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Teachers' Work:

Changing Patterns and Perceptions in the Emerging School Systems of Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Central Canada

Marta Danylewycz and Alison Prentice

THE CONTRACT OF Miss Ellen McGuire, dated 1 June 1880, spelled out government teachers' duties as they were understood at that time in the province of Quebec. As mistress of District School No. 3 in the township of Lowe, she agreed to

exercise an efficient supervision over the pupils attending the school; to teach such subjects as are authorized and to make use only of duly approved school books; to fill up all blank forms which may be sent her by the Department of Public Instruction, the Inspectors or Commissioners; to keep all school registers required; to preserve amongst the archives of the school such copy books and other works of the pupils which she may be ordered to put aside; to keep the school-rooms in good order and not to allow them to be used for any other purpose without permission to that effect; to follow such rules as may be established for discipline and punishment; to preserve carefully the *Journal of Education*; in a word to fulfill all the duties of a good teacher; to hold school every day, except on Sundays, and festivals and on the holidays authorized by the Commissioners or granted by proper authority.¹

Miss McGuire's contract stated that it was "in conformity with" the Quebec School Act of 1878 and, like many teacher contracts of the period, was on a printed form provided by the Quebec Department of Public Instruction. Her duties, as spelled out in the printed engagement, were those put forward by the department as the standard for any government schoolteacher in the province.

In subsequent years, provincial regulations and contract forms included further detail. Indeed, the very next year, the contract of Philomène Lachance of the parish of St. Croix, St. Flavien, already stipulated that it was the teacher's duty to supervise pupils, whether they were in or out of class, as long as they were "under her view." It was further agreed that Mlle. Lachance

¹ Engagement of Ellen McGuire, 1 June 1880, Education Records, E 13, Archives Nationales du Québec (hereafter ANQ).

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would keep the school register and children's books in a cupboard especially designed for that purpose. The teacher was expressly forbidden to use any of the schoolrooms to entertain unauthorized visitors. The contract also sounded a cautionary note regarding the use of corporal punishment, which was to be discouraged. Finally, the teacher was to be properly dressed and to set a good example of "cleanliness" and "savoir vivre."²

Teacher contracts such as those of Ellen McGuire and Philomène Lachance outline the major areas of teachers' work in state-supported elementary schools in the latter part of the nineteenth century. They deal with the subjects to be taught, the paperwork, and the discipline of both pupils and the teacher herself. They speak, if only briefly, of the teacher's duty to take care of the schoolroom and its property. On the other hand, the contracts say nothing about the responsibility of the school commissioners towards the teacher and the school. Although they failed to mention class size, the state of school buildings, heating and cleaning arrangements, or even the locations of schools, these factors too affected teachers' work. *Teacher's contracts, therefore, left much unsaid.*

They nevertheless serve as a useful starting point for examining the history of teachers' work in a vital period of transition. The following discussion, which is part of a larger, ongoing study of Quebec and Ontario public school teachers, focuses on the crucial years in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when state school systems were in the process of being established and teacher work forces were becoming disproportionately female across both provinces. We have probed elsewhere some of the major problems addressed by our explorations in this history, such as teachers' class and ethnic origins, the question of their changing ages, marital, and household status, and the overwhelmingly important issue of gender as it affected all of these questions, or was addressed by school reformers and teachers of the time.³ In this exploratory essay, our focus is on the actual work of teachers in the schoolroom, as this appears to have been understood and as this understanding changed during the crucial years of school system development in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is taken as a given that, increasingly, the teachers we are studying were women.

As we analyzed the history of teachers in this period, we were struck by two interesting lacunae in most previous historical considerations of the subject. Educational historians have tended on the whole to treat turn-of-the-century school mistresses and masters as incipient professionals or, more disparag-

² Engagement of Philomène Lachance, 11 July 1881, E 13, ANQ.

³ Alison Prentice, "The Feminization of Teaching in British North America and Canada, 1845-1875," *Social History/Histoire sociale*, 8 (1975), 5-20; Marta Danylewycz, Beth Light, and Alison Prentice, "The Evolution of the Sexual Division of Labour in Teaching: A Nineteenth Century Ontario and Quebec Case Study," *Social History/Histoire sociale*, 16 (1983), 81-109; Marta Danylewycz and Alison Prentice, "Teachers, Gender and Bureaucratizing School Systems in Nineteenth Century Montreal and Toronto," *History of Education Quarterly*, 24 (1984), 75-100.

ingly, as professionals "manqués," shying away from any concrete consideration of the work that they actually did. The story has often been told as a tragedy: an account of the failure of teaching to become a "genuine profession." In one Canadian analysis, this failure was explicitly attributed, at least in part, to the influx of inexperienced and malleable young girls into the occupation and the resulting devaluing of the work of experienced and well trained males. Equally, labour historians have not seen teachers as part of the changing work force that needs to be examined in their analyses of the emergence of industrial capitalism. As Graham Lowe has shown to be the case with clerical workers, teachers also have not fitted very well into the classic model of workers perceived to be men doing manual, as opposed to intellectual or managerial, work.⁴ Teachers, on the contrary, have been seen and portrayed as "brainworkers;" and as either actually or ideally the managers, at the very least, of children if not of other adults. In addition, they were very clearly not working *men*, since so many, as time went on, were in fact women. Thus, teachers *as workers* have been left out of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century labour history, just as they have been ignored in the history of education. Recently, investigations by Michael Apple on the position of twentieth-century American teachers, and Barry Bergen, Jennifer Ozga, and Martin Lawn on their late nineteenth- and twentieth-century British counterparts, have called into question both the tendency to focus exclusively on teachers' status as either incipient or failed professionals and the tendency to ignore them as workers. By looking carefully at the meaning of changes in teachers' work and working conditions, and by introducing the concept of gender, these studies begin, rather, to develop a convincing argument for the "proletarianization" of the teacher labour force.⁵

Our task, in the light of these considerations, was to try to come to grips more concretely than has been the case in the past with what teachers did in their daily work and how this work changed during the period of state school system construction in central Canada. As our concern was to try to get a general picture, we have ignored many details and interesting comparative questions, perhaps blurring very real differences between teachers' work in Quebec and Ontario, in Catholic and Protestant, or rural and urban schools. Nor have we focused very sharply on emerging differences between the roles of

⁴ André Labarrère-Paulé, *Les Instituteurs laïques au Canada français, 1836-1900*, (Québec 1965). J.G. Althouse, *The Ontario Teacher: A Historical Account of Progress, 1800-1910* (1929; Toronto 1967) focuses on the "rise" of the professional teacher, but avoids discussing the question of gender. Graham S. Lowe, "Class, Job and Gender in the Canadian Office," *Labour/Le Travail* 10 (1982), 11-37.

