

Urbanization and Education in Ontario and Quebec, 1867-1914

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Urbanization is not a phenomenon peculiar to North American society in the late 1960's; movements of population from rural to urban environments have been a feature of social history ever since primitive man first began trading his nomadic existence for life in settled villages. Nor is the impact of urbanization on other aspects of human society — for instance, education — confined to the late 1960's. Urbanization has been a significant cause of educational problems — problems both for the rural school and for the urban school — in Canada for the past one hundred years. The industrialization of Canada in the late nineteenth century, particularly Ontario and Quebec, was accompanied by rapid urban growth which changed population patterns and placed strains on both rural and urban schools. Educators and politicians of the day seemed aware of what was referred to as the "rural school problem" and concentrated a great deal of energy (unsuccessfully as it turned out) in attempting to solve this dilemma. Unfortunately they seemed unaware that urbanization was also creating an urban school problem every bit as serious.

The first census for the new Dominion of Canada, taken in 1871, showed a country of just under 3,500,000 people, eighty per cent of whom were classified as rural. It was a time when home, church, and village were the centres of life for most people, before

improvements in transportation and communications brought the metropolitan centres closer to rural communities. But such population and social patterns could not last indefinitely. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century Canada saw the twin revolutions of industrialization and urbanization create the new industrial city. To this new industrial city came both surplus rural population and, especially, the newly-arrived European immigrant. Though the "average" turn-of-the-century Canadian was often pictured as a farmer, the fact was that the rural population was declining in relative terms. Census returns showed a decline in the percentage of population classified as rural to seventy-four per cent in 1881 and to fifty-four per cent in 1911. The shift was particularly evident in the more industrialized central provinces of Quebec and Ontario, where Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, and other factory centres were rapidly expanding. Such shifts in population were evident in school statistics. In Ontario, for instance, the rural school population was fifty-eight per cent of the total school population in 1903, but less than fifty per cent eight years later.

The Rural School Problem

One of the main concerns of Canadian educators by the turn of the century was the so-called "rural school problem." Rural school populations were declining and rural school attendance was very unsatisfactory. The curriculum, reflecting the classical and literary bent, was not adjusted to the needs of the countryside and rural teachers were usually unable to make the necessary adjustments of their own. The great majority of rural teachers held the lowest calibre certificates or merely temporary permits to teach. In his survey of Canadian rural schools in 1913, J. C. Miller found that over ninety-three per cent of all uncertified teachers employed in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario (the only provinces which provided urban-rural breakdowns among their teachers) were teaching in rural schools.¹ Average salaries in cities, about twice as high as average rural salaries before Confederation, became nearly three times as high by 1900. This disparity was largely due to the number of poorly qualified persons available for employment at low rates in rural districts.

Quebec educators were most concerned about the plight of their rural schools at the time. The Catholic Committee of the Council of Public Instruction deplored the fact that few male teachers were employed in rural elementary schools; its attempted remedy

lay in increased grants to rural boards employing male teachers. The Protestant Committee in 1875 had found the condition of the rural elementary schools so hopeless that it concentrated its efforts on the improvement of superior schools. But after 1902, stimulated to action by McGill University, by a series of articles in the *Montreal Star*, and by deliberations of the Provincial Association of Protestant Teachers, the Protestant Committee turned its attention to improving rural schools. At this time, one-quarter of all rural Protestant schools were attended by ten pupils or less, and they were taught by poorly qualified teachers whose turnover rate was twenty-five per cent each year. Leaders of the movement for improving rural schools included G. W. Parmelee and J. C. Sutherland of the Protestant Committee, Victor E. Morrill, publisher of the *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, and Hon. Sydney Fisher, Minister of Agriculture in the Laurier Cabinet.³

Concern was also evident in Ontario. Farmers' groups called for equal educational opportunities for rural and urban children, and for a curriculum more relevant to the needs of rural society. Professor James Cappon of Queen's University argued that the rural schools could help make agriculture a more profitable vocation by "teaching the use of scientific methods, giving farming a scientific interest which will put its labours on a level with those of the engineer and the doctor, making the farmer the same type of elevated man they are."⁴ Annual reports of the Minister of Education had for years suggested that something would have to be done. "The large number of children in the rural schools belonging to the producing class of agriculturalists," declared the Minister's *Report* for 1880-1881, "plainly shows that elementary teaching should be so directed as to prove of practical value as a basis for such pursuits."

