

“A Concession to Circumstances”: Nova Scotia’s “Unlimited Supply” of Women Teachers, 1870-1960

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Many thousands of single rural women were hired as teachers in Nova Scotia between 1870 and 1960. Their qualifications and salaries were among the lowest in Canada. This article shows how their availability to teach, if only for a year or two, sustained and even made possible the survival of the province’s original school-section system of financing public education. Constrained by weak centralized municipal units, and by the politics and finances of 1,700 autonomous school sections, provincial education authorities made repeated “concessions” in the qualifications required of teachers. While the practice created what was described at the time as “an unlimited supply” of teachers, it reinforced gendered attitudes about teaching and undermined provincial attempts to raise teachers’ professional status.

Plusieurs milliers de femmes rurales célibataires furent engagées comme institutrices en Nouvelle-Écosse entre 1870 et 1960. Leurs compétences et leurs salaires étaient parmi les plus bas au Canada. Cet article montre comment leur disponibilité à enseigner, même pendant un an ou deux seulement, a supporté et même rendu possible la survie du système original de financement des écoles publiques de la province. Contraintes par la faible centralisation des éléments municipaux et par les pratiques et finances des 1700 sections scolaires autonomes, les autorités scolaires provinciales firent des « concessions » répétées à propos des compétences requises des maîtres. Cette pratique, qui créa ce qui fut décrit à l’époque comme un « approvisionnement illimité » de maîtres, devait aussi renforcer les attitudes sexistes envers l’enseignement et saper les tentatives provinciales de relèvement du statut professionnel des enseignants.

Between 1870 and 1960, Nova Scotia provides a stark illustration of what has been described elsewhere as “the slow revolution” in the professional status of schoolteachers.¹ “Attempts [by provincial education authorities]...to define the teacher as a legitimately authoritative figure in the locality,” as Bruce Curtis describes Ontario’s nineteenth-century reforms in teacher

1 Gerald Grant and Christine E. Murray, *Teaching in America: The Slow Revolution* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.

regulation,² met little success in Nova Scotia, even as late as the 1930s when some tentative first steps were taken. The province was not unique but its low salaries and long delay in introducing higher educational and training requirements set it apart from other Canadian provinces and American states.³

A Carnegie Foundation report in 1922, in response to a request from the provincial government for financial assistance, noted the “widespread apathy towards public education in Nova Scotia,” where politicians were more concerned with keeping taxes low than providing qualified teachers. The report also deplored a teacher turnover of 50 per cent in rural areas.⁴ The criticism was equally sharp in 1944 when a royal commission, appointed to study provincial post-war employment, described the salaries paid to teachers in Nova Scotia as “humiliating” in comparison to other provinces.⁵ According to the same report, Nova Scotia paid 63 per cent of its teachers “less (and most of them very much less) than British Columbia paid its meanest and least efficient teacher.”⁶

While it is clear that salaries and certification standards in Nova Scotia lagged behind those of other jurisdictions, it is less clear why that was so, and why unqualified teachers continued to be hired for as long as they were. Faced with teacher shortages, other governments similarly issued “permissive” licences and made “concessions” in the qualifications of those who taught. An explanation for Nova Scotia’s “slower revolution” must therefore look beyond such widespread licensing practices to the context where these repeated “concessions” were either needed or supported.

2 Bruce Curtis, *Building the Educational State: Canada West, 1836-1871* (London, Ontario: The Althouse Press, 1988), 222.

3 For a comparative view of certification, and the extent to which the Maritimes “lagged” behind in the first half of the twentieth century, see Patrick J. Harrigan, “The Development of a Corps of Public School Teachers in Canada, 1870-1980,” *History of Education Quarterly* 2, 4 (Winter 1992): 495-501. In the early 1950s, Nova Scotia’s teaching salaries were “lower on the average than in any other province in Canada with two possible exceptions.” This was the conclusion reached in the *Report of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance in Nova Scotia*, 1954, 36.

4 William S. Learned and Kenneth C.M. Sills, *Education in the Maritime Provinces of Canada*, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (New York: The Carnegie Foundation, 1922), 7. For background on the Carnegie Foundation’s educational surveys, see Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *Private Power for the Public Good: A History of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching* (Middleton, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983).

5 Royal Commission on Provincial Development and Rehabilitation, V, *Report on Education* (Halifax: King’s Printer, 1944), 21.

6 Ibid.

The reports cited above are suggestive in their mention of politicians, taxes, the high turnover of rural teachers, and low salaries. These reports were in effect a judgement on the school-section system of financing and administering public education in Nova Scotia, a system that was, in the words of the 1954 Royal Commission on Public School Finance (the Pottier Report), “virtually unchanged” between the Free School Acts in the 1860s, and 1942.⁷ Even then, with the creation of the Municipal School Unit,⁸ an equitable sharing of educational costs and the establishment of what the commission called “a proper salary scale,” still remained to be worked out. Prior to the re-organization of educational funding in the late 1950s, any salary increases above the minimum scale of 1947-8 came “wholly from local funds.”⁹ Thus many rural boards were still unable or unwilling to match what urban boards could pay teachers. It is clear that a satisfactory account of Nova Scotia’s slow implementation of higher standards between 1870 and 1960 must consider the circumstances under which teachers were employed in the rural school sections.

The trustees of over 1,700 autonomous rural and village school sections (and 45 urban sections) directly controlled most aspects of a teacher’s employment until the full adoption of the Municipal School Unit in 1946.¹⁰ The small school sections also provided the greater part of the funds through taxation on property and income within the section. In numerical terms, about 5,400 trustees (plus their 1,700 board secretaries) still determined the salary and conditions under which the province’s 3,500 teachers worked when Nova Scotia began seriously to study the larger school unit in 1939.¹¹ This amounted to four school officials for every teacher in

7 *Report of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance*, 7.

8 By 1946, each of the province’s twenty-four municipalities had adopted the Municipal School Unit under legislation passed in 1942. Each unit assumed financial responsibility for “a minimum program of education.” School sections no longer levied taxes for salaries but continued to have responsibility for capital costs.

9 *Report of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance*, 10. For the implementation of the report’s foundation salary scale between 1956 and 1960, see Norman H. Fergusson, *The Story of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union* (Armdale, N.S.: Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union, 1960), 110-13.

10 A section was “a self-governing school territory” of about four miles in diameter in rural areas, administered by a board of three trustees serving three years. Consolidation after 1942 began to reduce the number of sections. By 1960, of the remaining 1,470 school sections, 1,428 were still “rural and village” sections where 56 per cent of the province’s teachers were employed. (Thirty-two school “districts” functioned to determine the boundaries of sections and to decide which sections were to receive special financial assistance.)

11 “Report of the Committee on the Larger School Unit,” *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1939, Appendix 8, xlviii.

rural and village schools, which suggests the political and educational influence wielded by a small circle of men in each of these communities. This system may have worked in the mid-nineteenth century, according to Henry F. Munro, the provincial superintendent of education between 1926 and 1949, when these tiny and remote rural communities were more self-contained and self-sufficient.¹² Since then, greater mobility and decades of rural depopulation had increasingly exposed the limits of local control – and the weakness of centralized provincial and municipal structures.¹³

While the comparative rates at which other provinces implemented larger school units are beyond the scope of this article,¹⁴ it is clear that in Nova Scotia, until the new municipal units and funding arrangements were in place, little change in the status of teachers occurred. Many of the repeated “concessions” to unqualified teachers that are described in this article can be traced to what Munro viewed in 1939 as “the fundamental problem of sectional school finance.”¹⁵ In these decades, trustees and department officials temporized through the short-term service of unqualified women teachers. It is also telling that significantly higher salaries and certification standards arrived on the heels of the simplified and more equitable system of financial support introduced by the 1954 Pottier Report.

Thus a closer study of the factors behind the slow emergence of strong municipal institutions and the bearing this had on the rate of educational change is likely to shed light on Nova Scotia’s slower rate of educational change. The present study provides an overview of a ninety-year period in which rural and village school trustees, many operating on shoestring budgets, kept their schools open by hiring as teachers single women, most of whom were in their late teens and early twenties. Furthermore, the common practice of hiring the cheapest teachers – even when teachers with higher qualifications had applied – depended on the availability and

12 Ibid.

13 Janet Guildford’s comments on the significance of the slow growth of centralized municipal governments in Nova Scotia have been very helpful. An anonymous reviewer should also be thanked for raising similar questions about the actual causes of the slower pace of educational reform in Nova Scotia.

