



David O. McKay, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

David O. McKay's work in the Sunday School was the impetus for his being included in the general leadership of the Church and is among his greatest contributions to the modernization of the Church.

David O. McKay and Progressive Education Implementation for the Sunday School

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In 1897 David O. McKay graduated from the University of Utah with a Normal (Teaching) Certificate. He would become the first president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to have a college education and to have previously been a professional educator. This educational background would permeate every position McKay would hold in the hierarchy of the Church.

McKay's educational practices were based on the theoretical underpinnings of progressive education. Among the classes McKay took at the University of Utah were "Theory of Teaching," "Elementary Pedagogy," "Advanced Pedagogy," and "Comprehensive Pedagogy." Many of these courses were taught by William Stewart, professor of pedagogy and head of the Normal School at the University of Utah. Stewart attended a National Education Association Convention in Chicago in 1887, where he became acquainted with John Dewey and Colonel Francis Parker, with whom he formed a lifelong friendship.¹ In many ways, McKay's policies and practices were influenced by these three progressive educators. Especially while serving in the General Superintendency of the Deseret Sunday School Union

(1906–34), McKay infused their progressive educational philosophies into the auxiliary.

It is generally unknown that the main reason David O. McKay came to the attention of the senior members of Church leadership was because of his work in a previous, obscure, low-profile calling as second counselor in the Weber Stake Sunday School superintendency. Biographer Francis Gibbons believes that McKay was called to be an Apostle largely because of his work in that Sunday School program. Gibbons, who served as a secretary to the First Presidency (1970–86), explains, “Word got around that they were having great success in Weber and it was discussed by the General Authorities. His role in organizing that teacher-training program in Ogden is what brought him to the forefront of Church leadership. He was also handsome, articulate, and very adept at training teachers.”²

Bringing two contributions to our knowledge of twentieth-century Church history, this article brings to light David O. McKay’s activities and concerns about Sunday School, which have not been addressed before. Previous studies of President McKay’s life and teachings say very little about the specifics of his Sunday School work and the infusion of his progressive educational philosophy. In examining this part of McKay’s career, this study provides glimpses into his personality and values (including his emphasis on building character and creating an atmosphere of worship in Sunday morning meetings), the importance he placed on teacher preparation, and his specific goals when preparing lessons. As a master teacher himself, McKay also developed elaborate plans for teacher training.

A second contribution this article makes is added enlightenment of the institutional history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ Sunday School program. This research examines one aspect of the process of “modernizing” the restored gospel of Jesus Christ: making the Sunday School auxiliary something different from what it was before, as McKay was in the superintendency of the Sunday School from 1906 to 1934 and was the actual superintendent from 1918 to 1934.³ Before McKay, Deseret Sunday School Union superintendents were members of the First Presidency.⁴ He became the first and last member of the Quorum of the Twelve to serve in this position. As a career educator, helping gospel teachers become more effective was one of his passions. Surprisingly, other biographers have not given much attention to what he accomplished in this role in the general leadership of the Church.

Origins of Sunday School in the Church of Jesus Christ

The idea of Sunday School originated in Great Britain, where it was originally organized in the 1780s to provide education for working children. These schools were precursors to a national system of education in England. The role of the Sunday Schools changed with the British Education Act of 1870, when the term *Sunday School* became the generic name for various kinds of religious instruction on the Sabbath.⁵ The Sunday School as a religious education organization “achieved its greatest growth and development in America.”⁶ The establishment of Sunday School in many areas of the United States was an attempt to advance Protestant nationalistic ideals among new immigrants. As early as 1827, Sunday School organizations had sought nationwide congruity as “the American Sunday-School Union began the publication of its annual series of ‘Union Question Books.’”⁷ *The History of Sunday Schools, and of Religious Education from the Earliest Times* was published by Lewis Pray in 1847. In this work, Pray reported, “At this moment, we are not aware of any considerable body or denomination of Christians which do not recognize the Sunday School as a regular, approved, and established means for early religious instruction and moral culture of the young.”⁸