Approaches to the Problem

Provincial authorities responded to the needs of the rural population in various ways. Agriculture and nature study were added to the elementary curriculum, instruction in agriculture was offered in normal schools and at summer courses for teachers, attempts were made in Ontario to introduce the "continuation" school as a new type of rural or agricultural high school, and provincial directors of agriculture or rural education were appointed. Consolidation of small rural schools was encouraged by Quebec's Protestant Committee. Following public meetings on the subject in the

summers of 1912 and 1913, the Committee was voted a modest grant of \$6,000 in 1914-1915 to finance consolidation. But problems remained: for one thing some parents in rural areas felt their children were being discriminated against if they were not provided with a curriculum identical to that offered in city schools. They also regarded "book-farming" with considerable scorn. Projects for school reform involving increased expenditure of money at the local level were often blocked by economy-minded farmers.

Perhaps the best organized and best financed approach to the problems of rural education in the years prior to World War I came from the Macdonald Education Movement. Sir William Macdonald⁴ (1831-1917), the wealthy Montreal tobacco manufacturer who was such a generous benefactor of McGill University, was persuaded by James Robertson⁵ (1857-1930), Dominion Agricultural and Dairying Commissioner, to use his money to introduce practical work into the elementary schools of both rural and urban Canada. At the turn of the century the Macdonald Rural Schools Fund was established. School gardens were set up at five rural schools in each of the five eastern provinces. The costs of establishing the gardens and maintaining supervisory personnel for three years were borne by the fund. The pupils were shown the value of seed selection, the rotation of crops, and the protection of crops against weeds, insects, and disease. As a result, flourishing school gardens and school agricultural fairs sprang up.

The initial success of the school gardens persuaded Macdonald and Robertson to launch an even bolder scheme for the rejuvenation of rural schools in eastern Canada. The Macdonald Consolidated School Project would expand the benefits of school gardening and add those of manual training and household science by establishing "consolidated" schools — that is by merging several adjacent school districts and providing daily transportation of the children to and from the new, larger schools. With great fanfare, the first Macdonald Consolidated School was opened at Middleton, N.S., in 1903, followed by others in eastern Canada in the following years. The intention here, as with the school garden project, was that the public would be so receptive that provincial and local bodies would assume the financial obligations after three years. But the high hopes for these schools failed to materialize; while the principle of consolidation was confirmed in undoubted pedagogical success, the

movement seemed to be in advance of its time. The rural public in eastern Canada was simply not convinced that the plight of country schools was serious enough to warrant the additional expense that consolidation involved.

The post-secondary agricultural college was also charged with addressing itself to the problems of rural education. The colleges aimed at educating young men for scientific agricultural careers and at training teachers for rural schools. These two aims were incorporated in the culmination of Macdonald's financial assistance to rural education: the founding of Macdonald College at Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, to provide instruction in agriculture and domestic science, and to provide teacher training. The Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education (1910-1913), the first federal Royal Commission in the field of education, also concerned itself with rural education; its deliberations and recommendations led directly to the Agricultural Instruction Act of 1912 and the Agricultural Aid Act of 1913, through which Ottawa assisted the provinces in extending agricultural education in rural areas.

