

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association

Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

**This document has been made accessible and PDF/UA compliant by Accessibil-IT Inc.
For more information go to
<http://www.accessibilit.com>**



“The World is Wide Enough for Us Both”:

The Manitoba School for the Deaf at the Onset of the Oralist Age, 1889-1920

Sandy R. Barron, Doctoral Student, Carleton University
sandybarron@cmail.carleton.ca

Abstract

Historical research on the oralist era in North American deaf education has typically been undertaken through a national lens. This study asserts that a more localized and regional view of the communication methods practiced at deaf schools will aid in the creation of a more complex picture of how oralism spread in Canadian and North American deaf schools. Based on an analysis of the papers of the Manitoba Ministry of Public Works; the archives of *Silent Echo*, the Manitoba School’s newspaper; and published works by the school’s principals, this paper contends that strict oralism faced fierce resistance in Manitoba from both Deaf citizens and teachers, as well as the school’s hearing principal, before 1920. Principal Duncan McDermid and deaf teacher J.R. Cook published and republished arguments in the *Echo* against oralism and in favour of moderation in the sign debate. In consideration of all three characteristics of strictly oralist schools in the early twentieth century – a ban on sign language, separation of deaf students from Deaf communities, and the expulsion of deaf teaching staff – the Manitoba School for the Deaf emerges as an exception to the trend of encroaching oralism in Canadian deaf schools during the early twentieth-century.

Keywords

Deaf education; Deaf history; Deaf education methods debate; Manitoba; Provincial governance; regional vs. national historiography.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Jonathan Miller and Len Marshall at the Manitoba School for the Deaf, as well as to Shawn Brackett and the reviewers, for their helpful input. This paper is based on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through a CGS Master’s Award.

“The World is Wide Enough for Us Both”:

The Manitoba School for the Deaf at the Onset of the Oralist Age, 1889-1920

Sandy R. Barron, Doctoral Student, Carleton University
sandybarron@cmail.carleton.ca

Oralism was a late nineteenth and twentieth-century social reform movement that sought to reintroduce Deaf people into national cultures by denying the emergence of Deaf communities as distinct linguistic groups.¹ Supporters of oralism, not conversely, presented it as an attempt to integrate a socially and linguistically isolated group into existing social structures; from the workplace to the family. The nineteenth and twentieth-century sign debate was of primary importance to Deaf communities in the United States and Canada, and has been the subject of a great deal of the work undertaken so far by researchers in the burgeoning fields of Deaf history and the history of deaf education. Initial works pointed to a total victory by oralists in state and provincial deaf residential schools by the early twentieth-century, and have been national in scope. The Manitoba Institute for the Deaf and Dumb/Manitoba School for the Deaf (after 1912) offers a local counterweight to the thesis that oralism had triumphed by 1920, as it remained a school that utilized a combined method into the 1930s. This paper does not deny that oralism was a very significant force in Canadian deaf education by the end of the First World War, but it argues that deaf students, citizens, and some hearing educators did strive to limit the movement's influence, with localized success.

¹ Deaf community members capitalize the word deaf when referring to Deaf culture or members who identify as culturally Deaf. Using a lower case form refers to physiological deafness. This convention did not exist until well after the time considered in this paper, so I do not use it to refer to individuals. I do use 'Deaf' when referring to emerging Deaf communities, as communities that advocated for Deaf employment and educational equality were forming in Winnipeg at the time covered by this paper.

Early studies of oralism focused on the combative personal relationship between oralist Alexander Graham Bell and combinit Edward Minor Gallaudet.² These studies took seriously the proposition that the Milan Conference of 1880, that committed European educators to oralism or “the German method,” was a watershed moment in North American deaf education.³ Douglas Baynton’s landmark monograph on the topic presented a national story, that intellectual currents linked to evolutionism combined with nationalism to ensure that national leaders in the deaf education movement sought to end sign language instruction and force deaf children to master speech and English, markers of human and American membership respectively.⁴ Defining the practical parameters of oralism is more challenging than defining its intellectual pedigree. For the purposes of this paper, three linked characteristics will be used to define “strict oralism”: a ban on sign language in the classroom and/or dormitory, the separation of deaf students from signing members of the Deaf community, and the expulsion of deaf teaching staff. These three characteristics, which form the backbone of Baynton’s analysis as well, were all institutional manifestations of an intellectual and political programme to eliminate sign language in Deaf communities over time. Oralism ensured that students were educated without the use of sign language, neither American Sign Language (often referred to as ‘natural signs’ at the time) or the sign language that featured English syntax that was decline in North American deaf schools by the 1860s (‘methodical signs’).⁵ Students at strictly oralist schools were required, after a few early years of instruction, to master lip-reading and verbal speech, or articulation. Articulation training involved the mastering of detecting the pitch and volume of one’s voice

² Richard Winefield, *Never the Twain Shall Meet: The Communications Debate*. (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1987).