⁵ Michael W. Apple, "Work, Class and Teaching," in Stephen Walker and Len Barton, eds., *Gender, Class and Education* (New York 1983), 53-67; Jennifer Ozga and Martin Lawn, *Teachers, Professionalism and Class: A Study of Organized Teachers* (London 1981); Barry H. Bergen, "Only a Schoolmaster: Gender, Class and the Effort to Professionalize Elementary Teaching in England, 1870-1910," *History of Education Quarterly*, 22 (1982), 1-21.

teaching assistants and principal teachers or even between those of men and women. Our concern, rather, has been to look at what was going on in nearly all nineteenth-century state-supported elementary schools, in both provinces, in all their regional, religious, and ethnic variety, to try to find the common denominators that seemed to have been affecting nearly all teachers, whatever *their backgrounds or places in schools and school systems*. In a reading of the annual reports of the Ontario and Quebec provincial departments of public instruction, the reports of the Montreal Catholic School Commission and the Toronto Public School Board, the *Journal of Education for Upper Canada*, and the *Educational Record of the Province of Quebec*, as well as a sampling of the correspondence of the two provincial education departments and other scattered sources, we in fact discovered a number of recurring themes. These included the introduction of new subjects and new teaching methods into nineteenth- and early twentieth-century schoolrooms; the introduction and phenomenal growth of paperwork; and a growing emphasis on discipline and hierarchy, as well as on uniformity of practice and routine. Pupil and teacher health and the question of the physical maintenance of schools and classrooms also emerged as important questions for analysis. Documents of the period make it clear, in other words, that an understanding of teachers' work must include a consideration not only of their tasks, but also of the changing conditions under which they performed them. Finally, teachers' work was affected by less tangible factors. Their own perceptions, and the perceptions of their employers, regarding the economic and social position of schoolmistresses and schoolmasters, as well as assumptions about what work was compatible with that position, also played a role. Here great tensions were generated, tensions that explain the contradictory policies pursued by the women teachers' associations which emerged at the turn of the century, as they sought to improve their members' conditions of work and to define the position of women teachers in the labour force.

I

New Subjects, More Teaching

DESPITE THE PROFOUND differences in the organization and structure of the Ontario and Quebec public school systems, both were settling into an era of consolidation and growth by the 1880s. Having weathered the storms of local opposition to the intervention of central authorities in the establishment of schools, and having asserted their dominance over teacher certification and classroom instruction, provincial educational leaders were now in a position to expand the functions of the institutions they increasingly controlled. The lengthening of the period of formal schooling and the broadening of the public school curriculum were part of that expansion and both developments directly affected the work of teachers. As children remained in school longer, class sizes and schools grew proportionally; and as students had to master a broader range of subjects, the workload of many teachers increased.



Teaching Toronto school children hygiene at the Forest School, Victoria Park, August 1913. This special summer program in an outdoor school evolved from health instruction in the regular program. Toronto Board of Education Series, No. 117. Toronto Board of Education Archives.



The author of this 1882 article wondered if the disgruntled school mistresses of certain Quebec parishes where there were teacher shortages were simply "on strike" against work that was hard and poorly paid. Former teachers, she claimed, were choosing to be cooks or maids rather than carry on in schools. A.D. CeCelles, *Journal de l'Instruction Publique*, 2 (October 1882).

The 1871 Ontario School Law, which made schooling compulsory for children between the ages of seven and twelve, also called for the addition of agriculture and drawing to the long established elementary school programme of reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and grammar. The 1880s saw the introduction in Ontario of hygiene, temperance, and calisthenics into the curriculum, and the turn of the century brought in manual training and domestic science. The annual reports of the Department of Education recording the number of children learning the new subjects following their introduction attest to the widening of teachers' responsibilities during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The number of children studying drawing, for example, increased eight fold between 1870 and 1900; the number taking hygiene increased six fold; and the number taking drill and calisthenics increased three fold between 1880 and 1900.⁶

Similar developments occurred in Quebec, producing comparable alterations in the work of teachers. Although compulsory education was not legislated until 1940, a rise in school attendance, owing to growing enrollment and the lengthening of the period of formal schooling, was evident by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Moreover, as was the case in Ontario, so too in Quebec were agriculture, drawing, hygiene, calisthenics, and domestic science beginning to be integrated into the public elementary school curriculum during the closing decades of the nineteenth century.⁷

In both provinces curricular reform created much consternation among teachers. Not having been consulted about or forewarned of changes in elementary school programmes, they were frequently overwhelmed by the new demands being made of them. "Can anyone tell us where we are drifting to in this matter of additional text-books and increasing number of subjects?" asked one Montreal teacher of a teachers' journal. It was this teacher's hope that the editor would throw some light on the "impossible goal" towards which teachers were "expected to hasten."⁸ Teachers such as this correspondent were often troubled by their lack of preparation to teach the new subjects. Many responded by simply ignoring the pressure to introduce them, arguing that this was justified as long as the central authorities did not provide proper instruction manuals or opportunities for teacher retraining. Because both provinces were slow in helping teachers out of the conundrum the new subjects created, such resistance endured.⁹

Central authorities, for their part, may have counted on the high turnover

⁶ *Annual Reports of the Chief Superintendent of Schools for Ontario, 1870-1900.*

⁷ *Ibid.* and *Annual Reports of the Superintendent for the Province of Quebec, 1870-1900.*

⁸ *Educational Record of the Province of Quebec* 13, 1 (1893), 28.