14 The Nova Scotia committee on larger school units believed that Ontario, and western provinces like Alberta and British Columbia, were more advanced in this regard. It was expected that Alberta, for example, would have the whole province in larger units by 1939. See the “Report of the Committee on the Larger School Unit,” liii.

15 *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education for Nova Scotia* (hereafter AR), 1937-38, xxxix.

willingness of rural women to teach, however briefly. Any explanation of the long life of Nova Scotia’s school-section system of financing public education would be incomplete without considering the tens of thousands of women on whom the staffing of rural schools ultimately depended. Their presence – as transient as it was – provides the focus of this article.

Nowhere was the slow pace of reform more evident than in the experience of women whose professional standing and level of licence remained unchanged even after the introduction of compulsory teacher training in 1930.¹⁶ The use school trustees were prepared to make of single women as temporary teachers, to be engaged as the circumstances warranted, and to be replaced without much fuss, conformed to the political and financial circumstances of the province’s autonomous school sections. Indeed, the use made of an “unlimited supply” of single rural women sustained and even made possible the survival of the school-section system. It was not until the mid-1950s, when municipal reform began to take hold, that the status of Nova Scotia’s rural teachers, 85 per cent of whom were women in 1958, began to improve.

This article first reviews the way in which the province’s early goal of “professionalization” was compromised by gendered attitudes about women’s role as teachers. The same attitudes continued to facilitate a series of “concessions” between 1870 and the 1950s that took the form of lower licence requirements, applied principally to women teaching in rural and village schools. These practices, driven by the exigencies of the rural school section, and sustained by traditional attitudes about women’s work, resulted in a surplus of under-qualified teachers – and serious damage to the prospect of a “professionalized” corps of teachers.

“Concessions” for Women

In her discussion of the feminization of teaching in Nova Scotia in the last half of the nineteenth century, Janet Guildford shows that women were recruited as teachers because, in addition to being cheap, school administrators and politicians believed that they were “inherently suited to the care and teaching of young

16 Over 40 per cent of the province’s teachers in the early 1950s had qualifications below the minimum recommended by the 1950 Commission on Teacher Education. See the *Report of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance*, 33.

children.”¹⁷ Gender ideology, Guildford adds, was more than a rationalization for recruitment. It also had a direct bearing on the length and extent of training deemed suitable for women in one instance and men in another. The schoolmen of the day did not believe that women required the same amount of formal education as professional men, or even as much as their male teaching colleagues. The Reverend Alexander Forrester, who served concurrently as provincial superintendent and principal of the Provincial Normal School¹⁸ between 1855 and 1864, sidestepped the issue of whether “the mental energies of the female mind will, as a whole, suffer comparison with those of a male”; nonetheless, he still believed that the infant and primary departments of a school were best suited for the female, while headmasterships and the advanced sections were more suited to the male teacher.¹⁹

The implications were obvious. Professional status for men and women did not mean the same thing; common-school teachers, who were mostly women by 1870, required less education than men, who, presumably, would aspire to higher levels of teaching. And because training in prescribed methods was intended to compensate for the modest amounts of scholarship, higher education for teachers was not an immediate priority. Forrester’s successor as Normal School principal, John B. Calkin, described the purpose of professional training in 1888: “The ideal normal school is a more thoroughly technical school whose true function is to make teachers, not scholars.”²⁰ In the event, it was a scaled-down, feminized form of “professionalism” that came to be associated with teaching.²¹

Guildford was therefore right to conclude that the ideology of “separate spheres” was “inimical to teachers’ claims to professional status”; gender ideology was “problematic to both men and women working within the reformed public schools” because it got in the

17 Janet Guildford, “‘Separate Spheres’: The Feminization of Public School Teaching in Nova Scotia, 1838-1880,” *Acadiensis* XXII, 1 (Autumn 1992): 44.

18 The institution was called a “Normal School” until 1908, when it was renamed a “Normal College.” I use the term appropriate to the time period being examined.

19 Alexander Forrester, *The Teacher’s Text-Book* (Halifax, N.S., 1867), 566.

20 *AR*, 1888, Appendix A, 45.

21 For Forrester – and for the principals and superintendents who succeeded him – professional status did not include any notion of self-regulation or collective autonomy. Instead, their professional vision centred on standardized teaching practices and close provincial supervision. The purpose of formal training was to “exemplify a method,” to impart, as another provincial superintendent put it in 1887, the “correct methods of instruction and discipline.” It was in this sharply delimited vocational or technical sense that normal schools were intended to “professionalize” teachers. See Forrester, *The Teacher’s Text-Book*, 559, and *AR*, 1887, xiii.

way of official attempts to base teaching on scientifically derived principles, which in turn were predicated on higher levels of education and training.²² If teaching young children was treated as “women’s work,” the argument made by provincial superintendents and Normal School principals for advanced education and training was inherently flawed, even disingenuous. Forrester’s belief that normal school training would make teaching “a permanent employment,” for example, had yet to be reconciled with a prior belief that married women belonged in the home, and not in the classroom.²³

Schoolteaching was not regarded as a career in mid-nineteenth-century Nova Scotia or other provinces; it was a temporary job for both men and women. It was an “undeniable fact,” Forrester wrote, that too many of those who took up teaching did so without a mission or without any intention of making a career of teaching. Teaching was “a stepping stone to a more elevated position” until more attractive and remunerative opportunities offered themselves; it was even a last resort for people who had failed at every other venture.²⁴ The survival of this attitude to the middle of the twentieth century, its very language intact,²⁵ is one measure of the “slow revolution” in Nova Scotia and elsewhere.

Clear intellectual and sexual divisions of labour, then, undercut the case for longer periods of training for women and both were used from the beginning to justify the sharp differentials in pay and professional status that emerged and continued in Nova Scotia until the late 1950s. The derisory certification standards that were tolerated for common-school teachers in that province drew their justification from the same thinking, and were reinforced by many decades in which teacher training and common-school teaching were popularly regarded as a single woman’s sphere of activity. It was this underlying contradiction between the promise of professional status and the reality of women teachers serving as cheap and expendable workers that, in Guildford’s words, “prolonged the struggle for higher wages and professional autonomy” wherever the feminization of teaching occurred.²⁶

22 Guildford, “Separate Spheres,” 44, 64.

23 Normal schools elsewhere shared the goal of turning teaching into a full-time career. See Jurgen Herbst, *And Sadly Teach: Teacher Education and Professionalization in American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 140.

24 Alexander Forrester, *The Object, Benefits and History of Normal Schools* (Halifax, N.S., 1855), 4.

25 See page 356 below.

26 Guildford, “Separate Spheres,” 44.

While Guildford's argument alone cannot account for Nova Scotia's longer delay into the first half of the twentieth century in raising the pay and status of teachers, the persistence of the same restrictive view of women's role as professionals continued to be important in rural Nova Scotia. In this sense, there was nothing out of the ordinary in the way rural and village school trustees treated their female employees in a province where 45 per cent of the population was still classified as rural as late as 1960 (in contrast to 22 per cent in Ontario).²⁷ There was little in provincial regulations to check the authority of the local school board. School law gave trustees the power to determine the amount of money to be raised within the section to supplement the funds provided by the province, and the power to contract with and employ a licensed teacher.²⁸ The provincial government had little choice but to accept in effect a two-tier practice of licensing: rural schools were as a result allowed to operate with minimally qualified and untrained teachers who were overwhelmingly women, while town and city schools attracted teachers with higher licences and the relatively few men who chose to make a career of teaching.

Provincial education officials were further constrained by the contingencies of the labour market – increasing employment opportunities generally placed teaching at a competitive disadvantage. This often resulted in “concessions” in the level of education and training required in order to attract enough teachers if even for only a year or two. “Concessions” were short-term solutions to a long-term teacher retention problem; they were also solutions that matched the short-term service expected of women teachers before they took up their life's work as wives and mothers. Alison Prentice has described “the special consideration” (in the form of requirements lower than men's) that was extended to prospective women teachers by the new school systems in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: “The insidious feature of such concessions of course was that they helped to ensure both the lower pay and status of many female teachers.”²⁹ Such a practice began in Nova Scotia in 1864, the year of the first Free School Act,

27 “Rural and Urban Distribution,” Census of Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, 1961, Advance Report No. Ap-4, Catalogue No. 92-518. The 1961 Census classified as urban all cities, town and villages of 1,000 and over.