³ Milan was an important landmark for educators in Europe, however. Manualism would continue to be identified with American educational methods for at least two decades after Milan.

⁴ Douglas Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁵ Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 48.

through bone conduction and vibration. These tasks were often Herculean for prelingually deaf students, and those who struggled were often placed in lower classes as “oral failures” and were buried in Annual Reports that touted the successes of the new approach.⁶

Commentators and contemporary participants in the methods debate referred to the differences between oralism, manualism, and combined education as variations in *method*, which is misleading. What was often presented as a conflict about method was more exactly a project of enculturation, with little regard for the abilities or wishes of deaf students, and nearly non-existent input from deaf people themselves. Michael Reis and others have successfully framed this debate as an overtly political one, a debate over the future of the Deaf community and deaf individual’s potential linguistic and social integration into hearing society.⁷ Oralist, manualist, and combined schools still offered similar curriculum material and educational foci, though oralist schools routinely struggled to overcome educational deficits borne in the difficulty of teaching lip reading and articulation to prelingually deaf students. Oralists often used social reform language rather than attempt to quantify educational attainment to support their project, and schools in the United States often changed methods and language policies along with the shifting fortunes of Democratic and Republican state spoils regimes.⁸

Baynton estimates that by 1920, 80% of deaf students in the United States were being educated in classrooms where sign language was outlawed.⁹ Yet his approach in this assertion is a microcosm of his whole argument – it is an aggregate number, telling a national story.

Canadian historians of deaf education and culture have not made a similar quantitative assertion,

⁶ Jason Ellis, “‘All Methods and Wedded to None’: The Deaf Education Methods Debate and Progressive Educational Reform in Toronto, Canada, 1922-1945.” *Paedagogica Historica* 50, no. 3 (2014): 384-385.

⁷ Michael Reis, “‘A Tale of Two Schools: The Indiana Institution and the Evansville Day School, 1879-1912,” in *The Deaf History Reader*, ed. John Vickrey Van Cleve (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2009), 85-115.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 5.

but it is clear that by 1907, when Ontario's deaf school began to become oralist, the movement was not spreading uniformly north of the border. Canadian deaf schools varied greatly in the timing of their adoption of oralism, but most remained combined after the First World War and simply increased the numbers of students who were separated in an oral 'stream.'¹⁰ This paper follows Susan Burch's assertion that deaf people resisted oralism, often successfully, within oralist schools¹¹, and extends it by asserting that in localized situations deaf people had hearing allies who were able to help them preserve combinist programs as a 'middle ground' between the extremist oralist and manualist positions. Iain Hutchison has made a similar argument against a singular narrative of oralism in late nineteenth-century Scotland, arguing that hearing educators rarely fully endorsed a strictly oralist program, in contrast to England, where educators were far more receptive to oralism than those in North America at the time.¹² The MIDD's hearing principal Duncan McDermid was opposed to strict oralism until his death in 1909, as was deaf printing instructor J.R. Cook and Howard McDermid, who succeeded his father as principal after Duncan's death. Together, after 1893, McDermid and Cook co-edited *Silent Echo*, the school's paper, which they used as a pulpit to advocate against oralism, reprint similar arguments from across North America and across the Atlantic, and comment upon the sign debate that raged around them. Through publications, the hiring of deaf teaching staff, and continued support of students' interaction with deaf community members in Winnipeg, the MIDD/MSD advocated in

¹⁰ According to historian Clifton Carbin, Ontario began to end the hiring of deaf teachers and increase oral instruction after 1907, and Halifax began to adopt oralism after 1906 under Principal Fearon, yet the (Protestant) MacKay School in Montreal did not become strictly oralist until 1936. Catholic schools in Quebec adopted oralism by the end of the nineteenth-century. Clifton Carbin, *Deaf Heritage in Canada: A Distinctive, Diverse, and Enduring Culture*. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1996), 100 and 119.

¹¹ Susan Burch, *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II*. (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

¹² Iain Hutchison, "Oralism: A Sign of the Times? The Contest for Deaf Communication in Education Provision in Late Nineteenth-Century Scotland." *European Review of History* 14, no. 4 (2007): 481-501.

favour of moderation in the sign debate and a bilingual educational framework in which to design and undertake deaf educational efforts.