⁹ *Educational Record* 9, 12 (1889), 324. Resistance to curricular reform in Quebec can be traced in a variety of sources. For references to complaints coming from rural schools, see the letters in *Education Records*, E 13, 615-44, 614-50, 615-200, and 615-82, ANQ.

rate among teachers to flush out the older and ill-equipped masters and mistresses who would, they must have reasoned, eventually be replaced by normal school graduates trained in the teaching of the new subjects. But normal school training remained the exception rather than the rule in both Ontario and Quebec. The majority of teachers moved into the occupation through other channels, generally by attending model or convent schools and then presenting themselves to local boards of examiners. Moreover, within the teaching corps there were increasing numbers of persisters or career teachers whose training pre-dated curricular reform. If in the early days educational authorities satisfied themselves by assuming that such teachers would train themselves in the new subjects or by reminding the recalcitrant that "the clever teachers" would be able to master them "without the aid of a manual,"¹⁰ by the last decades of the nineteenth century they began to supply some assistance. During the holidays, after school, and on weekends, schoolmistresses and masters were urged to attend provincially or locally organized classes and institutes, to learn not only the new subjects but the more modern methods of instruction and classroom management popularized by the "new education" movement of the period. These extracurricular courses, ad hoc at first, soon became a regular part of teachers' work.¹¹

II

Paperwork

IF NEW SUBJECTS added to the teacher's workload, so did the rapidly growing mounds of paperwork. As early as 1847, the chief superintendent of schools for Upper Canada had foreshadowed this work when he wrote to a local school officer to the effect that what was not put in writing did not, for the purposes of the school system, exist. What was communicated "verbally," he commented then, could not be considered "official." In this brief remark, tossed off so casually to an obscure Upper Canadian educator who must have failed to put some information crucial to his purposes on paper, the chief superintendent enunciated a principle which was to haunt teachers as well as the officers of school systems from then on.¹²

¹⁰ A reference to parent resistance to too many new subjects, and the fact that the Toronto Public School Board supported the complaint against their introduction by the provincial government, may be found in the *Annual Reports of the Toronto Public School Board*, 1872 and 1873. Reports for the remainder of the 1870s and 1880s record the work of special subject masters hired to deal with new areas like music, drill, and drawing, including the introduction of after-hours classes to train the teachers. The tone of the special subject masters' reports suggests that many urban teachers were as slow as rural teachers to accept the new subjects.

¹¹ Miss Reid, "How to keep the Little Ones Employed," *Educational Record*, 2, 10 (1882), 413.

¹² Egerton Ryerson to C. Gregor, 5 May 1847, Education Records, RG 2, C-1, Letter-book C, 355, Public Archives of Ontario (hereafter PAO). On the role of the Ryerson

It may have been the local school officers who were legally required to fill out the forms demanded by provincial authorities — and by the 1860s in Ontario, local trustees' reports covered over a hundred different items — but it was usually the teacher who had to supply the basic information. And of the "blank forms" mentioned in the Quebec teachers' contracts of the early 1880s, the most time-consuming, as well as the most vital, was probably the individual class or school register. In Canada West the daily attendance register seems to have made its appearance as early as the 1840s. In 1850 it took on a crucial role for local schools, and parents and taxpayers, for after that date the Upper Canadian school grant was distributed on the basis of average attendance rates, with the highest grants going to the schools with the best attendance. Woe betide the teacher who did not keep an accurate daily account of pupils' presence or absence in the school, for falsification of the attendance register, according to the chief superintendent's report for 1859, met with "punishment." Failure to keep it altogether jeopardized the entire school grant to the section.¹³

By the 1880s in Quebec, it was clear that individual teachers had paperwork that went beyond the compiling of the daily registers. A correspondent to the *Educational Record* explained the methods whereby teachers could compute the averages from their daily records for half-yearly reports.¹⁴ Rural Quebec teachers reported to local commissioners rather than to boards of trustees for individual schools, and an 1883 report from the county of Soulanges is evidence of some of the information that they had to include. This document, dated 19 February 1883, came from the pen of Marie Argonie Viau, *institutrice* of a school in the sixth *arrondissement* of the *Municipalité Scolaire de St Joseph*. It was two pages in length. One page listed the scholars in the school, along with their ages and the numbers of boys and girls who were studying various subjects or reading particular books. The other page consisted of a letter introducing this material, explaining its deficiencies, and requesting that the commissioners supply the teacher with a notebook so that she could comply with the requirement that an ongoing record be kept of inspectors' and commissioners' visits to her school.¹⁵

In the city of Toronto, the annual reports of the Public School Board are evidence of the reporting tasks that could be added to the work of urban teachers as school systems grew larger and more complex. In 1872, in addition to the statistical summaries of their schools' registers that were periodically

administration in the increase of paperwork in Ontario Schools, see Alison Prentice, "The Public Instructor: Egerton Ryerson and the Role of the Public School Administrator," in Neil McDonald and Alf Chaiton, eds., *Egerton Ryerson and His Times* (Toronto 1978), 129-59.

¹³ *Annual Report of the Chief Superintendent of Schools for Ontario*, 1859, 16-7.

¹⁴ *Educational Record*, 6, 3 (1886), 81-2.

¹⁵ Report of Marie Argonie Viau to the commissioners, 19 February 1883, E 13, ANQ.

required, headmasters and mistresses were asked to provide monthly lists of absentees for that month, along with the reasons for their non-attendance. In 1881, it was announced that every teacher had to keep a written record of all homework assigned to pupils. Finally, in 1891, written assessments of individual students' progress were added to the teachers' work. At the end of the school year, every teacher had to produce a "mind chart" for each pupil, along with his or her recommendations regarding the individual pupils' promotions.¹⁶

If reporting to their superiors produced one kind of paperwork for teachers, the advent of written tests and examinations produced another. Gone was the era when everything depended on the oral questioning of both pupils and teachers. Examinations for teacher certification on the one hand, and the correction and assessment of students' workbooks and examinations on the other, loomed ever larger in the work of schools. Another part of the teacher's work lay in dealing with the anxiety that examinations inevitably produced. On the occasion of the introduction of provincial examinations in Quebec in 1895, a sarcastic letter from "Amicus" appeared in the *Educational Record*, revealing the extent to which one correspondent, at least, felt that schoolmistresses and masters in Ontario had already become slaves to the unreasonable central authorities who controlled such exams. *Amicus* produced a list of injunctions which reflected what this author clearly believed were the sins the Ontario examiners had all too often committed. Failing to phrase questions simply or arrange them clearly, or to proofread the printed copies of the examinations were only a few among many. Moreover, it was really the teachers who were being examined, not their pupils. What provincial examiners wanted, *Amicus* seemed to imply, was confusion and anxiety — in short, more work for the people who were actually on the firing line in the schools, their already overburdened teachers.¹⁷