28 *Manual of the Public Instruction Acts and Regulations of the Council of Public Instruction of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, N.S.: King's Printer, 1921), 19, 25.

29 Alison Prentice, “The Feminization of Teaching,” in *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History*, ed. Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 56.

when inspectors were authorized to license “all applicants who gave evidence of being at all useful as teachers...”³⁰ Overnight an anticipated shortage of licensed teachers became a surplus, thus ensuring that there were always enough teachers to keep the schools open.³¹ The practice of making concessions to single rural women teachers was repeated many times, irrespective of the acknowledged damage done to teachers’ professional standing.

In 1954, Nova Scotia’s deputy minister of education summarized the effects of the easy solutions of the past century: “temporary relief,” which had required the massive recruitment of single rural women, had largely prevented teacher shortages from occurring; but the practice had “tend[ed] to discredit the profession, lower salaries, and turn away ambitious and able people.”³² Only in the late 1940s and 50s did the pattern begin to break with the adoption of a province-wide funding formula. It was not until the 1960s, however, that differentiated salary scales for male and female teachers finally ended in Nova Scotia.

Teacher shortages figure prominently in discussions of feminization. Much less prominent is the fact that “shortages” left relatively few classrooms without a teacher. Several studies have drawn attention to the unsatisfactory use that has been made of shortages in relation to feminization. James Albisetti notes, for example, their “dose of circular reasoning: “At times, shortages of teachers are used to show the unattractiveness of the field, but at other times the assumed unattractiveness is used to explain the shortages.”³³ Thus it is useful to view “shortages” in a different way because in Nova Scotia, in the years that concern us here, very few schools were closed for a lack of a teacher.

30 AR, 1864, 15.

31 On this point, see Michael W. Sedlak, “‘Let Us Go and Buy a School Master’: Historical Perspectives on the Hiring of Teachers in the United States, 1750-1980,” in *American Teachers: Histories of a Profession at Work*, ed. Donald Warren (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 271. Also, James C. Albisetti, “The Feminization of Teaching in the Nineteenth Century: A Comparative Perspective,” *History of Education* 22, 3 (1993): 255. For a discussion of “female redundancy” or “superfluous women,” see Geraldine Joncich Clifford, “‘Daughters into Teachers’: Educational and Demographic Influences on the Transformation of Teaching into ‘Women’s Work’ in America,” in *Women Who Taught: Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching*, ed. Alison Prentice and Marjorie Theobald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 129. On the general recruitment of surplus female labour from rural Nova Scotia, see D. A. Muise, “The Industrial Context of Inequality: Female Participation in Nova Scotia’s Paid Labour Force, 1871-1921,” *Acadiensis* 20, 2 (1991): 22, passim.

32 AR, 1954, viii-ix.

33 Albisetti, “The Feminization of Teaching in the Nineteenth Century,” 255.

Complaints from school sections that they were unable to obtain teachers were few and when they occurred were often the result of teachers refusing to take up positions under the terms offered. In 1943, for example, when the shortage of teachers was thought to be especially severe, only 7 of 1,419 rural school sections were “unable to make provisions for the formal education of their children.”³⁴ In Nova Scotia, a heavy demand for teachers resulted, paradoxically it would first seem, in a surplus of teachers, an understudied aspect of the gender and professionalization relationship. It is the creation of this perennial surplus of licensed teachers and its consequences for the teaching “profession” that concern us here.

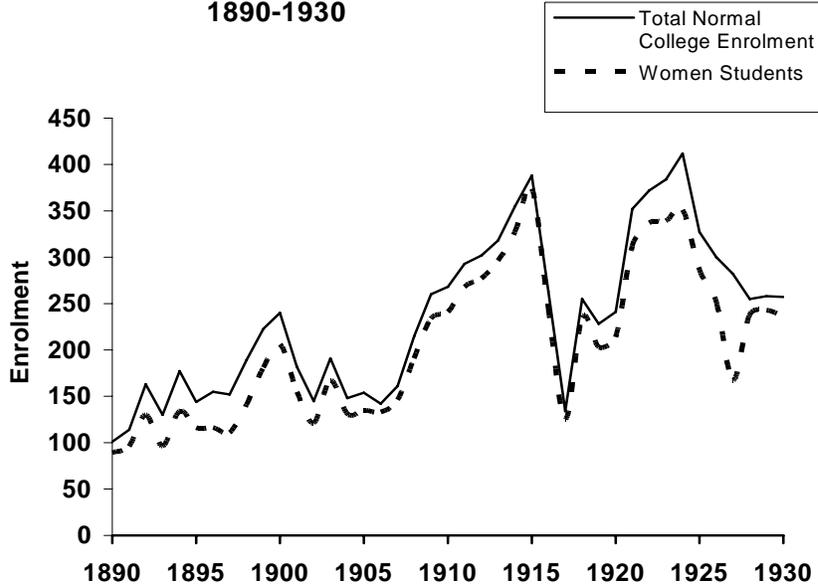
The “Mystery Attached to Fluctuating Enrolment”

The Provincial Normal College and the historical dimensions of teacher supply are indicative of the political and economic circumstances that influenced regulatory decisions, and the context in which local pressure to maintain an adequate supply overrode other considerations. Training and certification, and the whole effort to create a professional corps of teachers, were in the first place circumscribed by the school-section system of financing public education. The professionalization project was also caught up in and conditioned by demographic change and market forces to which Nova Scotia, a poor province, was especially vulnerable.

The enrolment of both men and women at the Provincial Normal College ebbed and flowed with the commercial life of the province. Sharp fluctuations in enrolment (see Figures 1 and 2) mirrored young people’s responses to a changeable job market, and also reflected a disinclination either to enter or to stay in teaching

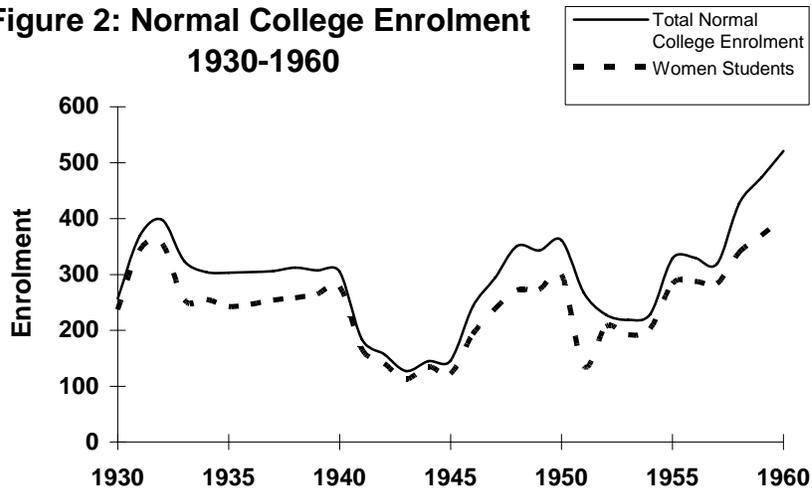
34 See *AR*, 1943, xix. Segregated schools for “coloured” children were a significant exception and often failed to operate because there was no available teacher. In 1927, for example, schools with about 200 children at Beechville, Maroon Hill, Lucasville, Lake Loon, and New Road were closed. It was reported that “very few coloured teachers” were obtainable. For an introduction to the history of racial segregation in Nova Scotia’s schools, see the *BLAC Report on Education*, Vol. 2, *The History of Black Education in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994).

**Figure 1: Normal College Enrolment,
1890-1930**



Source: Compiled from the *Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Education of Nova Scotia, 1890-1930*.