That same year, 1847, the first members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. During the mid-1800s, to aid Latter-day Saint families in educating their youth, Church leaders established auxiliaries, with the Sunday School becoming the main auxiliary for teaching Church doctrine to both youth and adults. Pioneer Richard Ballantyne established the first Utah Sunday School in 1849. Ballantyne, who was born in Whitridgebog, Roxburghshire, Scotland, served as a Sunday School teacher in the Relief Presbyterian Church before joining The Church of Latter-day Saints. Ballantyne’s main purpose for starting a Sunday School was “for the education of the youth in the principles of the Gospel and knowledge of the scriptures.”⁹ After Ballantyne’s Sunday School became established, other ward Sunday Schools quickly followed. In some places, regular school was held on Sunday for those who could not attend during the week. In 1866 George Q. Cannon of the First Presidency became interested in the national Sunday School Movement and published the *Juvenile Instructor*, a periodical for Sunday School instruction.¹⁰ The *Juvenile Instructor* included a range of subjects that would be considered “secular” today. Under Cannon’s direction the Parent Sunday School Union was also formed. Before the development of the “Sunday School Treatise” in 1896, Sunday School teachers provided

their own lessons based on their own curriculum.¹¹ This treatise included provisions for outlines as well as model lessons. The Latter-day Saint Sunday School was comparable to other denominational Sunday School programs. In 1900 a writer for the national Protestant-related magazine, the *Outlook*, visited a Sunday School of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. He was, in general, favorably impressed. Though the superintendent, he said, was not a man of culture, several of the teachers seemed to be of the “aristocratic type.” The remarks of the superintendent and the prayers offered “were fully up to the general level in well-to-do Sunday Schools in the East.”¹²

It is not surprising that Utah Sunday Schools were similar to other denominational organizations. Cannon had originally modeled his proposal after “the international movement, and the LDS Church authorized members of their Sunday School General Board to participate in national and international Sunday school conventions.” In 1903 the First Presidency directed that all wards hold Sunday morning free from meetings that conflicted with Sunday School.¹³

Early Sunday School Influences on David O. McKay

Huntsville, Utah, was one community that followed this directive. On Sunday mornings at 9:30 a bell rang, “telling everyone that they had one-half hour to get ready for Sunday school. . . . A few minutes before ten it would be rung again so that everyone would be seated in time for the opening exercises promptly at ten o’clock.”¹⁴ The directive to ring the Sunday School bell probably came from Bishop David McKay Sr. of the Huntsville Ward, who was active in the Sunday School organization. Sunday School visitors often frequented the McKay homestead. Elders Ballantyne, George Goddard, and William Willis from the Sunday School General Superintendency, as well as members of the Weber Stake Sunday School presidency—Lewis W. Shurtliff, Charles F. Middleton, and Nels C. Flygare—“were as well known in the McKay home as if they were relatives because of their regular visits to the ward.”¹⁵ The principles of Sunday School undoubtedly were introduced to the bishop’s son, David O., as he listened to his father converse with these house guests.

Like most American children, David O. enrolled in a Sunday School program at an early age. Records indicate that he delivered several talks in the Huntsville Sunday School, thereby revealing his familiarity with Church

topics such as the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the life of Joseph Smith.¹⁶ On 27 January 1889, at the age of fifteen, McKay became secretary of the Huntsville Ward Sunday School. He served in this position until 20 August 1893. Then called at the age of twenty, he served as a Sunday School teacher for the next three years until 4 October 1896, when he moved to Salt Lake City.¹⁷ From these obscure beginnings in Huntsville, McKay eventually would lead the major teaching arm of the entire Church. One idea that McKay strongly infused into the Sunday School actually came from a Sunday School teacher who taught in his hometown. Former Utah Congressman Gunn McKay, who lived next door to David O., explained: "In the Huntsville Ward there was a Gospel Doctrine teacher named Jens [Jenson] Winter. . . . Each week Brother Winter would make an outline of the next week's Sunday School lesson and run off copies for his class on the hectograph. David O. saw what Brother Winter was doing [as] a good teaching practice for advance preparation of class members and implemented it into the Sunday School."¹⁸ Jens Winter was a dry farmer and the son of a Danish immigrant whose own schooling was limited, yet McKay's introduction to his ideas about outlining lessons became a Church-wide practice. Winter had ample opportunity to associate with young David. "Jens Winter loved young people and liked to work with them."¹⁹ Winter was involved in the training of teachers in the Huntsville Ward. At Winter's funeral, a speaker noted: "Union meeting was held in Ogden and Jens wanted all of his teachers to be in attendance so he saw to it that a buckboard or canvas-covered wagon was ready to take his teachers down to the Meeting. . . . He was the first to outline lessons [in Huntsville]. President McKay visited the class and took the suggestion back to the Stake Sunday School."²⁰

Weber Stake Sunday School Superintendency

McKay attended the University of Utah, graduating with a Normal (Teaching) Certificate in 1897; he would become the first Church president to have a college education. His training and educational background would eventually greatly benefit the Latter-day Saint Sunday School program and the general membership of the Church. After serving a mission from 1897 to 1899 in Scotland, McKay was called to be a member of the Weber Stake Sunday School Board.²¹ The Weber Stake was a territorial division of the Church that included part of the city of Ogden and a number of outlying towns. Serving as the second assistant to superintendent Thomas B. Evans,