III

The Work of Supervision — And Being Supervised

BOTH *AMICUS* and Marie Argonie Viau outlined the difficulties teachers had in complying with the control mechanisms set in place by provincial schoolmen, and their comments reveal how wide the gulf could be between the expectations of central authorities and the realities teachers faced on the local level. If the laws and departmental or local regulations were problematic, even the pressures generated by reformers' supposedly helpful suggestions could have a disquieting effect. A teacher writing to the *Educational Record* in the mid-1880s captured the anxiety of many. The *Record's* advice was good, the letter implied, but hard to follow in this teacher's country school. The *Record* had suggested a school museum, but that was impossible. The "scholars would

¹⁶ *Annual Reports of the Toronto Public School Board*, 1872, 12-5; 1881, 16; 1891, 28 ff.

¹⁷ *Educational Record*, 15, 3 (1895), 91-3.

likely kill one another with the mineral specimens." Even the more standard activities of needlework and scripture reading were counted "a loss of time" in this teacher's school, where pupils no doubt continued the tradition of attending only when farm or domestic work permitted them to do so: "You have never taught schools in this country. I feel as I felt one summer when I rode for a month a very vicious horse, coaxing him a little, yet not too much, lest he should think, or rather find out, that I feared him, for then he would be sure to run away with me."¹⁸

Individual teachers were caught between the exigencies of local conditions and the demands of their superiors, and both fell heavily on them. In the 1840s it had been possible for an elderly rural teacher from the Upper Canadian District of Gore to lie on a bench and allow the pupils to read out loud to him as they gradually drifted into the school over the course of the morning. But the district superintendent, on observing this approach to school teaching, had been shocked. As he related to the chief superintendent of the province, when all the pupils were assembled he had lectured both teacher and taught on the importance of punctuality; later on he had seen to it that the old man's certificate to teach was not renewed.¹⁹ The situation of the teacher from Gore anticipated that of his successors for, as the nineteenth century wore on, the teacher's role in matters like punctuality was increasingly emphasized. One graphic illustration of how important such issues became was the astonishing drop from 69,456 cases of "lateness" reported for Toronto board schools in 1874 to only 5,976 cases in 1880. This constituted a great improvement in the eyes of the city's newly appointed school superintendent, James Hughes; how it had been achieved was not explained. Clearly, though, classroom teachers must have been involved in Hughes' campaign to reduce tardiness.²⁰

Teachers were also increasingly expected to take responsibility for the behaviour of students outside the classroom. This included pupils "on their way to and from school" as well as during lunch hours and school breaks. Recognizing the fact that some parents sent children to school when they were sick, the Toronto board required each school to appoint a teacher to stay inside with such pupils during recess. All other teachers, according to a new regulation of 1879, had to be in the schoolyard during that period.²¹ The supervision of children outside of the classroom, most educators believed, involved not just one's presence but also setting a good example. Thus an 1885 *Educational Record* article entitled "Noontime" exhorted teachers to eat "decorously" and use a napkin when having lunch with their pupils. After a short lunchtime rest, they were also encouraged to organize games for the children to keep them happy and occupied.²²

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5, 2 (1885), 57.

¹⁹ Patrick Thornton to Egerton Ryerson, 22 January 1849, RG 2, C-6-C, PAO.

²⁰ *Annual Report of the Toronto Public School Board*, 1880, 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1873, 66; 1879, 29.

²² *Educational Record*, 5, 1 (1885), 7-8.

As school officials increasingly used teachers to tighten the reins of control over students, they also introduced measures to insure that the teachers themselves performed their work as specified in the regulations. Through local institutes teachers were instructed in matters as personal as their tone of voice and as trivial as how many times to pull the rope when ringing the school bell, as well as in matters more clearly related to academic instruction.²³ But the more obvious controls were exerted by the visits of school inspectors and, where schools were growing larger, by principals or head teachers. The frequency and character of rural school inspection depended on a variety of factors, ranging from the personality of the inspector to the location of the school. Schools that were hard to reach were sometimes missed altogether when the inspector made his rounds.²⁴ Conversely, urban teachers were inspected more regularly than rural teachers and were subjected to more systematic and closer controls. In Toronto, for example, Public School Board teachers were visited by an increasing number of "specialists," who supervised the teaching of subjects like drawing, domestic science, and drill. Schoolmistresses and some masters who taught for large urban boards were also visibly compartmentalized in the lower rungs of growing educational bureaucracies which subjected them to several levels of inspection, beginning with the school principal and ending with the district and provincial superintendency.²⁵

IV

Working for Better Health

THE SUPERINTENDENCY CONCERNED itself not just with teachers, of course. It was also part of the inspector's job to supervise the local school boards themselves, with a view to enforcing the laws requiring decent school accommodation. Ontario authorities, for example, specified in 1871 exactly how much land, floor space, and air each school should have, depending on the number of pupils. Requirements governing fences, ventilation and heating, drinking water, school privies and equipment were vaguer, stating only that these items should be "sufficient" or "suitable."²⁶ But whether they were specific or vague, the regulations were hard to enforce and teachers all too often found their employers delinquent in these matters. As a result their work frequently had to be performed under the most trying conditions.

In a typical letter, dated 23 March 1883, a local inspector described to his superiors in the Quebec Department of Public Instruction the failure of the

²³ *Annual Report of the Toronto Public School Board, 1886, 18-9.*

²⁴ J-P. Nantel to Hon. Surintendant de l'Instruction Publique, le 29 March 1884, E 13, 637-50, ANQ.

²⁵ *Annual Report of the Toronto Public School Board, 1891, 33 ff.*, describes the addition of an assistant superintendent and four "supervisory principals" to the Toronto administration.