**Figure 2: Normal College Enrolment
1930-1960**



Source: Compiled from the *Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Education and the Department of Education of Nova Scotia, 1930-1960*.

when there were alternatives.³⁵ The drop in enrolment by 40 per cent between 1900 and 1903, for example, was steep but not unusual. Enrolment quickly recovered and rose by over 30 per cent the following year, prompting the Normal College principal to wonder about the “mystery attached to fluctuating enrolment.”³⁶ There was little mystery, however, behind the decision to teach – or not to teach. The option of teaching was always available when better-paying alternatives could not be found. In Nova Scotia between 1855 and the 1950s, teaching, unlike nursing, had the advantage of requiring no training at all until 1930, and only brief periods of compulsory training, often less than a year, as late as the 1950s. Young men could more easily avoid teaching; moreover, an inspector for the County of Halifax in 1912 wrote of “the tendency to shun teaching” because for male students teaching was not looked upon as a “man’s job.”³⁷

The doubling of average normal-school enrolment levels after 1870 reflected as well the profound social and economic restructuring that was occurring in Nova Scotia. The old staples-based rural economy was coming undone, giving way slowly and unevenly to urbanization and new industrial employment. Marginal farms and falling fortunes in timber and shipbuilding reduced rural employment prospects and convinced many young people of the value of further schooling.³⁸

Under the free school system, enrolment grew steadily from 75,279 pupils in 1870 to over 100,000 in 1900. These were difficult decades; the expansion of teaching opportunities following the Free School and Compulsory Assessment Acts of 1864-5 meant at least an available and alternative source of paid work, especially for rural daughters. As for rural sons, the principal of the Normal School wondered if the “commercial depression” in the mid-1870s had caused the retention of a greater number of male students than would otherwise be expected. With “the revival of business and the demand for active and intelligent young men,” he felt, “we may find a recurrence of the old objection, that our teaching work is

35 While teaching was a respectable option, it was not an option that was freely chosen. See, for example, AR, 1912, Appendix A, Abstracts of Inspectors’ Reports, 49. Cf. Harrigan, “The Development of a Corps of Public School Teachers,” 483.

36 AR, 1905, 59.

37 AR, 1912, Appendix A, “Abstracts of Inspectors’ Reports,” 49.

38 On the disappearance of “occupational plurality” in this era, see E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 21, passim.

falling largely into female hands.”³⁹ The principal’s prediction, if not the old objection, was sound, but the extent to which men would leave teaching in the next generation might have surprised him. Men continued to comprise a fifth of the student body until late in the century. Strong economic growth between 1900 and 1911, however, meant an expanding industrial and commercial labour force, and an even smaller trickle of men into teaching (see Figures 1 and 2).

When young women had few choices, the Normal College’s fortunes rose. In 1915-16, when women were still feeling the effect of several years of rising unemployment and slow growth in the Canadian economy, they made up over 96 per cent of the record-high enrolment of 388. For many young women, free tuition and subsidized travel made a term at the Normal College an attractive alternative, as an affordable means either of furthering their general education or of qualifying to teach in towns or provinces where training was required.⁴⁰ The principal noted at the time that attendance had not been affected by the war in Europe because few men attended the college in the first place. But even women would leave in the next two years for openings in a labour force previously closed to them, causing enrolment to fall by over 65 per cent to 134 in 1917-18.

The post-war slump between 1918 and 1924 restored high levels of female enrolment, while men generally resisted the trend by reclaiming the industrial employment that remained after the war. It took the Great Depression to push up men’s enrolment, and then only to 15 per cent. The provincial teaching force showed the same pattern, women making up 80 per cent or more of teachers between 1905 and 1960 (see Figure 3).

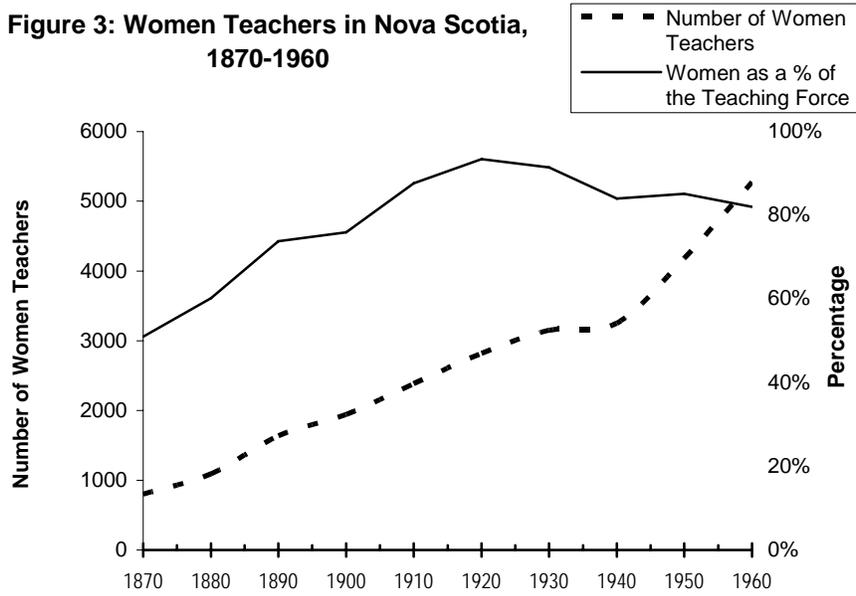
Teachers left in expansionary periods for other jobs – for domestic service, stenography, nursing, or, as one report put it, for “some other employment less worrying in [its] effects, and more generously remunerated.”⁴¹ New employment in Nova Scotia between 1901 and 1907 and growth in the new prairie provinces in the same period accelerated the exodus of licensed teachers from both teaching and the province. School inspectors reported in 1905 that the Canadian Northwest was still taking away the province’s

39 AR, 1875, ix.

40 In 1913, A.H. MacKay, the provincial superintendent of education, attributed an increase in the employment of normal-trained teachers to “the fact that the better schools of the province [were] successfully competing against the attractions of the progressive West.” See AR, 1913, xiv.

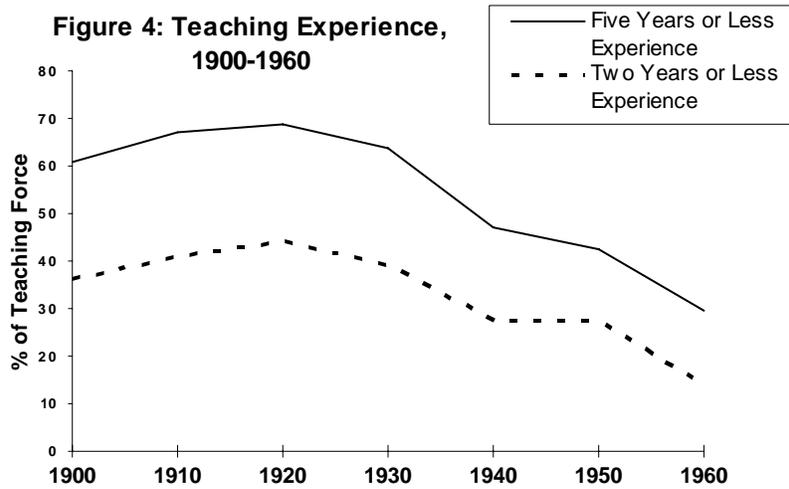
41 AR, 1910, xviii.

Figure 3: Women Teachers in Nova Scotia, 1870-1960



Source: *Annual Reports of the Department of Education, 1870-1960.*

Figure 4: Teaching Experience, 1900-1960



Source: *Annual Reports of the Department of Education of Nova Scotia, 1900-1960.*

teachers, a dozen at least having gone from Yarmouth and Shelburne counties alone.⁴² An Annapolis Valley inspector reported the effect of the western “draft” upon the province’s teachers: “Those who go are from the higher classes, and so we are left with more new and inexperienced teachers at home.”⁴³

A fifth of the provincial teaching force quit in 1910, even when growth had slowed, only to be replaced by 533 new teachers in their first year of professional service. This was, according to the superintendent of education, the “approximate measure of the number leaving the profession in Nova Scotia each year.” The wheat boom and Prairie growth between 1926 and 1929 – and much higher salaries⁴⁴ – produced the same effect, huge turnovers in most rural school sections in a decade in which 122,000 Maritimers emigrated.⁴⁵ In Colchester-Hants East, 86 of 239 teachers had never taught before and fewer than 30 per cent had any Normal training.⁴⁶ The loss of qualified teachers to other occupations and provinces began to slow by 1930 as employment in the West dried up and teachers tended to hold on to their teaching positions in Nova Scotia. The 1930s were different, a decade when fears of a teacher shortage disappeared and when the province raised both academic and professional standards, eliminating licences based on Grade X study and requiring for the first time a full year of compulsory training.