McKay was given the responsibility of directing class work.²² McKay's sister, Jeanette McKay Morrell, remembered that there was a "great need for reorganization in preparation and presentation of lessons."²³ As a result McKay refined and implemented the following Sunday School practices: (1) a collection of uniform lessons, (2) a program for grading students (at the time grading was a way of determining which class students should be assigned to), (3) a definite course of study for each department, and (4) an adequate teaching force in each ward with corresponding supervisors for every department of the stake board.²⁴ It should be reiterated that McKay was not the superintendent of the Weber Stake Sunday School when he implemented these changes; rather, he was the second counselor.

Professionally, McKay was a teacher and later the principal of Weber Stake Academy during this time. He was also instrumental in establishing a Sunday School course modeled after the one offered at Brigham Young Academy as part of the academy's curriculum during the 1899–1900 school year.²⁵ This short-term course that usually ran from November to April was discontinued in 1905. The classes taught in the Sunday School course concentrated on the theory and practice of teaching on the Sabbath.²⁶ Jennie Marshall Niel tells us that when she was thirteen years old she enrolled in the Sunday School course at Weber Stake Academy. Her teacher, David O. McKay, required the students to "select a text, develop an aim (i.e., objective), make an outline, and [implement] application." When a new schoolhouse was built, Niel was "chosen at 14 to be an assistant school teacher." Her main qualification for this position was her completion of the Weber Academy Sunday School course.²⁷ Another McKay implementation was the founding of monthly union meetings for all ward Sunday School teachers and officers. "Under the tutelage of his trained stake board members, the ward teachers were given training in the selection of an aim, in the organizing, and presenting of each lesson, so as to make vivid application of the aim to each class member."²⁸ McKay required accountability from every Sunday School worker. For instance, under his leadership stake board members were to visit each ward Sunday School every week and report their findings. Ward teachers also met together weekly in order to prepare their lessons.²⁹ This kind of direction was a major development at Weber in 1900. McKay sought support for his plan by presenting it to the stake board, who accepted it. The ward superintendencies then accepted it, and most Sunday School teachers endorsed it, though many of the teachers expressed their inability to outline lessons and adopt these new methods.

However, after trying McKay's method, the majority of them supported the plan.³⁰

News of the great success the Weber Stake Sunday School and Academy were experiencing spread quickly. The last visit Karl G. Maeser made as superintendent of Church Schools was to Weber Academy—he expressed how well it was doing. And young David McKay gave the closing prayer.³¹ Eventually, this success was noticed by the general leadership of the Church. In 1905, McKay “organized and directed a parents’ convention which was held in the Ogden tabernacle. This convention was the beginning of a parents’ class that would become part of the regular Sunday school course offerings.” Much to his surprise, Church President and Deseret Sunday School Union President Joseph F. Smith was among the attendees of McKay’s convention. Smith was anxious to have the Sabbath school teachers better trained. As early as 1894, he had made overtures for Sunday School teachers to receive instruction at Brigham Young Academy:

Latter-day Saints are generally aware of the fact that we have Sabbath schools, which are of vast importance to our children, and which are necessary for the good of our youth. It is requisite at this advanced stage of our proceedings and experience that men and women should have opportunity of becoming qualified for the labor and duty of Sabbath school instructors. For this purpose we have established in the Brigham Young Academy at Provo a normal class, to which Sunday School teachers may go and receive instruction from the best intelligence and under the best rules that we know of, by which they may become qualified to more efficiently and effectively teach the children in the Sabbath schools.³²

Seeing McKay’s teacher training programs, Smith might have seen McKay as someone who could also “give instruction from the best intelligence.” Smith was pleased by McKay’s ideas and investigated his other implementations at the time. McKay’s work in the Sunday School was the impetus for his being included in the general leadership of the Church and is among his greatest contributions to the modernization of the Church.