²⁶ *Annual Report of the Chief Superintendent of Schools for Ontario, 1870, 59.*

commissioners for St. Jean de Rouville to provide proper accommodation for their village school. The school, he reported, was exactly as he had found it the year before, *despite promises to repair and renovate it. The building was so cold that parts of it were uninhabitable; the rooms were so small that some of the children were literally "crushed one against the other."* The inspector clearly felt that only provincial pressure could bring about an improvement and he buttressed his case by referring to the feelings of the school's two teachers. These schoolmistresses not only suffered considerable "malaise" because of the conditions in their school, but, according to the inspector, were reluctant to complain because when their predecessor had done so, he had been reprimanded and forced to retract his complaints by the St Jean de Rouville commissioners.²⁷

In Montreal, teachers employed by the Catholic School Commission did not even need to submit a grievance to be reprimanded. City health inspectors might achieve the same result, as in the case of Mlle. Thibodeau in 1877. Because they found the conditions in her two-room school "injurious to the health of the pupils" and reported that finding to her employers, Thibodeau's subsidy from the commission was cut off. This teacher, her employers decided, would be reinstated only after the required renovations were made or after she found a new building to house her 150 pupils.²⁸

Thibodeau's predicament was not an isolated one in the history of Quebec schooling. Many Montreal women teachers toiled in poorly ventilated, ill-equipped, insufficiently lit, and overcrowded classrooms. When health inspectors presented a damning report, they and not their employers, the commissioners, faced the consequences, because schoolrooms and buildings were their responsibility.²⁹ Thibodeau was laid off for a month and a half; she needed that much time to find more suitable accommodation for her school. In the meantime, she and others like her suffered the loss of their salaries while moving from one site to another. Thibodeau, like many other teachers, also suffered from poor health, fatigue, and physical breakdown as a result of her working conditions, and eventually had to resign.

Clearly, *if the health of the students was endangered by the poor condition of many schools, so too was that of their teachers.* Léocadie Généreux, a contemporary of Thibodeau and mistress of a neighbouring school, requested a leave of absence in 1879 due "to the precarious state of her health." It was granted along with a \$50.00 bonus in recognition of fifteen years of service to

²⁷ J.B. Delage to Gédéon Quimet, 23 March 1883, E 13, ANQ.

²⁸ *Registre des délibérations du Bureau des Commissaires*, Vol II, 27 April, 4 May, 19 June 1877. Archives de la Commission des Écoles Catholiques de Montréal (ACCM).

²⁹ The Montreal Catholic School Commission was unusual in requiring women teachers to find accommodation for their own schools. The commission did not, until the 1900s, build schools for female teachers and students. A discussion of its policies may be found in Marta Danylewycz, "Sexes et classes sociales dans l'enseignement: le cas de Montréal à la fin du 19^e siècle," in N. Fahmy-Eid and Micheline Dumont, *Maitresses de maison, maitresses d'école* (Montréal 1983), 93-118.

the school commission.³⁰ Généreux returned to the classroom one year later, to take up the front line in the battle against smallpox, diphtheria, and tuberculosis being waged by school officials and public health reformers. In the wake of scientific findings that many of the contagious diseases could be contained by vaccination and proper diet, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century teachers increasingly found themselves instructing their pupils in hygiene and correct eating habits, insuring that they were vaccinated, inspecting them for contagious diseases, and sending the ill to the school clinic or home.³¹

The combination of poor working conditions and exposure to a variety of contagious diseases debilitated teachers, forcing many to take periodic leaves of absence. In recognition of this fact, the Toronto Public School Board in the 1870s began to hire "occasional teachers" to replace those on sick leave.³² While from the students' and employers' point of view substitute teachers were a solution to the absent teacher problem, they were hardly the answer as far as the ailing schoolmistresses were concerned. Their only recourse at times of sickness was family, kin, or charitable institutions. In this regard their situation was no different from that of nineteenth-century labourers, who also relied on these traditional, albeit frequently inadequate, support systems.

At the same time, however, teachers were pressuring provincial governments to make amends to pension funds (established in 1853 in Ontario and in 1856 in Quebec) in view of the ill effects working conditions had on their health. Individual and isolated requests of schoolmistresses like that of Eliza Pelletier from L'Islet, Quebec for an early retirement with a pension due to her anemic condition, became by the turn of the century collective demands voiced at meetings of teachers' associations.³³ The associations of Protestant and Catholic teachers of Montreal stood united in the early 1900s in an effort to pressure the provincial government to lower the age of retirement for women teachers from 56 to 50. Reasoning that "the great majority of women teachers break down before reaching the present retiring age, and are utterly unfit to follow other occupations," they demanded revisions to the pension fund scheme as well as, at least implicitly, a recognition by school officials that the work of women teachers was far more exacting than that of the men.³⁴

In the same vein, women teachers began to publicize their concerns about health and working conditions through the medium of the press. Whenever the

³⁰ *Registre des délibérations*, Vol. II, 5 March 1879; Généreux worked for the commission until her death in 1890. ACCM.

³¹ For a discussion of public health reform and the role of teachers in it see Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus* (Toronto 1978).

³² Teachers were permitted to take sick leaves of up to one month. For longer absences they had to pay for the substitute teachers out of their own pockets. See *Annual Reports of the Toronto Public School Board*, 1872, 98, and 1874, 85-90.

³³ Eliza Pelletier to V.T. Simard, 19 January 1884, E 13, 637-12, ANQ.

³⁴ "Miss Ferguson's Address to Convention on Pension Act." *Educational Record* 28, 12 (1903), 392.

occasion presented itself, and it did in turn-of-the-century Montreal with the founding of the *Ligue d'enseignement*, they pleaded their case with the public.³⁵ They also rejoiced when support for their cause or recognition of the difficulties under which they laboured appeared outside their own circles. In 1891 the *Educational Record* reprinted an article from one of the province's newspapers that had taken notice of the teacher's plight and outlined ways in which teachers could prevent fatigue, anemia, or mere discouragement.³⁶

V

School Maintenance and Housekeeping

IF POOR WORKING CONDITIONS and health care were dominant themes for teachers in the second half of the nineteenth century and carried on unabated into the early twentieth, a related and muted theme was the teacher's continuing role in the physical maintenance of the school. The school had once been located in the teacher's home, a rented house, or a room in someone else's house; then, as provincial school systems were put into place, in most locations the school house became public property and, in theory, the responsibility for its maintenance shifted to local boards of trustees or commissioners. But, for the women who taught under the Montreal Catholic School Commission, as we have seen, this theory did not even begin to be put into practice. And for a long time the boundaries of responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of school property remained blurred in other regions as well. Often school boards insisted that at least the minor work of school maintenance still belonged to teachers.

