**HIST 3510**

**RESEARCH PAPER**

**On**

 **“Major factors influencing absenteeism of children in schools of Canada during the mid and late nineteenth century”**

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The failure of public school system in Canada was a major concern for the officials. The major reason of this failure was the students’ irregularity of attendance. Regardless of the fact that all the public schools were completely free, the very low attendance was recorded throughout the Canada in the mid and late nineteenth century.

“The school act of 1850 gave legislative recognition to property assessment for school purposes, making it possible for the individual school boards to introduce free schools. If the schools were free, then there was no reason why every child of school-age should not attend them. The task was to bring the children into the schools and, just as importantly, to ensure that they attended with sufficient regularity to gain the benefits of education.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

The public school system was established especially with the idea of free and compulsory education for all but the children did not receive the benefits of the same and hence they did not get the adequate schooling due to which the whole idea of public school system was failing in the mid and late nineteenth century throughout the Canada.

“‘Irregularity of attendance’, one local superintendent declared in 1871, ‘is the bane and curse of the public schools; it is a log and chain upon the progress of instruction for it blasts and withers the noblest purposes of the best of teachers.’ Irregular attendance not only deprived the individual student of adequate schooling but disrupted the whole school.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Although the schooling was free and compulsory in Canada in the mid and late nineteenth century, there was a problem of absenteeism of children in schools due to various reasons. Firstly, familial socio-economic factors influencing the students’ irregularity of attendance in public schools. Secondly, the national economic and social factors determining absenteeism of children in public schools. Also, public schools, teachers, and parents as factors influencing absenteeism of children in public schools.

“It is well to recall the harsh line on truancy taken by the Committee of 1857 when one looks at the findings of the Special Committee of 1863, which had virtually opposite findings. This Committee had been struck to do a census of al1 children in the city of Toronto between 5 and 16 years. The Census, done in August 1863, found that of 9,508 children, 1,632 had not attended school in the period of six months between January and June 1863. The causes of non-attendance were ''in almost al1 cases" due to employrnent (28%), that fact that students were wanted at home (16%), that their parents considered the students too young to attend or too far from school(13%), or could not come because of want of clothes (13%). Reasons for the 19% of non-attending who did not return the census were not discussed.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

“The distinct family reproduction strategies of francophones was a result of many factors, but one important element was the continuing importance of child labour to familial economic activities. To a somewhat greater degree than other groups, francophones continued to seek material survival and security by combining the labour of family members.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The regularity of students in public schools was affected due to the familial economic and social reasons in Canada. In the Upper Canadian societies, due to the problem of poverty, the children were engaged in labor works to earn bread for their families. People could not afford to send their children to schools and lose a chance of getting the extra contribution from them towards the family income. From the 1860s there was an increasing number of children working in factories and this affected school attendance. It was recorded that most of the children who found work in industry were over the age of twelve. During the winter months, it was most common that the children did not attend schools due to sickness. “In large part, irregular attendance patterns in the urban areas were the cumulative result of many personal disasters stemming from the instability of the labour market and the incidence of sickness—conditions which intersected most acutely during the winter months.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Family circumstance, economic pressures, and physical conditions were the factors responsible for their irregularity. A great number of young children were provided employment in tobacco manufacturing and cotton and woolen mills. The French Canadian children in Quebec were irregular because the families continued to seek material survival and security by combining the labor of family members. This was because of the poor economic conditions of the families as they could not afford the living expenses only from the income of parents. So they had to engage their children in labour works. The boys of age 11 to 15 years were happy to work in the mine labor force in Nova Scotia in the 1880s because of the family’s dependence on the boy’s pay which made school attendance irregular. The boys were working in mining industry to support their parents in fulfilling living expenses because of the poverty in the families of Nova Scotia. In the context of Toronto, many mothers considered it their decision to determine whether or not their children would go to school on any given day and they would decide it according to their need for household works. Mothers would keep them at home and assign them domestic duties. According to The Special Committee and Census of 1863, the main cause of non-attendance of students in Toronto was due to employment and the considerable number of students were irregular because of their need at home for domestic duties. The mothers engaged their children in household activities so that the burden of excessive work on them could be reduced and the time could be saved by working together. This shows that the mothers were not concerned about the schooling of the children, probably because they were not aware about the importance of education and schooling or the reason might be a feeling of insecurity that their children would not be safe among others. The other reason of not sending their children to schools might be the understanding that their children would be taught about things against their own culture, and ethnicity. Being mothers they were not ready to risk sending their children to such environment where they could be vulnerable to many things. Hence the mothers were more in favor of keeping the children at home and making them learn the household activities. Due to which the attendance in schools was affected. "The most potent determinants of attendance patterns in both urban and rural areas were the same conditions which shaped the economic and social realities of nineteenth century Canadian life. Attendance was naturally influenced by such ubiquitous features as harsh climatic conditions, bad roads and sickness. However, those factors which contributed to poverty and economic insecurity- trade depressions, crop failure, transient work patterns and seasonal employment-- largely determined the regularity of school attendance throughout the province"[[6]](#footnote-6)