The Demands of the Cities

If rural taxpayers balked at increased school costs and revamped curricula to help the schools meet the needs of a changing rural society, urban taxpayers likewise found it difficult to accept the idea that the new industrial city was placing equally serious demands on the urban school. As S. D. Clark has written, the Canadian urban community of the 1890's was essentially a first generation community. Few of the people in the cities at this time (and during the next two decades) had been born and raised in the community in which they were living; many of them had come to the city from rural districts. Clark concludes:

The people who held positions of responsibility or influence in the Canadian city of 1890 were people with a rural background and their thinking as a result tended to be in terms of the needs of a rural society. Leadership, largely sheltered from the effects of industrial urbanization, promoted policies and activities within group organization which went little way in meeting the needs of an industrial urban population.⁶

Romantic descriptions of Montreal, Toronto, and other major Canadian cities in the late nineteenth century usually failed to

mention the seamier sides of the new industrial centres — the slums, the street urchins begging and selling newspapers, the saloons and the flophouses. The impersonalization of factories and urban ghettos affected adults and children alike in this new environment. Alarming statistics on the growth of urban poverty and crime eventually led to the formation of several middle class social reform movements.

Many of these movements to reform urban-industrial society were focused on the child; the adult residents of the slums were perhaps lost, but the child held out hope for the future. Though not all these groups were directly connected with education, most looked to the schools as a vehicle for reintegrating the child into the existing (middle class) social structure. Movements active in this field in late nineteenth Canada included the Child Saving Movement (get the child out of the slums), the New Education Movement (create a pleasant classroom atmosphere), the Social Gospel of the Salvation Army and the YMCA, the Temperance Movement (include temperance in the elementary school curriculum), and the Labour Movement (get the child out of the factories). These movements tended to bring together professional educators and volunteer social reformers — men like James Hughes,⁷ Toronto's superintendent of public schools, and J. J. Kelso, founder of the Toronto Children's Aid Society — in a concerted campaign to reform urban-industrial society through the child and through the school.

Attention to certain subject areas — physical and health education on the one hand and technical and commercial education on the other — will demonstrate the effects of urbanization on curriculum. The health and physical welfare of city youngsters was of special concern to educators and reformers of the time. As Ontario educator John Millar wrote in 1897:

In a new and sparsely settled country, where the inhabitants are most closely connected with agriculture, some of the dangers to health which beset large cities are absent. The problems relating to school life become more complicated when questions affecting a supply of pure water, the disposal of sewage, the heating and ventilation of large buildings, . . . are pressing for solution.⁸

Demands grew for a more important place for health and physical education within the curriculum and for physical recreation and ath-

letic activities as important co-curricular activities. By the turn of the century, most large city high schools had gymnasias, and many of the larger urban boards were providing medical and dental services for their young pupils.⁹ There was also an increasing concern for those youngsters whose physical or mental handicaps were a greater barrier to their social acceptance in urban centres than would have been so in small rural communities. The larger urban school boards gradually accepted responsibility for the special education of the handicapped; in the years prior to 1914 special classes were established for the tubercular, severely undernourished, and physically and mentally handicapped children.

Urban communities (led by the industrial employers) expected city schools to provide graduates with expertise in the new skills demanded by sophisticated business and industry. It was not surprising that the earliest moves into technical and commercial education came in the larger cities of the country. Greater population concentrations resulted in larger student populations and larger schools which could afford diversified programs. And urban centres also tended to have larger tax resources (due to industrial assessment) to provide for the more expensive technical and commercial courses. Since provincial governments and the federal government were late in committing themselves to large-scale financing of vocational education, city schools boards were forced to take the lead. By 1914 Montreal, Toronto, and other large industrial centres were offering technical and commercial courses at the secondary school level.

A Half Century of Progress?