In Ontario, debate on the subject can be traced back to the 1840s. Queries to the office of the chief superintendent of schools suggest that Upper Canadian trustee boards and their teachers had already entered into dispute in two areas: who should lay the fires in schools and who should clean the schoolhouses. In 1848, Egerton Ryerson wrote that these were matters for negotiations between teachers and trustees, the law not specifying who was responsible for the work of school maintenance. He suggested that the trustees could give the teacher a higher salary in return for the work, grant a special allowance for the purpose, or agree to it being done by the pupils under the teacher's direction.³⁷ But arguments on the subject continued to reach the chief superintendent's desk, as trustees pressed the housework of the school on reluctant teachers who clearly regarded such tasks as "extra" work, or beneath their dignity. By 1861 the provincial Education Office took a stronger stand on behalf of such teachers. The housekeeping work of the school, Egerton Ryerson now argued, was no

³⁵ See the following in *La Patrie*, "Causerie — Une Grande Fondation," 6 December 1902; "Autour de l'école," 11 October 1902.

³⁶ *Educational Record*, 11, 1 (1891), 4-12.

³⁷ Egerton Ryerson to John Monger, 26 December 1848, RG 2, C-1, Letterbook D, 360.

longer a matter for negotiation; such work, he implied, did not belong to the men and women whose employment educational reformers were trying so hard to define as "professional." Under the heading "Official Replies of the Chief Superintendent of Schools to Local School Authorities in Upper Canada," the *Journal of Education for Upper Canada* published the following brief statement: "Teachers are not required to make Fires. The Teacher is employed to teach the school, but he is not employed to make the fires and clean the school house, much less repair the school house."³⁸

Provincial educational authorities' pronouncements did not necessarily sway local school boards, however, and in an 1863 trustees' minute book for School Section No. 1, North West Oxford, building fires as well as ringing the school bell were explicitly laid out as the teacher's contracted work. In 1865, however, the superintendent from Oxford County reported that the more common solution in the country schools under his jurisdiction was to hire a lad to do the "extra work" or to press it onto the pupils.³⁹

Anna Paulin, who taught in the Quebec parish of Ste Marie de Manoir Rouville in the 1880s, engaged to keep the school clean and the path to the school clear, according to her contract.⁴⁰ But in Quebec as well, such work was subject to debate. Under the heading "Enquiries," the *Educational Record* dealt with the topic in 1885. Was it "part of the teacher's duty" to light the school fires each morning? The answer was unequivocal: "Certainly not. The trouble and expense of lighting the fires must be provided for by the school commissioners through the school manager of the district."⁴¹ In 1889 the *Educational Record* argued that it was the teacher's job, with the help of her pupils, to keep the schoolroom neat and clean, but only provided that a proper caretaker cleaned it thoroughly once a week. The issue was of sufficient importance to merit attention once again in an 1893 editorial on how teachers could improve their position in society. Schoolmistresses and masters were advised to see to it that their contracts were signed and sealed and that no one dictated to them on the subject of where they should board. Last but not least they were told to arrange "if possible, with the trustees to make someone look after the cleaning of the schoolroom and making the fires."⁴²

If these issues continued to be problematic for rural teachers as late as the 1890s, in the cities they were less often debated. At least wherever urban schools were larger than one or two rooms, the need for a separate staff of

³⁸ Letters of inquiry on the subject include C. W. D. De l'Armitage to Egerton Ryerson, 27 June 1849; Meade N. Wright to Ryerson, 26 June 1859; and Teacher to Ryerson, 1 April 1859, RG 2, C-6-C, PAO. "Official Replies, . . ." *Journal of Education for Upper Canada*, 14, 3 (1861), 40.

³⁹ North West Oxford Trustees' Minute Book, School Section No. 1, 15 January 1863, RG 51, 10816, No. 1, PAO, and *Annual Report of the Chief Superintendent of Schools for Ontario*, 1865, Appendix A, 53.

⁴⁰ Engagement of Anna Poulin, 1 June 1882, E 13, 826-13, ANQ.

⁴¹ "Enquiries," *Educational Record* 5 7/8 (1885), 199.

⁴² *Educational Record* 13, 10 (1893), 286.

caretakers was generally recognized. By 1876 the Toronto Public School Board employed nineteen caretakers; fifteen years later their number had almost tripled. City school caretakers in the nineteenth century frequently lived on the school property; indeed it seems often to have been a family occupation and even a job for women. Wages compared favourably with those of teachers: in 1889 the top annual salary for a male caretaker was \$600, for a woman \$375. In 1891, nine women were among the board's 53 caretakers. Two of these women were succeeded, when they died, by their sons.⁴³

If the heavy work of school cleaning and laying fires was a thing of the past for city schoolteachers, this did not mean that their jobs were entirely free of housekeeping tasks. Urban and rural teachers alike were exhorted to keep their schoolrooms tidy and to "beautify" them.⁴⁴ Even the Montreal daily, *Le Canada*, in its support for the "new education" movement, decried the unattractive appearance of Quebec schools compared to American ones: "Our [schools] are devoid of decoration, while in the public and catholic schools of our neighbours, professors and students pride themselves on giving their schools as beautiful an appearance as possible."⁴⁵ Schoolroom tidying and decorating, indeed, gradually moved in to replace the more mundane tasks of sweeping and dusting for late nineteenth-century teachers.