The MIDD was founded in Winnipeg in 1889, from the remains of a short-lived private school under Principal J.C. Watson. Duncan McDermid, a former teacher at the Ontario Institution for the Deaf and currently at the Iowa Institution, became Manitoba's principal in September of 1890. Once hired, McDermid strove to gain extensive control over the school's operation by suggesting changes to the MIDD's constitution. Most importantly, he suggested that the principal have control over hiring staff. McDermid also suggested that he become the sole conduit for employee and parental complaints, and that concerns "shall be made to the Principal and if not addressed application in writing should be made to the Minister through the Principal."¹³ This allowed him to hire teachers, supervisors, and printing instructors who were deaf or fluent in sign language and also to downplay possible parental concerns about his backing of the combined method. One of his first acts as principal was to fire a Supervisor of Boys who was "useless...partially on account of his ignorance of the sign language."¹⁴ McDermid also sought to improve student accommodation, fire safety standards, and sign language use at the school in his first five years as principal. By 1901, he had convinced the province to add a second wing to the school, hired primarily deaf teachers and supervisors, and established a printing instruction program, which allowed the more fiscally and professionally stable MIDD to advocate on behalf of those pursuing various reform causes in Winnipeg, as well as employment opportunities for deaf Manitobans.

¹³ Duncan McDermid to James Smart, October 2, 1890. Ministry of Public Works Correspondence Files, Provincial Archives of Manitoba. GS 0123 GR 1607, 4.

¹⁴ Duncan McDermid to James Smart, December 9, 1890. MPWCF, PAM GS 0123 GR 1607, 1.

During McDermid's tenure, which ran from 1890 to 1909, the MIDD pursued a combined program. As Baynton points out, the term "combined method" could represent a whole spectrum of linguistic methodology – from the simple use of finger spelling in some classes to the limited teaching of articulation to late-deafened students or those with residual hearing.¹⁵ In Manitoba, "combined method" represented an educational program in which *bilingualism* was seen as key – that deaf students learn within a residential environment that ensured sign language fluency, but also within a classroom environment that used written English and finger spelling to build English language skills. Student Olive Jenkins, in an 1892 letter home that described her routine at the school, remarked that "as soon as school is over I have lessons in articulation, after that I and the other girls sew til half past four."¹⁶ Clearly, for Jenkins, articulation was defined as beyond the bounds of both "school" and the experiences of "the other girls." McDermid taught articulation to hard-of-hearing students and students with residual hearing from 1890 onward, and hired hearing teacher Augusta Spaight in 1891 to teach this same small group of students. The MIDD only established a two *formal* articulation classes in 1911, so during McDermid's tenure "combined" method as practiced was less a combination of sign/articulation and more a combination of sign/written English. While McDermid did assure prospective parents of students in the 1903 Calendar that "Articulation and Lip-Reading are taught whenever pupils show the requisite ability for permanent improvement...All have the opportunity to make a fair trial of Articulation and Lip-Reading,"¹⁷ articulation remained a small part of the school's efforts before the First World War.¹⁸ Though Spaight held the title of "teacher of articulation" for most of her

¹⁵ Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 26.

¹⁶ "A Letter." *Silent Echo* 1, no. 1 (April 29, 1892), 4.

¹⁷ "Annual Calendar, 1903." Winnipeg: Manitoba Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, 1903. Deaf Heritage Room (DHR), Manitoba School for the Deaf (MSD): Winnipeg, Manitoba.

¹⁸ The *American Annals for the Deaf* reported that 6 of 40 students at the Manitoba School were "taught speech" in 1894. *American Annals for the Deaf* 39, no.1 (January 1894), 61.

career at the MSD, most students were not exposed to the oral stream, and sign language was not suppressed at the school.

In the February 15, 1895 edition of *Silent Echo*, McDermid published an engraving that characterized his stance on the methods debate. “To Be Or Not to Be” depicted a mountainous landscape, oriented from a single route toward a branched background as it moves upward to the summit.¹⁹ At the routes’ bases, McDermid engraved “R.I.P. Unity.” At the base of each new branching road, named after different methods in deaf education, McDermid placed influential figures who drop roadblocks toward upward progression. These paths are named “Oralists,” “Auralists,” “Manualists,” and “Alphabetists,” with the oralist and manualist branches leading to a crowd of individuals at the centre of the mountain range’s peak. A single figure, described in text surrounding the engraving as “a young man who is in the uncomfortable position of having a foot on each road,” represents the combined method.²⁰ For McDermid, unity in method was only possible if a focus on methodological “purity” could be overcome. The oralist road in his engraving is “well graded and likely to prove a great temptation to many,” yet McDermid chose to highlight the efforts of a “young man of great possibilities” to keep his feet on both roads. McDermid’s message here echoes a long line of arguments in his Annual Reports for the Ministry of Public Works, where he stressed the importance of the flexibility of the combined method. “We are still convinced,” he wrote somewhat defensively in 1893, “that the combined system...is the best adapted to meet all the demands and conditions of our work.”²¹ The ideological inflexibility of strict oralism, McDermid suggested in his writing for public

¹⁹ *Silent Echo* 3, no. 14 (February 15, 1895), 4. DHR, MSD.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Auralists were those who promoted medical and technological solutions for deaf children, while manualists sought a form of deaf education that was far more steeped in sign language than combined proponents. Alphabetists advocated the use of the manual alphabet, by both hearing and deaf people, as a bridge of communication.

