social system." This can sound like a variation on functionalism or even a form of indoctrination. But the Canadian progressives never lost site of the way in which the just society might work to adapt itself to the character of the individuals who composed it. As Kierstead note in this regard, "even the arrival of the infant soon produces a considerable readjustment in any home."¹⁶⁷ As the individual adjusts to the society in which he or she lives, the society in turn adjusts to that individual as he or she engages with it meaningfully. The relationship is transactional and is key to the production of a healthy and flexible character development.

Blatz's focus on the concept of security therefore calls attention to his grounding in the developmental psychology of the postwar Canadian context. The human security of each individual needed to be preserved, whilst each individual, in turn, had a responsibility to make the world a better place. Karl Bernhardt, reflecting on the work of William Blatz within the ICS, made just this point: "The evolution of methods of training is based not on a standard of mere adjustment to the world as it is but rather on the contribution an individual can make

¹⁶⁵ Theodore Christou, *Progressive Education*.

¹⁶⁶ W. C. Kierstead, "Indoctrination in Education," *The School* (May, 1940), p. 743.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 744.

to a better world in which the welfare of the individual is fundamental.”¹⁶⁸

In his own thinking, Blatz’s “concept of security has a solid foundation not only in knowledge of human nature but in a clear conception of what is good.”¹⁶⁹ A secure child was one who could face the uncertainty and mutability of the world courageously, with self-reliance and confidence. That is, in Blatz’s understanding, security was the foundation for any worthy character education.

Security Theory: The Gospel According to Blatz

Security theory came to be known as “the gospel according to Blatz.”¹⁷⁰ It gave primacy to the individual’s right to make decisions but contextualized these in social and educational contexts that would help shape the consequences of those decisions. The individual was ultimately responsible for the role that they played in shaping both his or her future and that of the democratic unit, writ large.¹⁷¹ Blatz noted that the security of any person rested upon their membership in a society and upon their socialization.¹⁷²

The relationship between the personal and the social aspects of security were evident even in Blatz’s first published statement on the subject.¹⁷³ In this statement, Blatz distinguished security from safety, noting that we may strive for the latter concept but not necessarily realize

the former, as it is both “learned” and “earned.”¹⁷⁴

Security is earned insofar as it requires maturity and independence. These manifest themselves in a purposeful striving for improved conditions to their life circumstances, and the actualization of their vocation, their avocation, and the social relationships that sustain these.

Security is learned to the extent that it depends upon the individual’s socialization or “adaptation” to their social, physical, and intellectual environment.¹⁷⁵ Any person’s security is dependent upon the security of the collective to which the individual belongs. Security is earned insofar as it requires maturity and independence. These manifest themselves in a purposeful striving for improved conditions to their life circumstances, and the actualization of their vocation, their avocation, and the social relationships that sustain these.¹⁷⁶ “There is never just social action but always social interaction,” Blatz emphasized, stressing that the relationship between the individual and society is always dynamic and iterative.¹⁷⁷

Blatz considered security to be “a first principle, the basis of social living and a means of unifying theory and practice.”¹⁷⁸ Security concerns the general adjustment of individuals and society while always depending upon a person’s

¹⁶⁸ K. S. Berhardt, “A Prophet Not Without Honour: The Contribution of William E. Blatz to Child Study,” *Twenty-Five Years of Child Study*, p. 6.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷⁰ Mary L. Northway, “Postscript,” in *Human Security: Some Reflections* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1966), p. 123.

¹⁷¹ W. E. Blatz, *Human Security*, pp. 103–111.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Richard Volpe, “Consciousness and Consequences according to Blatz,” in Richard Volpe, Ed., *The Secure Child* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2010), p. 11.

¹⁷⁴ William Blatz, “The Importance of Failure,” *Bulletin*, 45 (December, 1934), pp. 3–4.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* See, also,

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁷⁷ William Blatz, “The Individual and the Group,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 6 (1939): p. 829.

¹⁷⁸ Volpe, “Consciousness and Consequences,” p. 12.

ability to confront social life as it is, sometimes difficult and always complicated.¹⁷⁹

Conclusion: Progressive Education, Character Education, and Engagement of the Citizenry

Progressive educators of various stripes have long argued that the purpose of education is to develop engaged citizens who are not only literate and numerate, but who would shape the world around them, even as they were shaped by the society they inhabited.¹⁸⁰ Cecil Charles Goldring, who would go on to serve as superintendent and director of schools for the city of Toronto, stated that the task of educators was to help students “learn to think independently and live co-operatively.”¹⁸¹

An editorial in *The School*, a monthly journal published by the Ontario College of Education, corroborated this position in later years, noting that the life of the “school must spring from the life of the people. Freed from the encumbrances of traditional subjects and no longer pre-occupied with remote and meaningless abstractions, it must adapt itself to the needs of the community it serves.”¹⁸²

Progressive education in Ontario, as represented by Blatz, taught that we depend upon each other. We do not have sufficient individual intelligence to deal with problems that affect the collective. Our human security is sustained by our personal and by our collective identities. We may only be progressive insofar as we at-

tend to our selves and to *ourselves*, conceived of as a collective.