Tidying became important for both rural and city teachers because of the growing stock of globes, maps, and other material goods that modern schools required. In the city of Toronto as well as in rural and urban Quebec, school documents express concern about this work. As one of them put it, now that the teacher was responsible for school property it was only fair that each school or classroom should contain a cupboard for its safekeeping. In Toronto, the school board recognized in 1873 that teachers occasionally needed extra time for the work of tidying and organizing the schoolroom and its contents. That year, at least, the day before the Christmas holidays was set aside for teachers to put their rooms "in good order."⁴⁶

The advent of caretakers also meant another kind of work for urban teachers: the work of negotiating when their interests and those of the caretakers clashed. Such a conflict occurred when the women employed in Toronto schools noticed that the oil used by the caretakers on the floors soiled the hems of their skirts. If it was part of the teacher's work to set a good example by looking clean and presentable — and Ellen McGuire's 1880 Quebec contract was not the only one to state explicitly that this was the case — then a measure initiated to reduce costs or caretakers' labour in maintaining floors had resulted in increased costs and labour for the women who taught in Toronto public schools.⁴⁷

⁴³ *Annual Reports of the Toronto Public School Board*; see especially 1876, Appendix 1, 10, and 1891, 14-5 and 37-9.

⁴⁴ See *ibid.* 1876, 18; and "Something for Country Teachers," *Educational Record* 4, 2 (1884), 51-3.

⁴⁵ "Les écoles primaires à Montréal et aux États Unis," *Le Canada*, 26 August 1903.

⁴⁶ *Annual Report of the Toronto Public School Board*, 1873, 87.

⁴⁷ Wendy Bryans, "The Women Teachers' Association of Toronto," paper presented to

VI

Resistance and Perceptions of the Woman Teacher's Ambiguous Position

IT WAS THIS ISSUE, along with those of their wages, that the Women Teachers' Association of Toronto brought to the trustees of the city twenty years after their organization's founding in 1885. Indeed, these were the problems, along with other long-standing concerns about health, working conditions, and the reorganization of the pension fund in light of the particular needs and experiences of women teachers, that eventually drove schoolmistresses to band together and establish protective associations. In central Canada, Toronto led the way with Montreal and then, somewhat later, rural teachers in both Ontario and Quebec followed suit. By the turn of the century, urban women teachers were speaking with collective voices, not only echoing the grievances their predecessors had so frequently raised in individual exchanges with their local and provincial superiors but also winning some concessions from their employers. In Toronto for example, organization helped to bring the women teachers a salary scale based on seniority rather than grade level and the election of a woman to the school board.⁴⁸ In Montreal the associations of Catholic and Protestant women teachers succeeded in persuading the provincial government to make the pension plan more favourable to women teachers and to raise the annual pension by 50 per cent. The Catholic association also guaranteed ill or unemployed teachers some assistance during times of need.⁴⁹

When schoolmistresses should be allowed to retire and the presence of women on school boards were hardly the major concerns of those promoting school system development and professionalism among teachers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The former were of such profound interest to Ontario and Quebec women teachers, on the other hand, that eventually they began to view themselves as a class apart from their male colleagues and state school employers. A sense of separateness, nourished by years of working conditions harsher than those endured by men (who generally could look forward to administrative positions or at least teaching the more advanced grades) and of a shared experience of inequality in salary and opportunity for advancement in the occupation, led many of the career women teachers to express their particular demands and grievances increasingly openly. As part of her contribution to the pension debate, a Quebec schoolmistress, who had "roamed professionally" from one rural county to another for nearly twenty years, remarked in no uncertain terms that she, as a teacher, did "more work for [her] country than some of our politicians." This conviction

the Canadian Association for American Studies, Ottawa, 1974.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Marie Lavigne and Jennifer Stoddart, "Women's Work in Montreal at the Beginning of the Century," in Marylee Stephenson, ed., *Women in Canada* (Toronto 1977), 139. Marise Thivierge, "La Syndicalisation des institutrices catholiques, 1900-1959," in *Maitresses de maison*.

tion prompted her to ask why no provision could be made for "the few women" who made elementary teaching "their life-work" and to offer the provincial government a list of suggested improvements.

I would suggest that our Government provide a work house for superannuated female teachers, taxing highly-salaried teachers and school inspectors for its support. Another suggestion I beg leave to make is that women be eligible for the office of school inspector. It would be a comfortable berth for some of us that have been too long on starvation salaries.⁵⁰

Such sentiments were behind the founding of separate women teachers' associations in both Ontario and Quebec. The frustrations and aspirations expressed by teachers making suggestions of this kind were also a reflection of the transition teachers' work had undergone in the period since 1840. Prior to the establishment of government school systems as well as during the early years of their creation, schoolmistresses and masters worked within informal, more personal, and less hierarchical structures. Centralization and the development of provincial elementary school systems brought about a major change in the form and content of schooling. Athénais Bibaud, the principal of Marchand Academy in Montreal, noted in 1911 that in the past "the programme of studies was not as heavy," leaving time for frequent breaks and "cordial chats between teachers and pupils, chats which were very useful because they *shed light on everything*." But, as she further remarked, as all things go, this type of interaction between student and teacher had come to an end, and not just in her own school. Discipline had become "more severe," pupils and teachers alike "worked a bit harder," and younger mistresses were now supervised by the older, more experienced ones. By this time, too, the Montreal Catholic School Commission exercised more control over the academy.⁵¹

The reorganization of time, work, and discipline in the school did not improve the lot of the teacher. "One thing that did not keep pace with the changing times," added Bibaud in her reflections, "were the salaries of teaching assistants."⁵² A similar observation of the disjuncture between the enduring regime of low salaries and the changing mode of schooling led Elizabeth Binmore, a founder of the Montreal Protestant Women Teachers' Association, to speculate on the nature of the woman teacher's work in the public school-room and its relationship to her status in society. Did her employment fit with the title "lady teacher" which was still so much in use? Elizabeth Binmore seemed to think not.⁵³ Her work was not leisure; therefore it was not appropri-

⁵⁰ "Correspondence," *Educational Record* 11, 9 (1891), 241-2.

⁵¹ Athénais Bibaud, "Nos écoles de Filles," *Revue Canadienne* 2 (1911), 138-9. In 1905 the Marchand Academy had been listed as "receiving subsidies," but not "under the control" of the Montreal Catholic School Commission. By 1909, the Catholic School Commission had replaced the former school with a new one built by itself and now directly under its control. Many girls' schools in Montreal underwent a similar transformation at this time.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵³ Miss E. Binmore, "The Financial Outlook of the Women Teachers of Montreal," *Educational Record* 13, 3 (1893), 69-74.

ate to refer to the schoolmistress by using a term implying that it was. "Lady teacher" belonged to a genteel past which by the turn of the century was but a dim memory to the vast majority of overworked and underpaid women teachers in Montreal.