George R. Hill (1921–2001), a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy who also served as the general superintendent of Sunday Schools, concurred: “Of the many contributions of . . . David O. McKay, none are of greater significance or more far reaching than those relating to unity in Sunday school work and the techniques of organization and presentation of Sunday school lessons. Indeed, he has often been called the ‘Father of the Modern Sunday School.’”³³

Apostle and Sunday School General Superintendency

In 1905 President Joseph F. Smith asked McKay to write an article about his programs. McKay's article, "The Lesson Aim: How to Select It: How to Develop It; How to Apply It," appeared in the Sunday School periodical, *Juvenile Instructor*.³⁴ On 8 April 1906, at the age of thirty-three and after working six years in the Weber Stake Sunday School, he was called to be an Apostle in the Church. On 6 October 1906 he had been called to be the second assistant to President Joseph F. Smith in the General Superintendency of the Sunday Schools. McKay immediately organized a Church-wide convention for all stake Sunday School superintendents and boards that was held on Thursday, 4 April 1907. In his opening remarks, McKay outlined the purpose of the convention: "The object of this convention is to bring about some unity in our work. . . . We need unity of effort in everything that pertains to the development of the child's soul. . . . We would like to exchange ideas. We want your suggestions. . . . We would like every point to be discussed . . . so that you may go out from this convention, knowing what the decision of your department upon each particular subject is."³⁵

McKay was always organized in his approach. Two examples during the convention identified his efficiency. All delegates were provided with notebooks and pencils and encouraged to take copious notes; and, when they separated into departments, they did so by "orderly marching."³⁶ "Marching order for students going and coming" was an idea suggested years before by Karl J. Maeser, and McKay made sure this practice was continued at the convention.³⁷ Results of this convention included the adoption of "unified standards in the opening exercises and in classwork, [and] the inauguration of a system of follow up by stake board members at monthly union meetings."³⁸ Other convention achievements are found in the *Juvenile Instructor* of 1 May 1907.³⁹

On 4 April 1909, three years after his call as second assistant, McKay became Smith's first assistant and in 1918, he became the general superintendent. This appointment established a new precedence. On 27 November 1918, the First Presidency announced they would no longer serve as presidents of various auxiliary organizations. As president of the Deseret Sunday School Union, McKay chose Stephen L Richards and George Pyper as assistants. He served in this position for the next sixteen years. During his tenure as Sunday School general superintendent, he introduced ideas that became standard

throughout the Church. During this time, McKay also wrote *Ancient Apostles*, which was used as one of the first official manuals for the Sunday School.⁴⁰

Implementation

The implementation of Sunday School practices that McKay instituted in Weber Stake in 1900 literally revolutionized Sunday School teaching.⁴¹ Several months after the new superintendency was sustained, Mormon Tabernacle organist and German-Austrian Mission president Edward P. Kimball paid the following tribute to Superintendent McKay:

Elder David O. McKay is signally honored by his call to preside over the Sunday Schools of the Church in all the world. His appointment comes as a merited recognition for the faithfulness and zeal which he has displayed during his long association with the Sunday Schools. That confidence in his training for the great responsibility of his new calling, and in his capabilities in and fidelity to the great Sunday School cause, exhibited by his brethren in placing him at the head of the wonderful work, will find an echo in the heart of every Sunday School worker throughout the Church.⁴²

McKay's efforts had an impact on the way all Sunday School workers fulfilled their callings. As general superintendent, he began to apply the successful plans he previously developed in the Weber Stake. Parents' classes became part of the curriculum throughout the Church, and progressive courses of study covered all ages from kindergarten through the parents' classes. Lessons were graded (to assign students to age groups), and members of each department had definite assignments to complete before being promoted.⁴³

McKay maintained a busy schedule visiting various Latter-day Saint stakes and implementing his program. For instance, between 9 July and 10 December 1927, he visited twelve stakes in such distant locales as Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada; Star Valley, Wyoming; and Boise, Idaho.⁴⁴ His emphasis for Sunday School work focused on the development of children's character. He was convinced that children were born "Tabula rasa."⁴⁵ In his words, he believed children came "from the Father pure and undefiled, without inherent taints or weakness. . . . Their souls . . . [were] as stainless white paper on which . . . [was] written the aspirations and achievements of a lifetime." McKay saw the Sunday School as an organization that could establish the "formation of character and guidance of childhood."⁴⁶

Sunday School curriculum also seems to be much different before McKay came into the superintendency in 1906. In 1897 McKay's predecessor

Deseret Sunday School general superintendent George Q. Cannon felt that the Sunday School teachers should teach children to “soften their manners and teach them proper deportment and good behavior.”⁴⁷ And in 1899, just seven years before McKay came into Sunday School leadership, Cannon felt that some of the most important curriculum for the Sunday School students was “getting them to observe the Sabbath day and to refrain from visiting the street corners, behaving rudely and boisterously.”⁴⁸

In juxtaposition, McKay wanted to develop children’s character. For McKay, character did not just mean moral development or intellectual prowess, but the actualization of the divine potential within each individual.