At the outbreak of World War I, educators in Ontario and Quebec could look back on a half century of industrialization and urbanization. The effects of urbanization and declining rural populations had not gone unnoticed by those in positions of authority. Yet it seemed that the rural schools were not much closer to the farming community in 1914 than they had been fifty years previously. Despite the introduction of agriculture into the curriculum, the efforts at rural school consolidation, and the work of the agricultural colleges, champions of a distinctive type of rural education were far from satisfied. In his 1918 comprehensive survey of Canadian education, Peter Sandiford concluded that Canada's greatest

educational problem was that of her rural schools, with their poor teachers and largely irrelevant curriculum.¹⁰ J. C. Miller was firm in his conviction that "in Quebec the inadequacy of the training given in elementary rural schools forms the darkest page in Canadian education."¹¹

Urban education had likewise failed to make the adjustments necessary to meet the needs of the new industrial cities. In fact the situation was probably bleaker in the area of urban education since fewer people realized the nature of the crisis. Apart from social reformers like James Hughes and J. J. Kelso, and activists in a handful of middle-class reform movements, hardly anyone seemed aware of the need to extend the functions of the urban school beyond the traditional, formal, intellectual concerns in order to conquer the urgent problems posed by the rural migrant, the immigrant, and the industrial slum.¹² There were several factors which contributed to the emphasis of the rural over the urban: the rural backgrounds of many city dwellers; the persistent belief that rural values were superior to urban values, and must be recaptured and perpetuated; and, not the least, the importance of the rural vote over the urban vote.¹³

To contemporary educators, politicians, and sociologists who are attempting to grapple with the demands of urbanization and education in the 1960's, the problems of urbanization and education in pre-1914 Canada may seem remote, and the solutions proposed somewhat irrelevant. Yet a closer examination of urbanization and its effects on both rural and urban education in this earlier period may be of considerable assistance in isolating difficulties, finding solutions, and, more important still, transferring the proposed solutions into effective action.

REFERENCES

1. J. C. Miller, *Rural Schools in Canada: Their Organization, Administration, and Supervision*, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1913, p. 60.
2. Fisher was a member of the Protestant Committee, and chairman of its sub-committee on the teaching of agriculture. At the time of his death he left a portion of his estate to establish the Fisher Trust Fund for the aid of agriculture and education in Brome County.
3. James Cappon, "Is Ontario to Abandon Classical Education?" *Queens' Quarterly*, XII (October 1904), p. 318.

4. Unfortunately there is as yet no published biography of Sir William Macdonald. The best account of his involvement in elementary education is to be found in J. F. Snell, *Macdonald College of McGill University: A History from 1904-1955*, Montreal: McGill University Press, 1963.
 5. Robertson is considered by many people (himself included) as being more important than Macdonald in the so-called "Macdonald Education Movement." Born in Scotland, he first took up farming on his arrival in Canada in 1875. Before becoming Dominion Agricultural and Dairying Commissioner he was a professor at the Ontario Agricultural College; in 1905 he was appointed Principal of Macdonald College of McGill University; in 1910 he was appointed chairman of the federal Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education.
 6. S. D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948, p. 390.
 7. James Hughes ranks with William Macdonald and James Robertson as an important educator in turn-of-the-century Canada. The only published biography of Hughes is the outdated, non-objective account, Lorne Pierce, *Fifty Years of Public Service: A Life of James L. Hughes*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1924. A more recent study of Hughes is Bruce Carter, *James L. Hughes and the Gospel of Education*, Unpublished Ed.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1966.
 8. John Millar, *School Management and the Principles and Practice of Teaching*, Toronto: William Briggs, 1897, p. 19.
 9. It was not always smooth sailing, however; there were many who agreed with the mayor of Toronto when he charged in 1900 that vaccination in the schools was "a dirty, filthy practice."
 10. Peter Sandiford, "Canada," in Peter Sandiford, ed., *Comparative Education: Studies in the Educational Systems of Six Modern Nations*, London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1918, pp. 346-347, 375-376.
 11. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
 12. For comparison's sake, the reader is directed to the work of the Public Education Association of New York City, founded in 1895 to advance the cause of reform in the city's public school system. Its major concern was the lower East Side, the home of myriads of immigrants and the sprawling tenement slum. See Sol Cohen, *The Progressives and Urban School Reform: The Public Education Association of New York City, 1895-1954*, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1964.
 13. The last point is illustrated by Ottawa's quick response to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Industrial Training and Technical Education dealing with agricultural education.
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