While Binmore was able to make such a statement in the mid-1890s, a moment when Montreal teachers' salaries, owing to depressed economic conditions, may have been at a particularly low ebb, she and her colleagues in the three women teachers' associations that late nineteenth-century conditions spawned in Quebec and Ontario nevertheless had great difficulty grasping permanently a vision of themselves as workers. Wayne Urban has argued that in the three American cities he studied, the women teachers who organized were aware of their interests and fought mainly as interest groups rather than as incipient professionals, although their approaches varied according to local conditions.⁵⁴ It is very clear that Canadian women teachers, like their American counterparts, also formed their associations with bread and butter issues such as wages, working conditions, and pensions chiefly in mind. Yet, unlike the most radical Americans, Canadian teachers were reluctant to ally themselves with working-class organizations or identify with working-class groups that had comparable problems. In Toronto, the Woman Teachers' Association toyed with a labour affiliation in 1905, but backed off.⁵⁵

Perhaps the key word here is "comparable." For, with hindsight, we can now see that the position of turn-of-the-century women teachers was similar to that of beleaguered industrial workers but, as the women teachers of the time perceived, it was also different. Women teachers had not necessarily been "deskilled;" on the contrary, new skills were constantly being demanded of them. Nor were they necessarily subjected to seasonal unemployment and layoffs to the same extent as labourers, especially those who worked in the light manufacturing industries. Moreover, their work was supposedly intellectual and not manual, a division which, at least according to Harry Braverman, was "the most decisive single step in the division of labour" taken by industrial capitalist societies.⁵⁶ Yet as "brainworkers" they also at times toiled manually, beautifying their schools, keeping the path to the schoolhouse clear in the winter, and inspecting pupils for contagious diseases. They spent hours on the busy work of maintaining school records and looking after the objects that increasingly filled their classrooms. In fact, in their work they straddled both sides of Braverman's great divide and laboured on the margins of both. As far

⁵⁴ Wayne Urban, *Why Teachers Organized* (Detroit 1983). The three cities studied were Chicago, New York, and Atlanta.

⁵⁵ Bryans, "The Women Teachers' Association of Toronto," 13-4. See also Alison Prentice, "Themes in the History of the Toronto Women Teachers' Association," in Paula Bourne, ed., *Women's Paid and Unpaid Work* (Toronto forthcoming). The most radical Americans were the leaders of the women teachers' associations in Chicago.

⁵⁶ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, (New York and London 1974), 126.



Maud Celina Demerse (Laronde) and children from her last school. Maud Demerse taught in three different Quebec communities between 1905 and 1908. Clearly she and her pupils accepted the importance of "proper" dress, at least for the occasion of the photograph. Courtesy F.D. Laronde, Victoria, B.C.

as their working conditions and salaries were concerned, however, they did share the plight of nineteenth-century workers.⁵⁷

It was the uncertainty of their position in the labour force that helps to explain how women teachers could flirt with the mystique of professionalism while at the same time their members referred to themselves as the exploited or as toilers and hirelings. In recalling their double bind one returns, finally, to feminists' recognition of the need for a more nuanced analysis of work and a less dichotomous vision of the social order if we are to understand the work of women.⁵⁸ Elizabeth Binmore began to glimpse these truths in the mid-1890s. Teachers, she saw, were not "ladies." Nor, however, could they fully see themselves as workers, in spite of the poor wages and difficult working conditions they endured.

Michael Apple has rightly argued that teachers' "deskilling and reskilling, intensification and loss of control, or the countervailing pressures of professionalization and proletarianization" that have affected the occupation, and continue to affect it to this day, are complex processes. They cannot be explained solely in terms of the sexual division of labour. Nevertheless, as he also contends, that division has been an essential component in these pro-

⁵⁷ Michael W. Apple has argued that twentieth-century teachers are "located simultaneously in two classes," being members both of the petite bourgeoisie and the working class. See his "Work, Class and Teaching," 53.

⁵⁸ Joan Kelly, "The Doubled Vision of Feminist Theory," in Judith L. Newton, Mary Ryan, and Judith Walkowitz, eds. *Sex and Class in Women's History* (London 1983), 259-70.

cesses.⁵⁹ This brief study of central Canadian teachers during the period of state school system formation confirms Apple's contention. Turn-of-the-century women teachers in Ontario and Quebec were increasingly aware of their special problems and some were already aware of the ambiguity of their position. Many also knew that a major source of their difficulties was the fact that they were women in school systems largely designed for and controlled by men.⁶⁰

The first draft of this paper was written in February and March 1984, for the American Educational Research Association meetings that spring. Its writing followed a wonderful research trip to Montreal and Quebec, which I shared with Marta, and during which we discovered together the richness of the Quebec Department of Public Instruction records deposited in the Archives Nationales, among other treasures of interest to historians of teachers. That fall, Marta and I wrote a detailed proposal for the funding of further research, another more theoretical and historiographical paper for the Social Science History Association meetings in Toronto, and submitted "Teachers' Work" to Labour/Le Travail. Marta was looking forward with special interest to the criticisms of Labour's readers because, of all our joint endeavours, this was probably the paper that excited her the most. Although she never heard the news of our paper's acceptance by the journal, the writing and talking that we did that fall was invaluable to me when revising it for publication. I am also grateful to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council, to Atkinson College, York University, and to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, for institutional support; and I wish to thank Ian Davey, Ruby Heap, Greg Kealey, Andrée Levesque, and Veronica Strong-Boag for their critical suggestions and their sympathy, which greatly lightened the task of revision.

Alison Prentice

⁵⁹ Michael W. Apple, "Work, Class and Teaching," 64.

⁶⁰ Prentice, "Themes in the History of the Toronto Women Teachers' Association;" Bryans, "The Women Teachers' Association;" John R. Abbott, "'A Man's Task': Women Teachers and the Turn-of-the-Century Public School Inspectorate in Ontario," paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association annual meeting, Montreal, 1985.

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