²¹ Duncan McDermid, *Fifth Annual Report of the Manitoba Institute for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb*. (Winnipeg: MIDD, 1894), 17. DHR, MSD.

consumption, would divide student populations between those who could not speak and read lips from those who could. Sign language remained the *lingua franca* in the school's dormitories and printing workshop, while sign, the manual alphabet, and handwritten English were used in all classrooms before 1911, when a limited distinct articulation stream was inaugurated for some students.

McDermid and deaf printing instructor J.R. Cook used *Silent Echo* as a vehicle for publicizing the concerns of combined theorists and manualists in Britain, the United States, and Canada, through republishing critical articles in the paper's pages and commenting on them. In 1895, *Silent Echo* reprinted a scathing article on the effect of oralism on deaf individual's abilities to negotiate the British legal system. *The British Deaf Mute*, published by the National Association of the Deaf and Dumb, told the ironic story of a young deaf woman who was attempting to testify against a defendant in court. The woman, "educated at one of the Oral schools," was unable to communicate with the judge through lip-reading and speech. The *BDM*, in a wickedly ironic tone, suggested that the situation showed how oralism had offered opportunities for interpreters beyond those simply performing sign-speech interpretation.

Hitherto, the interpreting business has been monopolized by those who understood signs, and now the way to get even and make a show of broad and liberal views opens itself to the ultra-oralists. With an army of 'familiar' to interpret information to the struggling lip-reader, flanked by another army whose duty it is to interpret the efforts at spoken language, conversation would flow smoothly and the 'restored to society' millennium would at last have arrived.²²

Reprinting anti-oralist articles and stories from deaf school and Deaf community papers allowed the MIDD to be part of a disparate, but certainly existing, network of schools and Deaf

²² *SE* 3, no. 17 (April 1, 1895), 5. DHR, MSD.

associations that criticized oralism publicly. *Silent Echo* also published a large number of critiques of strict oralism and defenses of the combined method during McDermid's tenure.

McDermid and Cook travelled to Congresses where deaf educational methods were discussed and contested, and mourned the divisive tone that emerged in both oralist and manualist conventions.²³ In the November 15, 1894 edition of *Silent Echo*, McDermid and Cook reported on a convention speech by E.M. Gallaudet, the most public proponent of combined method in the United States. "Some people wished to keep the signs out altogether but this...was patently absurd," reported the *Echo* of Gallaudet's arguments before a divided, mostly hearing crowd at the 1894 Convention for the Promotion of Speech, where both Gallaudet and McDermid spoke against pure oralism. "Speaking of a system of education," the paper continued, "the speaker said that it should take in everything that was of service to the deaf mute. They should take all the method from them into a combined system...lip reading was only sign-making on a small scale."²⁴ McDermid's similar speech prompted a laudatory response from an American deaf school paper, which the *Echo* reprinted. McDermid's topic, "Can Two Walk Together Except Be Agreed," was a plea for moderation and the continued allowance of a variety of teaching methods at deaf schools, allowing the needs of individual students to decide, not politics. *The Tablet*, a paper from West Virginia, argued that "Unless there can be mutual confidence and sympathy, each had better pursue his own way, according to the dictates of his own conscience, feeling that the world is wide enough for us both."²⁵ While *The Tablet* was in agreement that combinists should not be forced to adopt pure oralism, its editorial suggests a

²³ By 1894, there were separate Congresses for oralists and manualists, and McDermid and Cook went to both throughout the 1890s. It is noteworthy that Manitoba sent Cook, a deaf teacher, even in the capacity as *Silent Echo*'s editor, because the decline in Deaf teachers was increasingly reflected in the absence of Deaf attendees, especially at oralist conferences.

²⁴ *SE* 3, no. 8 (November 15, 1894), 2. DHR, MSD.

²⁵ *SE* 3, no. 8 (November 15, 1894), 4. DHR, MSD.

high level of individual power wielded by principals and superintendents over school methods, as they chose a singular voice through which to describe decision making. With the exception of J.R. Cook and a few others, the Congresses of the 1890s and early twentieth-century featured very little input from deaf teachers, citizens, and students. The Deaf community increasingly relied upon hearing allies like McDermid to have their opinions about the sign debate heard in professional journals like the *American Annals of the Deaf* and at Congresses.