In a broad aspect, major factors such as the national economic and social factors were responsible for absenteeism in public schools in Canada. Due to bad crops and rise in the prices in Ontario in the late 1850s, the peoples’ life became miserable which increased the irregularity of attendance because it raised the struggle for many people especially the poor who were lacking financial resources. The impact of depression due to the years of failure in the productions in the late 1850s brought widespread unemployment as many businesses were forced to shut down. Due to crop failure the trade depression aroused which led to the lack of employment for the people and they had to move to other places in search of jobs. During the depression years, the effect of economic privation on school attendance was double. Many children were withdrawn from schools when their parents had to leave the city in search of jobs. The attendance was influenced by the factors like harsh climatic conditions, bad roads, and sickness. It might be due to the lack of transportation facilities and infrastructures that the children were not able to reach to schools in case of harsh climatic conditions. It was also noted that the irregularity of attendance was affected by the lack of concern of parents regarding the importance of education. However, there was a contradiction for the same and it was agreed that material circumstances were responsible for the irregularity rather than the lack of concern of parents. Also, the regularity was affected by migration of family when the people moved from one place to another which interrupted the schooling of the children. It was noted in Toronto that the students decided not to attend school and enjoy themselves away from anyone’s supervision and without permission. They were often caught fishing, swimming, and playing games. This also affected the regularity of attendance. Some other issues were, sometimes their parents considered the students too young to attend school and sometimes the reason was just a desire of clothes.

Some other reasons due to which the regularity in public schools was affected were associated with public schools itself, teachers and parents. Some parents were not satisfied with the care or quality of public schooling. Such parents were willing to withdraw their child from public schooling and they had alternative education strategies as well. This also affected the regularity of attendance in public schooling in Toronto. Sometimes when parents felt that their children had been badly punished, treated unfairly by the teacher or schoolmates, mothers would withdraw their children from public school by not sending the children to school furthermore. There might be some cases of non-popularity of free public schools among the wealthy families as they might have hold such a thought that the schools without any fees would not provide quality education. Those wealthy families might have decided not to enroll their children in public schools. There was another case when the mothers had not been able to comply with the requirements of the school, they usually attempted to bargain to resolve the competing demands of schooling. The requirements of the schools might include the need of extra books and other stationaries, and objects of importance for other activities in schools like extracurricular activities. In case the mothers could not fulfill the needs, they would stop sending their children to schools. Some requirements of the schools might include the need of neat and clean uniforms and well-groomed appearance of the child. When these requirements were not fulfilled by mothers, the schools were bound to insist them to comply with the requirements of the schools. In case the mothers could not comply with the same, they would stop to send their children to schools.

Despite the numerous factors influencing absenteeism in schools, the scenario changed positively by time because of a lot of efforts made by the government of Canada. In Nova Scotia, social attitudes changed slowly, childhood was redefined, and new means of educating children were instituted.[[7]](#footnote-7) In Toronto, regular school attendance meant that women could no longer assign domestic work to children, in the way that it had been done in the past. Successive generations of mothers, no longer the supervisors of their children’s activities, lost the contribution their school-aged children had been able to make to the family economy.[[8]](#footnote-8) Also, later, the free and compulsory education system was generally accepted in Ontario and Upper Canada. These changes were brought by officials by implementing strict rules against the families who were responsible for the irregularity of their children in the schools but the changes did not come into record until the beginning of twentieth century. In the mid and late nineteenth century, the problem of absenteeism in schools was at its peak and the officials were desperately trying to cope up with the problem so that the importance of free and compulsory public schooling system could be promoted amongst the families. The factors influencing the absenteeism of children in schools were also impacting the development of the children. The officials were concerned about the youth of the nation which was not seeming bright and they knew that the condition could be improved only by promoting public schooling with free and compulsory education. Although the positive change was noticed in the early twentieth century, the mid and the late nineteenth century was the time of struggle for the officials to control the problem of absenteeism in schools.

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1. Ian E. Davey, *The Rhythm of Work and the Rhythm of School* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003), 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robert S. Brown, *A Study of Absenteeism in the Toronto Board of Education, 1850- 1997* (Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “The French Canadian Exception,” *History of Education in Canada*, accessed November 29, 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/history-of-education/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Davey, *The Rhythm of Work and the Rhythm of School,* 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Davey, *The Rhythm of Work and the Rhythm of School,* 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robert McIntosh, *The Boys in the Nova Scotian Coal Mines: 1873-1923* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Christopher Clubine, *Motherhood and Public Schooling in Victorian Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)