Gaining knowledge is one thing, and applying it is another. Wisdom is the right application of knowledge to the development of a noble and Godlike character. A man may possess a profound knowledge of history and mathematics; he may be an authority in physiology, biology, or astronomy. He may know all about whatever has been discovered pertaining to general and natural science, but if he does not, with this knowledge, have that nobility of soul which prompts him to deal justly with his fellowmen to practice virtue and honesty, he is not a truly educated man.⁴⁹

McKay felt the Sunday School stood for education, and its very purpose was to promulgate truth among men. McKay placed importance on the developing of the mind, of thoughtful thinking and reflection about life. McKay believed teachers were to be involved with more than subject matter. A teacher should “teach the student how to study; train [the student] to think.”⁵⁰ McKay practiced this principle. He once told educators, “I never tell a story to children who do not think. There is no use in talking to children who do not think.”⁵¹

In 1928 McKay announced a new plan for Sunday Schools where he would more fully implement his progressive education ideas. This announcement shifted formal theological study from the weekly priesthood meetings, which male members attended, to the Sunday Schools, which were to be lengthened to two hours. Lessons for adults were to be prepared under the direction of the apostles. Another change included switching the adult class from a “Parents’ Class” to a “Gospel Doctrine Class.” Sunday School superintendent McKay regarded these developments as a “distinct epoch” in the seventy-nine-year history of Sunday School.⁵² Then in 1928 McKay also published a plan that defined every aspect of the Sunday School organization including enrollment, curriculum, schedule, organization, atmosphere, teacher training, student responsibility, and stake board directives.

Courses

McKay desired that every man, woman, and child be enrolled in Sunday School.⁵³ “Students were graded by age levels, with a definite course of study and a stake board supervisor for each group.”⁵⁴ Suggested courses and departments for the Sunday School included: kindergarten department for four to six years of age that used the textbook *Sunday Morning in the Kindergarten*; primary department for children seven to nine years of age in which Bible stories were taught; Church history department for ten- to eleven-year-olds; Book of Mormon department for students ages twelve to fourteen; Old Testament study for fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds; and New Testament course for eighteen- to twenty-year-old students. Students planning on serving a mission were enrolled in a one-year course of study in the missionary department and adults attended Gospel Doctrine class.⁵⁵

Curriculum

Regardless of the age of the student, all lessons had “a central truth.” These truths were found in the accepted scriptures of the Church (i.e., the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price).⁵⁶ McKay also exerted great effort to supply wards with more books and manuals that would assist teachers in interpreting the gospel. General Authorities as well as expert teachers wrote most of these books. The overall blanket of truth to be taught to everyone in the Sunday School was the “nobility of character” which was to “be recognized as being greater than intellect.”⁵⁷ The motivating ideal for Sunday School students was for them to develop a character where “faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and loyalty to the standards and principles of His Restored Gospel would become ‘motivating ideals’ in their lives.”⁵⁸

Organization

To accomplish such goals, plans were announced on 8 October 1927 “for the establishment of a uniform Gospel study period between the hours of ten and twelve Sunday mornings throughout the Church.” The Sunday School presidency meticulously planned the two hours of Sunday School as follows:

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|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. 10:00 to 10:05 | Prayer meeting |
| 2. 10:10 to 10:15 | Preliminary devotional music |
| 3. 10:15 to 10:45 | School commences |

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|-------------------|--|
| | a. Notices (appropriate and brief) |
| | b. Singing |
| | c. Prayer |
| | d. Singing (sacramental) |
| | e. Prelude |
| | f. Sacramental gem |
| | g. Postlude |
| | h. Administration of sacrament |
| | i. Concert recitation |
| 4. 10:45 to 11:00 | Singing practice (15 minutes) |
| 5. 11:00 to 11:50 | Department work |
| 6. 11:50 to 12:00 | 1. Comparative report of attendance
(Abstract of Minutes) |
| | 2. Brief remarks (if desired) |
| | 3. Singing |
| | 4. Benediction ⁵⁹ |

Historian Jim Allen relates his own experience in Sunday School in the 1930s and 1940s, when McKay's developments were in full force.