A brief 1906 *Silent Echo* article on “the Deaf Mutes of Quebec” sheds light on the growing gulf between combined and oralist deaf schools in Canada in the early twentieth-century. Montreal had been the site of the first Canadian deaf school, and by 1906 the province of Quebec hosted four schools – three of which had become oralist by the end of the nineteenth-century. McDermid or Cook argued that Quebec schools had made two parallel mistakes in their adoption of oralism: barring sign language and prohibiting students from socializing with members of Montreal’s Deaf community.²⁶ “After the first two years tuition in lip-reading the students are not allowed to use signs or mix with others who use them,” McDermid/Cook argued, “and have to rely entirely on the Oral method for instruction, which we consider is not so satisfactory as the combined system.”²⁷ This piece would have been received by the Quebec schools, but also by the Ontario Institute for the Deaf, which was in the process of developing an exclusively oralist program under a new superintendent that year. While deaf school and association papers had a limited reach, the MIDD’s message would have been a direct criticism against subscriber oralist schools in both Canada and the United States, and a show of solidarity with the shrinking number of combinist schools.

²⁶ Establishing the authorship of most editorials and pieces after 1900 is difficult. It is clear that Cook, as editor after that date, wrote most of the unattributed editorials in the five or so years before McDermid’s death in 1909.

²⁷ *SE* 14, no. 16 (April 16, 1906), 2. Legislative Library, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (LL, PAM).

This 1906 article also shows that the MIDD reacted against oralist practices in one way beyond the issue of student language acquisition. Quebec schools, as well as many oralist schools, thought it pertinent to separate deaf students from signing members of Deaf communities who could tempt students to “backslide” against their oral gains. R.A.R. Edwards argues that separating students from signing communities was central to oralists’ plans to diminish the influence of Deaf communities as sub-national groups.²⁸ *Silent Echo*, up to the end of McDermid’s son Howard’s tenure as principal in 1920, shows ample evidence that the MIDD/MSD continued to host and sponsor Deaf social events, including a sign debating society called the Pharnorth Lit Society, a Winnipeg-wide Deaf hockey team called the Silents,²⁹ and numerous visits from graduates of the school to meet current students. Older male students acted as pallbearers at the funerals of Deaf community members, and a 1905 *Silent Echo* report on the annual tradition of a Thanksgiving feast at the school which invited Deaf community members, underscored that “the principal...is always pleased to have any and all deaf present at their social gatherings.”³⁰

Clifton Carbin and Neil Pemberton have identified Deaf religious services as central locations of resistance to oralism in nineteenth-century Canada and Britain, respectively.³¹ McDermid and Cook argued against oralist church services, describing them as especially damaging to deaf students and members of the Deaf community. McDermid seems to have interpreted for Winnipeg’s Deaf community in a number of churches on certain occasions, such as the 1895 funeral for student Everett Platt at Charles Gordon’s St. Stephen’s Presbyterian

²⁸ R.A.R. Edwards, *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 193.

²⁹ *SE* 17, no. 8. (February 1, 1909), 2. LL, PAM.

³⁰ *SE* 14, no. 3. (November 1, 1905), 3. LL, PAM.

³¹ Carbin, *Deaf Heritage*, 265; Neil Pemberton, “Deafness and Holiness: Home Missions, Deaf Congregations, and Natural Language 1860-1890.” *Victorian Review* 35, no. 2. (Fall 2009): 66-67.

Church.³² In 1905, coupled with a reprinted complaint about oralist services at a recent meeting of deaf educators, *Silent Echo* printed an *Arkansas Optic* editorial about why sign language services were clearly superior and should be maintained.

We make the assertion and believe that few teachers of the deaf, even oralists, will doubt it in the least – that if a stranger with an ordinary clear delivery had given these same pupils who took part in the exercises, orally taught though they were, a lecture in the sign language, it would have gone to their hearts deeper, impressed them more and done them more good than if the same man had spoken his lecture and depended on the pupils to get it from his lips.³³

The *Optic* argued that the distance between student and minister made lip reading difficult. Yet more importantly, the *Optic*'s assertion that a sign language lecture would go "to their hearts deeper" suggests that even oralists (and the *Optic* represented an oralist school) recognized the value of student access to religious services, making church services a common topic for complaint from combined method schools that oralists found difficult to dismiss. It also shows that oralist schools could broadcast some doubt about the efficacy of oral education, at least in students' early years. The emphasis on 'saving the souls' of deaf children in early North American deaf educational institutions had left a lasting legacy, and even strict oralists took seriously that sign language use in church services could insure against an incomplete understanding of Christian doctrine and practice that would endanger students' moral and spiritual futures.