These changes were later described in a Normal College centennial publication as a “rapid and upward trend in the training of teachers,” one that would lead to longer teaching careers.⁴⁷ If the claim was considerably overstated – nearly 43 per cent of the province’s teachers in 1950 did not have more than five years of teaching experience – a trend in the direction of greater

42 AR, 1905, 81. On the scale of migration to Western Canada, see Alan A. Brookes, “Out-Migration from the Maritime Provinces, 1860-1900: Some Preliminary Considerations,” *Acadiensis* 2 (Spring 1976): 25-26. Brookes notes on page 39 that “the attraction of the western provinces was particularly noticeable among Nova Scotians.” On the “greater propensity” for young women to migrate from the region, see Patricia A. Thornton, “The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921: A New Look,” *Acadiensis* XV (Autumn 1985): 18. The historiography of women’s out-migration from the Maritimes is discussed in Betsy Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity: Single Maritime Women in Boston, 1870-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 4-19.

43 AR, 1905, 99.

44 Average salaries in British Columbia in the early 1920s were reported to be double those of Nova Scotia. See the *Bulletin of the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union*, Dec. 1922.

45 Forbes and Muise, *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, 234.

46 AR, 1925, 85.

47 *100 Years of Teacher Education, 1855-1955*, Nova Scotia Normal College, 1955, 36.

permanency of service certainly began at this time (see Figure 4). This increase in tenure can be attributed in part to the greater commitment now required to become a teacher and to the increased employment of married women in the 1940s and 1950s. On the other hand, in the same decades the demands of war and peacetime prosperity reversed any “upward trend” in certification standards, as we will see. Furthermore, rural and village school sections continued to be the main source of teachers; urban sons and daughters were much less inclined to teach.

The 1950 Commission on Teacher Education calculated that “only one of every thirty-eight urban students, as compared with one out of every five rural and village students of grades 11 and 12 went on to the normal college.” A year of university attendance was suggested by the commission as a partial remedy for the failure to attract candidates for elementary school teaching from urban areas, and from homes where the average family income was higher.⁴⁸ The difference between rural and urban education was equally dramatic in the distribution of the highest licences, with 83.5 per cent of teachers holding academic licences located in towns and cities, 16.5 per cent in rural municipalities.⁴⁹

“The Elasticity of Our System”

Nova Scotia licensed over 44,000 new teachers between 1870, when women comprised the majority of teachers for the first time, and 1961, when the old Normal College acquired a new name and first introduced a two-year program.⁵⁰ Teacher licensing and hiring hinged on this renewable and seemingly infinite supply of young rural women who were prepared to teach for a few years. Many hundreds of new teachers were found each year to replace the many hundreds who left, there being few years in this long period in which four or five hundred new teachers were not licensed, well in excess of the number of teachers trained in many years (Table 1). While a perennial shortage of what education officials regarded as qualified teachers was certainly the case, the supply of certified teachers almost always matched any rise in demand. Indeed, supply was typically in excess of demand with more teachers

48 *Report of the Commission on Teacher Education in Nova Scotia*, 1950, 79, 80-1.

49 *Report of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance in Nova Scotia*, 1954, 32.

50 The Provincial Normal College became the Nova Scotia Teachers' College and continued under that name until its closure in 1996.

available than positions for them.⁵¹ “Is there a scarcity of teachers?” the provincial superintendent asked in 1911. The answer was clear:

There is not. We have an excess of them. They are flowing into other provinces. And altho [sic] there are twice as many teachers leaving the profession every year now as compared with nineteen years ago, due to the industrial activity within and without the province, we have three or four times as many coming up to and passing our high school examinations.⁵²

It was this rapid expansion of high school enrolment that allowed Nova Scotia to achieve the heavy annual additions of new teachers between 1880 and 1930, only half of whom received Normal College training (see Table 1). “The elasticity of our system [was] due specially to the vigorous development of the high schools, which are annually sending up 6000 candidates” for provincial academic examinations, noted the superintendent of education in 1920.⁵³ More than anything, however, the system’s elasticity was due to 4,245 of these 6000 candidates, or 70 per cent, being girls. “An unlimited supply of persons with certified scholarship” now existed, the superintendent reported; this made it possible to replace a third or more of the teachers who typically resigned from their schools each year.⁵⁴ Most of these new teachers moved on to other schools within a year and many hundreds quit after a brief period of service.

Even in years in which serious shortages were purported, replacements were found (Table 2). When war or prosperity stretched the supply, the superintendent could say with certainty that no province was better supplied with teachers than Nova Scotia. The demand for teachers rarely and exceptionally exhausted the supply in the years surveyed. A chronic superabundance of licensed teachers characterized the province’s teaching force for almost a hundred years and as long as thousands of teachers had

51 It is unlikely that Nova Scotia was typical in this regard. For example, see Nancy M. Sheehan and J. Donald Wilson, “From Normal School to the University to the College of Teachers: Teacher Education in British Columbia in the 20th century,” *Journal of Education for Teaching* 20, 1 (1994): 24. According to Sheehan and Wilson, “supply never quite met the demand” in British Columbia.

52 AR, 1911, xvi.

53 AR, 1920, vi.

54 AR, 1920-21, xiv.

little or no training, they assuaged local fears of shortages and were the means of allowing ungraded rural schools to remain open.

The impact of this “unlimited supply” of single young women, however, did little to encourage and retain more qualified common-school (elementary) teachers.⁵⁵ The superintendent’s report in 1918 acknowledged the loss of “high class teachers” who were being “strongly attracted out of the profession.” At the same time, it was understood that girls and boys with some high school education could be drawn temporarily into service to fill any vacancy. The Halifax inspector had done that, making “a house to house canvas where he knew that there were young persons holding high school certificates.” The best teachers had gone west, he said; others had gone into office work, banks, and other businesses. While it was hard to get “C” and “B” licences, “a fair supply” of “D” class licences, based on grade-nine scholarship, was still available.⁵⁶ These practices permitted schools with as few as two pupils to operate a full year.

A ready supply also depended on flexible regulations responsive to labour market conditions and sensitive to local hiring customs. Training was as short or as long as circumstances permitted, with institutes, summer courses, and half-year programs all designed as expedient measures to allow an uninterrupted flow of teachers. The superintendent conceded in 1906 that the Provincial Normal School’s courses were inferior to others in North America because of their shortness. This was, he said, “a necessary concession to the demands of the present stage of our educational evolution.”⁵⁷ It was also a desperate measure following four years of enrolment decline of greater than 20 per cent each year, the result of competition for students in a growing commercial and industrial labour force. “The most important immediate problem” for the Normal College, Principal Soloan reported in 1921, was “securing an adequate attendance of students...” Soloan admitted that the solution adopted, a half-year program for which temporary diplomas good for two years of service were awarded, was “a concession to circumstances,” nothing short of “a bid for students.” He added, ruefully, “At least they won’t decamp to the West where partially trained teachers are not accepted.”⁵⁸

55 The term “common school,” referring to grades I to VIII, was used interchangeably with “elementary” in the 1930s. The British term “primary” for the same grades appears in the *Educational Review* (St. John, N.B.) in 1887 and elsewhere.

56 AR, 1918, 57, 59.

57 AR, 1906, xx.

58 AR, 1921, 108.

The Second World War witnessed the same pattern, an acute shortage of teachers followed by a large expansion of supply through the licensing of under-qualified candidates. A decline in the Normal College enrolment by almost 60 per cent between 1941 and 1945, and massive defections from teaching, meant a huge draft of eligible reservists. Inspectors reported a “dwindling supply” and saw it as part of a worldwide shortage. As the Cumberland inspector reported, “A great many female teachers got married, a great many got employment in war work, a few more entered the civil service, while others took up more remunerative employment.”⁵⁹

But even this rapid wartime mobilization of women did not exhaust ways of augmenting the supply of teachers, measures over which a normal-school principal later expressed regret and ambivalence:

In order to attract as many as possible to secure training as teachers, Nova Scotia in common with other provinces of Canada found it necessary to accept as candidates for teaching some who would not be able to meet the requirements of normal times. This was probably a mistake, but the exigencies of the situation required drastic measures.⁶⁰

Inspectors accordingly issued permissive licences to “practically every person who showed any desire to teach...” Previously unwanted married women were also coaxed to help out. Forty-five per cent of the teachers in Digby and Yarmouth in 1943 were married women;⁶¹ almost 70 per cent (69.8 per cent) of the province’s women teachers in rural municipalities were married in 1949-50.⁶² An enrolment decline at the Provincial Normal College from 361 in 1951 to 229 in 1955 was attributed by the Normal College to “an expanded economy and the effects of the Korean War,”⁶³ and helped to undermine the old prohibition against married women teachers.⁶⁴ In Annapolis County, for example,

59 AR, 1942, 61.

60 *100 Years of Teacher Education, 1855-1955*, 38.