I went to Sunday School with my parents every Sunday morning. Originally of course, Sunday School was for the youth, but McKay institutionalized the adult class, making it not just a parent's class but a class for all adults. Our day began in the chapel with announcements, a song, prayer, a sacramental gem of some sort, and the sacrament, with devotional music in the background. (We took the sacrament twice each Sunday in those days—once in Sunday School and again during sacrament meeting in the evening!) We then had at least 15 minutes of song practice—something I really miss, for nowadays we are too often called upon to sing hymns we have never practiced and simply do not know. Then on to classes, as the pianist played “Onward Christian Soldiers” or some other tune with a marching cadence. After class, we went back to the chapel for a dismissal song and prayer. How times have changed!⁶⁰

Besides organizing a detailed schedule, McKay meticulously described the duties of every member of the Sunday School organization, including the general board, stake board, ward superintendent, bishop, teacher, and pupil.⁶¹ McKay saw each of these individuals contributing to the success of the program and offered detailed instructions about every aspect of the Sunday School.

McKay also instituted a weekly preparation meeting for all officers and teachers in each ward where details of the next Sunday were discussed. Stakes were to hold monthly union meetings where all officers and teachers of the wards would come together and discuss plans for the coming month. At the

close of the union meeting all teachers left with outlines for the next month.⁶² Although McKay seemed to have paid attention to detail relentlessly, he also was very concerned with building the self-esteem of all individuals. An example of this is evident in some instruction he gave his son David Lawrence McKay, who also served in the Sunday School General Superintendency. Barrie McKay, a law partner of David Lawrence, noted: "A person serving with him [David Lawrence] was being very negative. This person did one thing right and David O. McKay said to his son David Lawrence, 'Did you capitalize on the one positive thing this individual did?' David Lawrence answered, 'No!' David O. McKay then told him that he had missed a golden opportunity, that his personality could have been changed from that one impetus. Emphasizing the positive was one of the main [tenets] of his philosophy."⁶³

Atmosphere

McKay wanted the physical surroundings to also permeate a positive radiance. As members of the Church arrived at their Sunday morning meetings, McKay pictured a house of worship with an inviting atmosphere in which "the principles of punctuality, courtesy, self-control, respect for authority, studiousness, responsiveness and particularly reverence and worship would impregnate the atmosphere that even the dullard by absorption will be benefited."⁶⁴ McKay always saw punctuality as a vital part of eliminating the "static from the Sunday School."⁶⁵ He did not tolerate tardiness.

Instead, he believed that, if the mechanical part of the meeting was conducted with as little thought on Sunday morning as possible, then the spiritual and intellectual capacities of teachers would be used to develop the "true spiritual culture of the child." McKay believed that such factors as "looking after a little door, or moving a desk, or the arranging of a class, or the appointing of a teacher" should be taken care of outside of Sunday School time. He wanted each Sunday School to have a formal atmosphere and even suggested that the classes march when changing areas.⁶⁶ Before 1928 McKay found the atmosphere, as previously noted, of the Sunday School less than ideal. He found that classrooms were "places of boisterousness" if the lesson was not properly presented, or even worse, had not been properly prepared—then the members were rebellious, paid no attention, and fought with another.⁶⁷

Stake board members

McKay encouraged stake board members to visit and record the progress that was made in each Sunday School classroom. When stake board members came to visit, teachers were encouraged to show respect. Some teachers who possibly did not understand why this was necessary were informed that regard should be shown merely for the “position and the representation of the authority.” Teachers were promised by the general board that, if they would show respect to these board members their pupils would, in turn, give them the respect that they deserved.⁶⁸

Along with teachers and students, stake board members were given detailed instruction for their roles as visitors, observers, and evaluators in the Sunday School organization. A new term was coined by McKay to exaggerate negative board member behavior. Stake visitors were not to visit in “the spirit of snooper-vision.” McKay envisioned a positive type of supervision that was “cooperative and democratic in spirit, not inspectional and autocratic.” He encouraged board members to think of themselves as teachers at Sunday School.⁶⁹

Teacher training

McKay sincerely believed that “if a teacher was well taught and had prepared a lesson” that discipline problems would dissipate. Therefore, much of McKay’s focus in his 1928 plan was on teacher training. If teachers were to be effective shepherds, responsible guardians, and proper examples, they must be properly trained and prepared. McKay felt proper teacher education played a critical role in the Sunday School. To be effective, a well-prepared teacher must know the subject, the student, and how to teach the student so he or she masters the subject. McKay’s philosophy stated:

There are three things which must guide all teachers: first, get into subject; second, get that subject into you; third, try to lead your pupils to get the subject into them—not pouring it into them, but leading them to see what you see, to know what you know, to feel what you feel.⁷⁰

On another occasion, McKay wrote:

To achieve this goal, teachers must teach students, not subjects alone; students will acquire subjects. A good teacher realizes that his most important purpose in teaching is—

First, to inspire the student to love study; awaken within him a desire to rise above himself.