The MIDD continued to hire deaf teachers well into the twentieth-century, in contrast to oralist schools that only hired deaf staff to work in vocational training. In fact, correspondence between McDermid and Public Works throughout his tenure shows that sign language

³² Duncan McDermid, "Fifth Annual Report of the Manitoba Institute for the Deaf and Dumb." MPWCF, PAM. GS 0123 GR 1607.

³³ *SE* 14, no. 5. (December 1, 1905), 4. LL, PAM.

proficiency was his central criteria for hiring new teachers. After the 1891 hiring of sign-proficient but hearing teacher Augusta Spaight and deaf teacher J.R. Cook, all classroom teachers hired under McDermid, Howard McDermid (1909-1920) and Gordon Lilley (1920-1923) were prelingually or late-deafened women, while all supervisors and vocational teachers were deaf with one exception. Baynton argues that oralist schools hired female teachers because they could be paid a far lower wage than men, but that these teachers were often hearing women who could teach articulation.³⁴ Female teachers were also seen as providing a “nurturing” quality needed for oral students who began school at younger ages than manual students.³⁵ Upon the hiring of Augusta Spaight, McDermid’s line of argument betrays that in the Manitoba case, cost certainly contributed to these decisions. Spaight had agreed to be hired for “400 dollars per annum with board and lodging” which was, McDermid emphasized, far below market value for an experienced teacher. Spaight, however, was “an expert signmaker and thoroughly underst[ood] the ways of the deaf.”³⁶ Later, both McDermids hired female graduates of the school, some of whom taught at the MSD until its closure in 1940. These teachers likely served at a double discount to the province, being both deaf and female.

Augusta Spaight and Duncan McDermid began teaching articulation to targeted students with residual hearing in the early 1890s, though a distinct stream for orally trained students did not exist until 1911. Oral instruction was a key part of a combined system, and was reserved for those students who the principal decided could benefit from it. As Susan Burch and Douglas Baynton’s work shows, deaf educators and members of North American Deaf communities did not object to oral instruction for some, but objected to oral instruction for all. Clifton Carbin argues that after 1911, the MSD maintained a combined system under which the number of

³⁴ Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 56-82.

³⁵ Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 56-57.

³⁶ Duncan McDermid to James Smart, October 1, 1891. MPWCF, PAM GS 0123 GR 1607, 2.

students in the oral stream slowly increased in proportion to those in the manual stream.³⁷ Yet the balance between the two streams did not begin to change significantly until the 1930s, and it was not until the late 1930s that a sizeable majority of students were educated orally. In contrast to the adoption of oralism in Ontario and Quebec, the MSD did not officially adopt oralism in a unified way before its closure in 1940, and took a piecemeal approach. It was not until the proliferation of strictly oralist day schools in Winnipeg from 1940 that oralism gained enough momentum with hearing parents to be adopted by the MSD when it reopened in 1965.

The MIDD's legacy of combinism was strong enough that when the Saskatchewan School for the Deaf opened in 1932, it emerged as a combined method school in a heavily oralist era. Throughout the 1930s, the Saskatchewan school had both manual and oral streams, though more students were enrolled in the oral stream than the manual.³⁸ By the 1940s, Saskatchewan had become primarily oralist and would remain so until successful protests by senior students in 1973 ended strict oralism there. Saskatchewan's early experience shows that the combined method enjoyed positive momentum in Western Canada well into the oralist period, partially due to Manitoba's example and institutional memory.

I identify three primary, but not exclusive, reasons that Manitoba did not adopt oralism as did many of the rest of North America's deaf schools. The first is that the school was exclusively under the Ministry of Public Works, like the deaf school in Ontario before 1906. Correspondence between the school's principals and the Ministry show a lack of interest in the issue from the government. A similar situation prevailed in Ontario before 1906, where Superintendent Robert Mathison was given the power and responsibility to decide which method the Belleville School

³⁷ Carbin, *Deaf Heritage*, 142 and 146.

³⁸ Carbin, *Deaf Heritage*, 165. In the 1932-33 year, there were 96 students in the oral stream and 23 in the manual.

would adopt. McDermid was afforded the same level of power in Winnipeg from the provinces of Manitoba and British Columbia, whose deaf students were regularly sent to Winnipeg to be educated.