61 AR, 1943, 44, 48.

62 The total number of female married teachers in 1949-50 was 1,360, 332 of whom had not taught in the previous year. See the *Report of the Commission on Teacher Education in Nova Scotia*, 1950, Table II, 78.

63 *100 Years of Teacher Education*, 40.

64 The marriage bar was enforced on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Frances Widdowson, in her English study *Growing Up into the Next Class: Women and Elementary Teachers Training 1840-1914* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 64-65, describes

approximately 70 per cent of the teachers in rural and village schools in 1955 were married women, most holding minimum qualifications.⁶⁵ It would take a recession from 1957 through the early 1960s, and improved benefits, to restore higher levels of enrolment.

Until 1930, the principal mechanism for increasing teacher supply was the Minimum Professional Qualification (MPQ), a set of annual written examinations that allowed high school students to secure a licence directly without any professional training.⁶⁶ The candidates were overwhelmingly girls aged between sixteen and nineteen, who, inspectors said, “cram[med]” for examinations in School Law, Hygiene and Temperance, School Management, Pedagogy, the History of Education, and the Theory and Practice of Teaching.⁶⁷ In 1920, 621 candidates – 599 of them girls – sat for the MPQ in seventy district centres, with 400 gaining certification.⁶⁸ Between 1880 and 1930, the MPQ yielded an average of 55 per cent of the province’s new teachers, supplementing in this way any shortfall in trained teachers. One superintendent described the system as “a manifest anomaly”: “And if the question be asked of any of the applicants if they intend to adopt the vocation of pedagogy for life, not one in one hundred would reply in the affirmative.”⁶⁹ After 1930, the Normal College’s matriculation requirements were kept low enough to ensure a steady flow of new teachers – not until 1960 was grade 12 required for admission. Temporary and permissive licences

the desire to cut costs as probably the main purpose: “It was more economic to employ young unmarried girls than to employ older more experienced women who would expect higher salaries.” In Canada, the Toronto Board followed the practice of Nova Scotia’s trustees in requiring the resignation of teachers who married between 1921 and 1946. See Cecilia Reynolds, “Hegemony and Hierarchy: Becoming a Teacher in Toronto, 1930-1980,” *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 2, 1 (1990): 100.

65 AR, 1955, 22.

66 The MPQ began to be phased out in 1927. After August 31, 1930, professional training became a prerequisite for a licence. Third-class licences were also discontinued at this time and licences issued to persons without training were no longer valid beyond 1931. It is important to note, however, that even for trained women teachers, professional status was elusive. See, for example, R.D. Gidney and W.P.J. Millar, *Professional Gentlemen: The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 238-39.

67 AR, 1913, 82.

68 AR, 1920, Table XV – “High School and M.P.Q. Examinations.”

69 AR, 1892, 92.

continued to be issued at the discretion of inspectors, while school trustees still sought out the cheapest teachers.⁷⁰

The province’s first commissioners of education, appointed in 1824 to make a survey of educational conditions, remarked on the practice of “underbidding” in which male and female instructors with no intention of making teaching a steady occupation were hired for less than the going rate for a single season.⁷¹ School trustees desiring to spend as little as possible exploited this practice well into the next century, hiring the cheapest teachers over the more qualified. Teachers with higher licences were in effect at a disadvantage in many rural districts. One inspector, noting the proliferation of the lowest grades of licences, admitted the relationship between hiring and cost: “It is easier now to get teachers, because teachers are becoming cheap.”⁷² The inspector for Inverness and Victoria reported in 1902 that “[t]he desire to engage those teachers who are willing to accept very low salaries is so general that those holding “D” provisional licences were all employed during the past year.”⁷³ He also noted that the scarcity of employment for the greater part of the last two decades had induced a large number to take up teaching as temporary work. As a result “third class teachers had become abundant and could be engaged by parsimonious trustees at a very low rate.” In Lunenburg and Queens counties in 1903, for example, where 126 of 246 teachers held “D” class licences, the inspector reported that 90 per cent of those employed in rural areas held “D” licences and were hired because they were available for a lower salary. He believed that the “gradual depletion of a competent staff of teachers in the counties’ schools was due almost wholly to the small salaries.”⁷⁴ A similar concern was expressed in Cumberland and Colchester where the supply of teachers was said to be “in excess of demand,” “so much so that had the supply been a little more restricted the remuneration would have been better.”⁷⁵ An attempt to put an end to the practice of underbidding led to the formation of the first teachers’ union in 1895. The union’s first president

70 In 1921, the teachers’ union sought the abolition of permissive and class “D” licences. However, as late as 1967, 400 “permissives” were still teaching. See Fergusson, *The Story of the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union*, 41, 150.

71 *Reports of Special School Commissioners. Western District 1824. A Documentary Study of Early Educational Policy*, Bulletin of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, 1,1 (1937), 10.

72 AR, 1875, 8.

73 AR, 1902, 120.

74 AR, 1903, 83.

75 AR, 1903, 123-4.

criticized teachers who undercut salaries: "Such behaviour is below housemaids and it should also be below teachers."⁷⁶

Yet a century of economic decline and a vanishing property-tax base made it difficult for many rural school sections to pay teachers any more than they had to. Inspectors reported school boards rejecting applications from Normal-trained teachers with higher licences while accepting "D" teachers with little experience.⁷⁷ In the words of one inspector, "Existing conditions place a premium on the services of the cheaper class of teachers, who are willing to teach for the minimum salaries."⁷⁸ In many districts the lowest licences – Classes "C", "D" and "permissives" – were held by over three-quarters of the employed teachers. Eighty-four per cent of the teachers in Inverness North held these licences in 1924. In Victoria, 70 per cent held Class "D" or Temporary licences in the same year.⁷⁹ An inspector reported in 1932 that while experienced teachers were returning from the West, thirty-nine teachers with temporary licenses were hired instead of permanently licensed teachers, who remained without schools. At the same time a uniform 10 per cent cut in salaries in urban areas fell most heavily on teachers holding higher licences.⁸⁰ Little had changed after the Second World War. In Annapolis in 1955, 64 per cent of the teachers held minimum qualifications and 9 per cent held "permissive" licences, the latter issued at the discretion of the inspector and local school trustees. This state of affairs had earlier prompted a group of dissident teachers' union members dissatisfied with the number of low-licensed teachers to consider the formation of "a completely professional organization made up of professional teachers."⁸¹ Even by as late as 1961, over 40 per cent of the teachers in rural schools, most of whom were women, held licences below Class 2, indicative of an academic standing of less than Grade XII. Few men taught in rural schools but of these more than 80 per cent held Class 2 licences or higher (see Table 3). If Class 2 serves as the standard, only 11.3 per cent of the total number of male teachers in the province would have failed to qualify for "professional" status; in contrast, 33.9 per cent of all female

76 Fergusson, *The Story of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union*, 14-22, 49, 56.

77 AR, 1925, 78.

78 AR, 1924, 69.

79 AR, 1924, 76.

80 AR, 1932, 51-2, and AR, 1933, xxx.

81 Fergusson, *The Story of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union*, 101.

teachers would have been unofficially classified as “unqualified substandard teachers.”⁸²

“Local Sentiment” and the “Normal Flow” of Teachers

Standardization of practice and exclusive control over the licensing of teachers – a Normal School monopoly over training and certification – were the essential elements of Forrester’s (and the province’s) normal school project. But even this narrow conception of professional status for teachers challenged traditional attitudes about teaching at a time when the advantages of training and higher certification standards were far from obvious. As the provincial superintendent observed in 1879, “The distinction between ‘professional’ and non-professional qualifications [for schoolteachers] has hitherto been obscure in the public mind.” The superintendent still believed that public opinion was changing, however slowly, and that people were beginning “to see the true aims and functions of the Normal School.”⁸³ Given the evidence, this was doubtful. When teachers know that “their occupation is only temporary,” the *Educational Review* commented in 1889, “can they be expected...to exhibit a painful anxiety to make themselves accomplished teachers...?”⁸⁴ New grammar and high schools were already producing more than enough “scholars” who were thought to be capable of teaching younger children. In the decades following its opening, the Normal School faced competition for students from the new high schools. University departments of education that opened after 1926 also drew away the well-qualified students the provincial training school had once hoped to attract. Normal schools elsewhere as well often struggled to attract students, making institutional survival a more pressing priority than the professionalization of teachers.⁸⁵

The Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union in the early 1920s doubted that the status and salaries of teachers would rise until the

82 Public complaints about under-qualified teachers in the late 1950s generally referred to those holding Teacher’s Licence Class 3, which required only grade XI education and one year of professional training. See the *Annual Report of the Department of Education*, 1959, 30.