Second, to teach the student how to study; train him to think. Or, in other words, inspire the student to love truth, and second, teach him how to find it. Accomplish that, and the student will do the rest, as he should.⁷¹

The primary purpose of education was to promote this development. For education to accomplish this task, it must be guided by appropriate aims and proper pedagogy. The role of the teacher and the proper preparation of the teacher are critical in the provision of the education that will achieve its lofty goal. McKay wrote: “The skill of an able teacher is not shown in imparting instruction, but in the awakening in the mind of the student a desire for learning and in directing him how to obtain it.”⁷² He outlined the teachers’ role and how each lesson should be taught. More importantly, he believed in teaching by example. He did not lead by administering. People wanted to please him. He would not “just talk being positive—he would walk it.”⁷³ He often demonstrated his idea of the ideal teacher for other Sunday School workers.

In McKay’s plan, each teacher would be prepared to teach every week. He stated that adequate preparation was distinguishable by the following characteristics:

1. it is undertaken early enough for reflection;
2. it includes the rejection of more material than is presented;
3. all material is organized by outline; and
4. there is an illustration of concrete principle.⁷⁴

For every lesson, three detailed subsections were to be prepared in outline form. The first section included “the selection of the aim [objective]; the second included the development of the aim; and the third included illustration and application.”⁷⁵ Teachers were “to arrange topics logically, suggest a timely illustration from outside the text, and write a practical application of each lesson according to the child’s life.”⁷⁶ In describing the aim, McKay basically described what modern educators call an objective. The following suggestions helped teachers to select an aim. Teachers were expected to

1. study the limitations of the subject
2. get the mental picture, not a page image
3. choose aim from entire lesson, not from an incidental part
4. study limitation of the lesson
5. choose aim that appeals to you;

6. keep the application in mind
7. let your aim contain or be a moral truth
8. let your aim [be clear] for each lesson, though a series of lessons might be on the same topic;
9. in choosing [an] aim keep the same point of view.⁷⁷

After selecting the aim, teachers were to illustrate it in some other way. The illustration could be defined as a description of a circumstance that proved the same truth. McKay preferred that the illustrations came from the teachers' personal experiences or from modern Church history. Before the application, teachers were to encourage students to "express a belief or a disbelief in the aim."⁷⁸

According to McKay, the application was the most important part of the lesson outline. In defining it, he stated that application is "the emotion that springs from the search for truth . . . [or it can be] specific instances into which the aim can be introduced for practical uses, [or it may be called] . . . the avenue of action."⁷⁹ The aim, illustration, and application were to be outlined. General board members were to help teachers understand that the process of outlining was a natural, easy process and that it could be mastered by anyone. McKay gave specific, detailed instruction on how board members were to present outlining to stake leaders.⁸⁰ Although McKay placed significance on developing the outline, he clearly stated that when teachers stood in front of the class they were not to be dependent on it. The outline was simply to aid the teachers in getting everything in their mind so that when they gave the lesson they could keep their attention on the class.⁸¹

McKay also provided a detailed list of methodologies teachers could use successfully in the Sunday School classroom. He listed (1) recitation, (2) the story method, (3) the reading round method, (4) the specific topic method, (5) the lecture method, and (6) the discussion method, which is built through questions and answers. Although the general board did not explain each method, it always suggested books by popular professional educators of the day that explained those methods in detail.⁸² Nevertheless, whatever methodology the teachers used, they were always encouraged to let children discover the truth of the lesson.⁸³

The last aspect of teacher preparation was considered by McKay to be the most important. In fact, he stated that "no Sunday School teacher could succeed without it" and that was "prayerful preparation."⁸⁴ He envisioned all

teachers having within their minds “a sincere and prayerful desire to awaken . . . at least one heart every Sunday.”⁸⁵

Student responsibility

Likewise, McKay expected students to become enlightened by prayer, reflection, study, and observation. The general board valued students’ attitudes over their aptitudes. A publication from the general board of the Sunday School stated:

Students, who approach their study with interest and enthusiasm, and with a consciousness that they are doing and learning something genuinely worthwhile, put forth much greater effort and accordingly learn with greater facility than do those who are indifferent or perhaps rebellious toward their work. This emotional reaction either stimulates or retards learning, and is in fact more indicative of ultimate success or failure than the student’s IQ rating.⁸⁶

McKay’s influence and interest in the Sunday School continued even when he became the President of the Church in 1951. Such simple decisions as what kind of roll book would be best or the authorizing of a manual were important enough matters to be considered by President McKay. Even while serving as the prophet, McKay continued to see Sunday School as a vital organ within the body of the Church.