A significant result of Public Works oversight was that Progressive educational movements, and therefore the influence of educational experts, was weak in Western Canada. As Susan Burch has shown, Deaf communities and hearing allies began to advocate for deaf schools to be moved from Public Works Departments to Departments of Education in the early twentieth-century. Movements to call deaf schools “schools” instead of “asylums” and “institutes” were part of a larger attempt to normalize deaf education and separate it from historical links to charity and scientific novelty.³⁹ Where these reforms were successful, deaf educators became susceptible to educational experts and bureaucrats, who were increasingly influenced by Progressive-era educational reforms in the United States. Kerry Alcorn has argued that the extent to which these Progressive reforms were actually practiced in Prairie Canada before 1920 is difficult to establish and was likely negligible, as there was significant resistance to the impact of educational experts, especially in rural areas of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.⁴⁰ In Eastern and Central Canada and the United States, though, two key aims of the Progressive project - that education should have measureable outcomes and forge a national citizenry - led new educational experts to support and implement oralism. These experts, Jason Ellis has argued, pushed for oralism in Toronto public and day schools after 1922, against the resistance of many Deaf adults and the Canadian Association of the Deaf.⁴¹ By the 1920s, when the MSD began to fall firmly under Department of Education control, Progressive ideas in education had changed

³⁹ Burch, *Signs of Resistance*, 35.

⁴⁰ Kerry Alcorn, *Border Crossings: U.S. Culture and Education in Saskatchewan, 1905-1937*. (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013): 41, 87-88.

⁴¹ Ellis, “All Methods.”

and began to highlight the accommodation of individual difference, and thus support combined education.⁴² The MSD's avoidance of Department of Education control during the onset of oralism's adoption in North America (1900-1920) helped both McDermids to maintain control over teaching methods, and ensured a measure of influence over deaf education for Deaf community members in Winnipeg, albeit through hearing principals. The Ontario School, as Alessandra Iozzo has argued, was moved under the Ontario Department of Education in 1906 and within a year Mathison had resigned and methods at the school changed.⁴³

Secondly, the Manitoba school was free and publicly supported, as only the Ontario School was during McDermid's tenure, and was the first Canadian deaf school to operate in a school with compulsory attendance for deaf children, after the province's amendment to the Deaf Education Act in 1892. As the school did not have to convince parents to send their children but could rely on the law, the types of appeals to oralist rhetoric that Stephane-D Perrault identifies in Montreal after the 1880s were unnecessary.⁴⁴ Perrault argues that Catholic Quebec schools, due to their reliance on charitable and Church contributions, increasingly advertised oral methods as a way for parents to have their children returned to them, linguistically. Deaf schools in Quebec struggled to keep attendance to levels at which tuition and charitable donations could render them solvent, especially in light of the fact that Montreal had separate schools for Catholics and Protestants, as well as a Catholic school for each gender. Oralist methods, argues Perrault, allowed Catholic educators in Quebec to appeal to hearing parents of deaf children by assuring them that their children would speak and read lips to the point that they could "pass" as hearing. In Manitoba, these same appeals were rarely made, as parents were required to send

⁴² Burch, *Signs of Resistance*, 32.

⁴³ Alessandra Iozzo, "'Silent Citizens': Citizenship Education, Disability, and d/Deafness at the Ontario Institution for the Education of the Deaf, 1870-1914." (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2015), 101-102.

⁴⁴ Stephane-D Perrault, "Intersecting Discourses: Deaf Institutions and Communities in Montreal, 1850-1920." (PhD diss., McGill University, 2003), 109.

their children regardless of their willingness.⁴⁵ This allowed Duncan McDermid and his son Howard, who wanted to maintain a combined system, to design the school's efforts as they saw fit, without the need to appeal to parents on oralist grounds.

Finally, Duncan McDermid and his successors are a principal reason that the MIDD did not become an oralist school, as Principals and Superintendents yielded a great deal of power over policy in deaf schools that found themselves under Public Works leadership. McDermid had consolidated a lot of power at the school shortly after his hiring in 1890, and this power, gained through the modification of the school's constitution, was bequeathed to his son and other principals. The province, when it wanted to send a representative to teaching conventions or communicate with the media, relied on McDermid's expertise. He was the province's sole expert on deaf education, at least as far as the Ministry of Public Works was concerned, and he was given a degree of decision-making power over method that matched the province's faith. McDermid and his son Howard were also well connected to Winnipeg's moral reform movement and cultural elite. Duncan served for several years at the onset of the twentieth-century as the President of the Manitoba Club, and was also active in Winnipeg's Children's Aid Society upon its formation. Duncan and Howard McDermid, committed as they were against strict oralism, would have had to have been replaced in order for the school to transform itself. Their levels of professional and social prestige made their dismissals a remote possibility.