83 AR, 1879, xvi-xvii.

84 “Educational Reform,” *The Educational Review* (St. John, N.B.), III, 7 (Dec. 1889): 110.

85 See Andrew Gitlin, “Gender and Professionalization: An Institutional Analysis of Teacher Education and Unionism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Teachers College Record* 97, 4 (Summer 1996): 603.

decentralization of rural education ended. Union members regarded the consolidation of small school sections under stronger municipal units as “the ultimate solution of the rural school problem.” But it was necessary to overcome the opposition of school-board trustees who feared that a new system would usurp and infringe on local rights. The problem, one union member claimed, had as much to do with “the parsimony of well-off communities” as it did with the popular notion that Nova Scotia was too poor to improve its rural schools. It was not enough, in other words, to blame low salaries on poverty if this meant overlooking the attitude and incompetence of trustees in small districts. The challenge for the teachers and the union was to make country people understand the importance of better-qualified teachers.⁸⁶

Certainly the Carnegie Report and other provincially commissioned studies of the education system were unanimous in identifying the political and financial constraints under the self-governing school section as an area of needed reform. When W.S. Learned and Kenneth Sills of the Carnegie Foundation asked the Normal College principal in 1920 if a half million dollars for buildings and an endowment would make it feasible to introduce a two-year training course, and if Nova Scotia would be able to absorb the consequent output of teachers, there was no affirmative reply.⁸⁷ Provincial authorities knew that ratepayers in many school sections were either unable or reluctant to pay for good teachers.⁸⁸ The Royal Commission on the Larger School Unit of 1939, the Royal Commission on Provincial Development and Rehabilitation in 1944, and the Royal Commission on Public School Finance in 1954 concurred that the problem centred on the financial inability of many of the 1,700 mostly rural school sections, each operating as an independent employer, to provide qualified teachers.⁸⁹

86 *Bulletin of the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union*, June, 1923, 9.

87 AR, 1920-21, Appendix B, 109.

88 AR, 1903, xvii.

89 The Royal Commission on Provincial Development and Rehabilitation's recommendation for a “Minimum Program of Education” led to the introduction of a minimum salary scale for teachers in 1946; but it was not until the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance in 1956 that new sharing arrangements between municipalities and the provincial government narrowed the gap between rural and urban municipalities. For a summary of Nova Scotia's history of school financing, see *The Report of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance in Nova Scotia*, 1954, 1-14.

D. A. Muise’s study of the female labour supply in Nova Scotia between 1871 and 1921 is another reminder of how hiring decisions were made and of their impact:

School boards composed of middle-aged, largely middle class men hired young women as teachers because they were readily available. In the process, women experienced a type of ghettoization similar to that of their sisters in the cotton mill, even though their ethnic and religious traits differed sharply.⁹⁰

As it turned out, rural teachers, almost all women, were even worse off than textile workers as late as the 1940s; their median salary was as much as 40 per cent lower.⁹¹

What Muise’s study – and the present one – do not tell us is whether this was a hiring practice based purely on financial reality and whether school trustees regretted that under existing funding arrangements, they were unable to hire teachers with higher qualifications. This is where more evidence is needed to explain how resistance to a more centralized system of education finally yielded to the idea of larger and stronger municipal units. What exactly, for example, did the Carnegie study of 1922 mean by saying that “educational policy in Nova Scotia [was] a political product,” and that educational documents could not escape “the flavour of political orientation”?⁹² Until these questions are studied, we can only surmise that rural opposition to larger municipal school units did play a role in delaying the introduction of higher licensing requirements.

Provincial educators, fully aware of the contradictory tendencies in their management of the teacher supply, acknowledged the negative impact of huge annual in-takes of minimally educated and partially trained teachers. Officials knew that their licensing standard confirmed the low status of teachers; they saw before them precisely what Michael Apple has described elsewhere as “a strong relationship between the entry of large numbers of women into an occupation and the slow transformation

90 Muise, “The Industrial Context of Inequality,” 26.

91 The median salary of textile workers in 1943 was about \$900, while rural teachers were paid a little over \$600. See Maureen Phinney, ed., *Landmarks and Challenges: A Short History of the NSTU* (Halifax: NSTU, 2001), 10.

92 *Education in the Maritime Provinces of Canada*, 6-7.

of the job.”⁹³ Superintendent David Allison wrote in 1886, for example, that “such large accessions” meant stationary salaries and the loss of some of the profession’s “best talents.”⁹⁴ His successor, A.H. MacKay, reported in 1896 that the practice of issuing “permissive” licences “demoralized” school sections; it also lessened “the inducement to young men and women of the country to prepare themselves to become regular teachers by reducing salaries to the barest pittance.”⁹⁵

Superintendent MacKay was also concerned about the professional reputation of qualified teachers:

[I]t was injurious to the profession for it to put unqualified persons on the same plane as the qualified; and the expectation of getting a “permissive” for some local party has often been demonstrated to the Education Department to be the cause of the rejection of the application of regular teachers.⁹⁶

Provincial school authorities agreed that the “greatest weakness in [their] school system [was] the impossibility of obtaining trained teachers for all our schools.” This was especially the case in rural schools where “we must generally be content to employ those who pass at least a high school grade of scholarship,” McKay wrote in 1906.⁹⁷ This was the way to keep schools open which otherwise would be closed. MacKay was aware that in “the advanced educational countries” even elementary teachers were required to take two or three years of professional training, while admitting that in rural Nova Scotia the issuance of “permissives” satisfied “local sentiment.” And while political peace was purchased, the damage done to the teaching profession was clear:

But when this method [of issuing permissive licenses] has been already seen to act merely as an opiate in the regions concerned, relieving but not curing, and in addition, creating another disease; and when it is so unfair to the teaching

93 Michael W. Apple, “Teaching and ‘Women’s Work’: A Comparative and Historical Analysis,” *Journal of Education* 86, 3 (Spring 1985): 5. On feminization as “the most familiar form of degraded recruitment,” also see Andrew Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 128.

94 AR, 1886, ix.

95 AR, 1896, xxxv.

96 AR, 1903, xviii.

97 AR, 1906, xix.

profession that it can no longer be tolerated, it is clear that such a procedure is not the honest and statesmanlike course.⁹⁸

A teachers' union perspective on the same practice in 1922 reveals another dimension of the way the old system served local interests: “Parents and others, greedy for a miserable pittance of salary, sacrifice the best interests of these young people, and do incalculable harm to the children of the country who are being taught by [unqualified teachers].”⁹⁹ It was pointed out, however, that even a small pittance represented the chance to buy a ticket for the United States or achieve another goal. Thus local politicians and trustees had their reasons, whatever their merit, to oppose attempts to end underbidding and the use of “permissives.”

Learned and Sills of the Carnegie Foundation reached the conclusion that Nova Scotia had “habituated itself to an under-standard” and now had to find a way to break the custom.¹⁰⁰ Thirty years later the practice of issuing what were called “Temporary C’s” and “permissives” had not been broken, its damage no less than that noted by MacKay. It was not until 1946 that a minimum salary scale for the province was implemented.¹⁰¹

The Commission on Teacher Education in 1950 addressed the low status of elementary teachers. They recommended that in order to save the teaching profession from “further degradation,” the term “monitor” be used to describe “unqualified or partially qualified persons who [were] employed during the emergency shortage to keep school.”¹⁰² In their search for ways to achieve professional parity between elementary and secondary teachers, the commission debated how much general education was needed, if one year of professional training was adequate or, as several commission members suggested, if it was desirable to move teacher training to the universities where all other types of professional training were situated.¹⁰³ It would take time, they granted, but meanwhile they

98 AR, 1906, xix.

99 *Bulletin of the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union*, Jan. 1922.

100 AR, 1920-21, Appendix B, 109.

101 Fergusson, *The Story of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union*, 81.

102 *Commission on Teacher Education*, 1950, 84-85.