To demand, or to look for, hope, one must struggle with despair and cope with uncertainty. This confrontation requires courage.

In his security theory, Blatz examined the challenges that individuals will face in life. With the trauma and destruction of World War One as the backdrop, Blatz understood the way in which re-adjustment and security shaped the lives of returning soldiers, their families, and the great social body. This context laid the ground for his distinct contributions to a vision of a progressive character education.

Blatz therefore confronted *insecurity* in human lives and in democratic living directly. He, as well as the general citizenry, experienced this insecurity first hand through the sheer act of living in the context that they did, even as we do today within our own worlds. To demand, or to look for, hope, one must struggle with despair and cope with uncertainty. This confrontation requires courage.

Blatz recognized that an education rooted in a vision of hope had to acknowledge that life was fraught with difficulties. From this point on, it could concentrate on developing strategies to cultivate happiness and perseverance. This pertained to life inside and outside of schools.

Today, security is a term of ubiquity, implicated in geopolitical, economic, and military discourses. It relates popularly to surveillance, terrorism, bioethics, globalization, immigrant, war and refugees, order and disorder. Yet Blatz rooted security in the individual, whom he understood to be situated within a democratic and social frame of existence. Security was “a state of consciousness which accompanies a willing-

¹⁷⁹ See Mary D. Salter Ainsworth, “Security and Attachment,” in Richard Volpe, *The Same Child*, pp. 43-54.

¹⁸⁰ Theodore Christou, *Progressive Education*.

¹⁸¹ C. C. Goldring, “Manual training or the general shop?” *The School* (February, 1935), p. 470.

¹⁸² “Editorial: Two sides to a question,” *The School* (October, 1941), p. 91.

ness to accept the consequences of one's own decisions or actions."¹⁸³

This definition hinges upon two conditions:

- (1) feeling adequate in the performance of an activity, and
- (2) being willing to accept any intrinsic or extrinsic consequences which ensue.¹⁸⁴

The first condition is associated with independent security, and it relates to any person's self-reliance, confidence, grit, and striving towards a satisfactory life in the world. The second condition is associated with dependent security, which acknowledges the precariousness of life, the uncertainty of social living, and the interdependency of people living democratically.¹⁸⁵ Any character education worthy of its title must attend to both of these aspects.

A theory of character education can be considered robust if it is appropriate for the context in which it is articulated. Blatz's security theory was developed in a world defined, not unlike our own, by flux, uncertainty, efforts to fight exclusion while at the same time defining meaningful citizenship at local, national, and international levels. What, then, does security theory offer educators today as they interact with the young?

First, Blatz's compels educationists to attend to the dependent and independent security of their students. Security theory requires the development of educational environments wherein controversial subjects, personal and political, are considered intelligently, sympathetically, collectively, and individually. Prejudices are challenged, even as difference of opinions is acknowledged and assessments of social and

particular problems are respectful of the collective good.

... it is incumbent upon the young to attend to their private ambitions courageously and to seek ways to connect them to the common wealth.

Second, it is incumbent upon the young to attend to their private ambitions courageously and to seek ways to connect them to the common wealth. Children and youth flourish in an atmosphere that permits them freedom and self-reliance, and yet permits of the type of collaboration and cooperation that facilitate self-regulation. As one editorial article from an Ontario journal noted in 1941, personal courage and social action are both required if students might "assume responsibility for [their] own welfare and the welfare of all."¹⁸⁶

The demands that security theory makes upon the future character education are neither new nor easy. They are particularly pertinent in a world torn between the forces of modernity and tradition. Today, the historic challenges posed on educationists by William Blatz in the first half of the twentieth century are omnipresent and pressing.

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¹⁸³ William Blatz, *Hostages to Peace: Parents and the Children of Democracy* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company), p. 82.

¹⁸⁴ Michael F. Grapko, "Security Theory," in Richard Volpe, Ed., *The Secure Child*,

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 497.

ed collection, and byzantium, a book of poetry (Hidden Brook Press) are forthcoming.