David O. McKay: Father of the Sunday School

As head of the Sunday School organization, McKay implemented practices that transformed it. Among his accomplishments were (1) formalized, uniform teaching materials, (2) bringing order to teaching by clarifying objectives, and (3) training teachers by using the professional methods he had learned as a professional educator himself. His closest colleague, Stephen L Richards, observed that “he brought untold improvement in . . . teaching procedure.”⁸⁷ David O. McKay brought greater organizational strength and vision to the Deseret Sunday School Union of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a solid supporter of education and advocate of lifelong learning. The strength of the Sunday School program through the growth of the Church can be appropriately attributed to him and his influence. Bryant S. Hinckley felt that the Sunday School and David O. McKay were a perfect fit: “[The] work appeal[ed] to the best and the finest that is in Elder McKay. He brought to it, not only an undivided heart, but the strength and devotion of all his splendid powers. He put into the organization a part of the sublime

and attractive faith so manifest in his own life. Through the Sunday School he has fostered two major objectives of the Church—the development of faith and the building of character and he has left forever upon it the impress of his shining personality.”⁸⁸

Five decades later the question arises as to whether his accomplishments are still felt in the Sunday School program. In 1996 President Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles responded to this question: “It is a different Church. It is a worldwide Church. President McKay died in 1970 and much of the Church expansion has taken place since then, so it is a different world.”⁸⁹ Elder David B. Haight, who served as an Apostle from 1976 to 2004, had firsthand knowledge of the inner workings of the Church Sunday School. He observed, “David O. McKay’s influence was a strong factor in improving teaching in general.”⁹⁰ One of Elder Haight’s first assignments as a General Authority of the Church was to work with the teacher development program. (That program was later dissolved in 1994 but has been replaced in 2016 with the new teacher council program.) One of the reasons for this as seen by Elder Haight was a “challenge to keep the program simple and to keep it moving.”⁹¹ However, on the same occasion Elder Haight also stated: “I don’t think we’re doing very well with teacher training. Previously our training teachers was important enough to be a separate operation. It was not just part of the Sunday School Superintendency because members of the Sunday School Superintendency were not always teachers; therefore, it was a separate influence.”⁹² However, Haight’s concerns were addressed recently in the implementation of the new teacher council program, along with a new teacher manual, *Teaching in the Savior’s Way*. McKay’s influence can be seen throughout these two new programs, which the *Deseret News* called radical changes to the Sunday School.⁹³ Ronald Schwendiman, Church director of publishing product management, stated, “We have had a revolution in teaching in the church.”⁹⁴ The new *Come, Follow Me* resources for learning and teaching the gospel introduced in 2019 greatly resemble the discussion method based on questions and answers that McKay advocated. Echoing McKay’s monthly union meetings, the new monthly teaching councils involve all teachers in a ward “counseling together about what is working well, where they are struggling and discuss the new learning model.”⁹⁵ As one looks at these developments, the new changes are, in many aspects, a reintroduction of McKay’s ideas.

One might speculate what McKay would think about the present Sunday School program. One of his personal secretaries mused that McKay “would not be pleased with the way Sunday school has evolved.”⁹⁶ On the other hand, President Henry B. Eyring, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, then serving in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, defended the present Sunday School system after he watched developments while his father served on the general board and then later while he himself served on that board. Elder Eyring affirmed that even though there is “less training and coaching,” there is “more diversity and variety. . . . The best teachers are putting out better quality than ever before. . . . More Sunday School teachers on the average [are] testifying in Sunday School teaching.”⁹⁷

Individuals must experience the history of the Latter-day Saint Sunday School and decide whether it has improved or diminished. A more important aspect of the study of McKay and his influence on the Sunday School is gleaned from the truths he taught. All teachers can improve their performance by implementing McKay’s principles of teaching. One must agree that in the passing century since his death both the world and the Church have changed. However, it is evident that the remarkable success David O. McKay experienced with the Sunday School program was due to his grasp and knowledge of teaching and organization. His desire was that the Sunday School would continue to provide “true education” for his students. For McKay,

True education seeks . . . to make men and women not only good mathematicians, proficient linguists, profound scientists, or brilliant literary lights, but also honest men . . . with virtue, temperance, and brotherly love—men and women who prize truth, justice, wisdom, benevolence, and self-control as the choicest acquisitions of a successful life.⁹⁸

Perhaps this is the greatest educational legacy of David O. McKay—to remind us of the true aim and purpose of all forms of education. His educational ideas have as much to offer us today as they did to his generation, perhaps even more. **RE**

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