103 See Gitlin, “Gender and Professionalization,” 602-3, on how the emergence of university schools of education, with their greater emphasis on the liberal arts and scientific research, further diminished the prestige of professionalization projects in normal schools for common-school or elementary teachers.

urged “at least some attendance at university and for credit towards a university degree” in order to attract better students.¹⁰⁴

With respect to women, the commission conceded that “a certain wastage” was “always bound to occur among the female teachers who will leave to get married,” an attitude that was slow to die in the minds of the men who either trained or employed them.¹⁰⁵ It is worth recalling here the shorthand notes of Nova Scotia’s first superintendent of schools, J.W. Dawson, when considering the employment of women as teachers: “Female teachers their employment in the U. States, advantages cheapness, tendency to marry, good complement of girls get married – no loss.”¹⁰⁶

The 1950 commission immediately found itself constrained by the emergency of yet another “acute” shortage of teachers and the familiar truth that in prosperous times teaching was only a last resort. Too many young people found employment in teaching, the commission complained, as Forrester had, because “they can get nothing else better”: “The low salary frequently results in the profession becoming simply a stepping stone to something else, a means of marking time until a better opportunity appears.” Still, the commission’s mandate made it clear that “the normal flow of teachers into the profession” was not to be interrupted, especially at a time when it was still necessary to recruit for teaching almost all academically qualified students. A decade passed before the province acted on a recommendation that a second year of professional training be required and several decades before university attendance, not to say a degree, was required. The 1950 commission concluded presciently, and probably with some irony, that it might take an “economic recession to solve the problem” of the low professional status of elementary teachers. That was in part what happened, as an economic recession from 1957 through the early 1960s made it easier to require grade twelve for admission in 1961 and to inaugurate at the same time a two-year program at the Nova Scotia Teachers’ College.¹⁰⁷

104 *Report of the Commission on Teacher Education in Nova Scotia*, Nov. 1950, 117-27. It was forty-five years before the Normal College (or Teachers’ College, as it became in 1961) was closed and all teacher education moved to the universities.

105 *Commission on Teacher Education*, 1950, 21-22.

106 John William Dawson, “Educational notes gathered while on a tour in New England, 1850,” unpublished papers, McGill University Archives. By “no loss,” Dawson meant that their training as teachers would also serve them in good stead as mothers.

107 The immediate effect was a drop in enrolment of 170 students from the previous term.

Of far greater significance in overcoming the inertia of the past, however, was the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance. The new “foundation program” used a formula on which to base equitable sharing for the costs of education between municipalities and the province. The new system of equalized assessment meant that each municipality would pay according to its ability, thus narrowing the gap between rural and urban educational spending.¹⁰⁸ The benefits of this program, as the historian of the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union rightly observed, “could scarcely be overestimated.”¹⁰⁹

The failure of the Commission on Teacher Education to mention that even university-educated women teachers found little support for their professional advancement should not be overlooked. In 1956, for example, three women teachers appealed to the Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union to improve the status of women in the teaching profession. They noted that in towns women were still subject to differential rates of pay, and that in two towns married women were still not hired. It was not until 1956 that the city of Halifax undertook a three-year plan to end differential salaries for equally qualified men and women teachers. Furthermore, of the five hundred women who were university trained and held higher teaching certificates, only two were supervisors of schools in smaller towns.

The women’s brief continued: “A very few others [were] principals of small village high schools and of junior high and elementary schools in urban sections. Supervisory positions, therefore, in the larger high schools, both senior and junior, are almost invariably held by men.”¹¹⁰ The average salary for rural women teachers in 1956 was \$2,051, little more than half the \$3,775 average salary paid to urban male teachers. (Urban women received \$2,785.) There was no magical date – and it is certainly not found in the 1950s – by which “the special consideration” mentioned by Prentice or the differential treatment of women and men teachers described here ceased to be given.

108 For the impact of the Royal Commission on Public School Finance, see Fergusson, *The Story of the Nova Scotia Teachers Union*, 110-11.

109 *Ibid.*, 111.

110 “The Status of Women in the Teaching Profession in Nova Scotia,” Minutes, Appendix V, Nova Scotia Teachers’ Union, 35th Annual Conference, Kentville, Apr. 4-6, 1956.

Conclusion

In the decades surveyed in this article, thousands of single women with slight amounts of high school education, and with few employment alternatives, were made into teachers; their willingness and availability to teach saved the school-section system of financing public education from an impending teacher shortage time and time again.¹¹¹ The cost of a series of “concessions” was high, however, and served to confirm the low pay and status of teachers. Attempts to raise the professional stature of teachers were offset by measures to maintain the supply of teachers, thus ensuring the status quo in the standing of teachers in the period examined. Each regulated or administratively created batch of low-licensed teachers weakened any upward pressure on certification standards and debased the teaching force. The status of neither women nor teachers was elevated. Women’s subordinate position both as workers and teachers was in fact reinforced.¹¹² So were women’s roles as wives and mothers because the marriage bar that had kept married female teachers out of the schools for so long ended for many women any lingering desire to have a teaching career.

The use of expendable rural women as short-term teachers was an educational measure characteristic of the many rural school sections over whose political and financial operations the provincial government had little control.¹¹³ For officials, knowing that many sections were hard-pressed to provide qualified teachers, opportune times to enhance the dignity and promise of a teaching career were elusive. During economic downturns, when teachers were plentiful, salaries remained or were kept low, or even fell or were reduced. In more prosperous times, when other employment opportunities arose, officials lowered standards in order to maintain

111 On the prevalence of this pattern, see Jackie M. Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency 1873-1995* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 21. Blount writes that women’s willingness to teach “solved a thorny employment problem that otherwise would have stunted the common-school movement and the promise of basic education for American children.” For a general discussion of feminization in Canada, see Prentice, “The Feminization of Teaching,” 49-63.

112 See Ruth Roach Pierson, *They’re Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), on women’s mobilization in a wartime economy and its failure to change their secondary status.

113 In Western Australia, where the demand for *qualified* teachers outstripped supply, “unclassified” teachers were also used as “an important economy measure.” See Sally Kennedy, “Useful and Expendable: Women Teachers in Western Australia in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Labour History* (Australia), 44 (1983): 21.

a flow of new teachers, offsetting any pressure to introduce higher salaries. In effect, the pressure for higher standards was mitigated in both good and bad times. As long as seventeen hundred self-governing and mostly rural employers of teachers could turn to an “unlimited supply” of certified teachers, the educational gap between town and country was likely to remain as wide as ever. It was not until the implementation of new cost-sharing arrangements between the province and newly strengthened municipal units in the 1940s and 1950s that a century-long practice began to break down.

Nova Scotia was not alone in having minimal requirements for a teacher’s licence. Other Canadian provinces and American states lowered certification standards when faced with teacher shortages. The reputation of their teaching forces also suffered, as a major historical survey on the hiring of teachers in the United States concluded:

The United States experienced a teacher shortage of unprecedented depth and breadth following World War I. But since virtually all districts probably were able to round up *someone* to sit in each classroom (to keep school), the real magnitude of the shortage in 1919 was more evident in complaints about the qualifications of the teaching force.¹¹⁴

This was the experience in Nova Scotia as well, where few schools were forced to close because of no available teacher. It is debatable whether higher certification standards would have changed this and made “shortages” worse; or for that matter whether they were even possible given the state of the Nova Scotia economy and the way educational financing was shared. Still, an important point can be made about that possibility. As an American observer wrote in 1920:

Experience in a number of states indicates that an expected shortage does not usually follow the establishment of higher standards. Evidently the dignity and promise and opportunity offered are so improved by increased standards as to add to the attractiveness in the eyes of possible candidates.¹¹⁵

114 Sedlak, “Let Us Go and Buy a School Master,” 271.

115 Katherine M. Cook, quoted in *ibid.*, 273.

Significantly, when standards were permitted to rise, as they were during the 1930s, a gradual increase in the permanency of service began, suggesting that one of the effects of compulsory training and higher standards was the self-selection of more career-oriented teachers. It was also highly significant that the Great Depression caused what the 1954 Royal Commission on Public School Finance saw as “the breakdown” of the poorer sections’ ability to support themselves. This opened the door for the formation of larger municipal units in the late 1940s and 1950s and higher levels of provincial funding.

Far less speculative for the purposes here is the conclusion that education officials, their zeal for reform curbed by the rural school-section system of financing public education, and by the reluctance of men and women to seek a permanent career through training – inasmuch as it was even encouraged for women – were forced to delay the implementation of higher standards. And behind it all, the reality of huge turnovers of single women went largely unchallenged. The idea that these women could embark on a permanent teaching career had yet to win popular acceptance.