Oralism, then, was not a political or institutional success in Manitoba between 1889 and 1920. After 1920, more and more students were streamed into articulation classes, yet the

⁴⁵ There were many rural holdouts in Manitoba, however. McDermid struggled for years to get parents, who he felt were being selfish and irresponsible, to send their children to Winnipeg. Some did but many did not, as deaf children's farm labour was an important resource to the family farm, and some farm families saw little need for a formal education, much like many rural families of hearing children at the time.

conditions that would have been necessary to call the MIDD/MSD an oralist school were still not apparent upon its closure in 1940. Historians of disability and Critical Disability theorists, this paper suggests, need to become more precise in discussions of the oralist era in North American deaf education. Susan Burch has cast some doubt on oralism's triumph in light of her findings of Deaf student and cultural resistance. I suggest here that resistance to oralism also existed among hearing allies of deaf schools and Deaf communities, and that oralism may have succeeded at a later time than is considered representative in contemporary historical literature, at least in Western Canada. My research suggests that there may be evidence for a more complicated oralist era once researchers take on a more local framework in which to discuss deaf schools and Deaf communities. Manitoba, before 1940, seems to be among twentieth-century exceptions, but exceptions can also offer insight into the value and validity of large national narratives in histories of deafness and Deaf communities.

References

Primary Sources

Ministry of Public Works Correspondence Files, 1888-1899. Provincial Archives of Manitoba, GS 0123 GR1607.

Silent Echo vols 1 – 10. Deaf Heritage Room, Manitoba School for the Deaf (DHR, MSD), Winnipeg.

Silent Echo vols 11-17. Legislative Library, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (LL, PAM).

Annual Reports of the MIDD/MSD, 1890-1920. DHR, MSD and LL, PAM.

American Annals for the Deaf 39 no. 1 (January, 1894).

Secondary Sources

Alcorn, Kerry. *Border Crossings: U.S. Culture and Education in Saskatchewan, 1905-1937*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013.

Baynton, Douglas. "Disability and the Justification for Inequality in American History." In *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, edited by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, 33-57. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Baynton, Douglas. *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Buchanan, Robert M. "The *Silent Worker* Newspaper and the Building of a Deaf Community, 1890-1929." In *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship*. Edited by John Vickrey Van Cleve, 172-197. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993.

Burch, Susan. *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II*. New York: New York University Press, 2002.

- Carbin, Clifton. *Deaf Heritage in Canada: A Distinct, Diverse, and Enduring Culture*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1996.
- Cleall, Esme. “‘Deaf to the Word’: Gender, Deafness and Protestantism in Nineteenth-Century Britain and Ireland.” *Gender and History* 25, no. 3 (November 2013), 590-603.
- Edwards, R.A.R. *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.
- Ellis, Jason. “‘All Methods and Wedded to None’: The Deaf Education Methods Debate and Progressive Educational Reform in Toronto, Canada, 1922-1945.” *Paedagogica Historica* 50, no. 3 (2014): 371-389.
- Hutchison, Iain. “Oralism: A Sign of the Times? The Contest for Deaf Communication in Education Provision in Late-Nineteenth Century Scotland.” *European Review of History* 14, no. 2 (2007): 481-501.
- Iozzo, Alessandra. “‘Silent Citizens’: Citizenship Education, Disability, and d/Deafness at the Ontario Institution for the Education of the Deaf, 1870-1914.” PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2015.
- Pemberton, Neil. “Deafness and Holiness: Home Missions, Deaf Congregations, and Natural Language 1860-1890.” *Victorian Review* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 65-82.
- Perrault, Stephane-D. “Intersecting Discourses: Deaf Institutions and Communities in Montreal, 1850-1920.” PhD diss., McGill University, 2003.
- Reis, Michael. “‘A Tale of Two Schools: The Indiana Institution and the Evansville Day School, 1879-1912.’” *The Deaf History Reader*, edited by John Vickrey Van Cleve, 85-115.. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2009.
- Roots, James. “Deaf Education and Advocacy: A Short History of the Canadian Association of

the Deaf.” In *Making Equality: History of Advocacy and Persons with Disabilities in Canada*. Edited by Deborah Stienstra and Aileen Wight-Felske, 73-86. Concord, ON: Captus Press, 2003.

Stamp, Robert. “Teaching the ‘Children of Silence’: Samuel Greene and the Hearing-Impaired.” *Historical Studies in Education* 17, no. 1 (2005): 165-68.

Winefield, Richard. *Never the Twain Shall Meet: The Communications Debate*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1987.

Winzer, Margret. “Education, Urbanization, and the Deaf Community: A Case Study of Toronto, 1870-1900.” In *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations From the New Scholarship*. Edited by John Vickrey Van Cleve, 127-145. Washington, D.C., Gallaudet University Press, 1993.

All articles in the journal are assigned a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license.

See: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

