In recent years, there has been increasing interest in transnationalism in a range of fields, including the history of education. Whereas comparative histories are concerned with identifying the similarities and differences between “discrete geographical units, usually nations” (Tyrrell 2001, 356), transnational histories focus on the interdependence of people and ideas. Sometimes such approaches focus on the micro-level, identifying the networks of influence of individuals and groups of reformers, but equally they can encompass common understandings, social movements and institutions that transcend national boundaries. While not denying the importance of nation, transnational histories stress the connectedness of processes, and thus they cast a wider net than the political and organisational ties that characterise internationalism (Curthoys 2002; Lake 2003; Tyrrell 2001). A focus on transnationalism also challenges the dichotomies between margins and centre that can circumscribe comparative accounts, demonstrating that understandings circulate in mutually informing ways, and also that they are reshaped at the local level (Mayhall, Levine and Fletcher 2000; Nolan and Daley 1994; Trethewey and Whitehead 2003). Marilyn Lake (2003, 349) argues that transnational history is “not merely a catalogue of differences and similarities, not just a series of intriguing parallels, but whole configurations, general processes, an entire interactive system, one vast interconnected world.” However, transnational influences and networks are not necessarily global. Rather they are more likely to be those of Western peoples. In the history of education, for example, it is apparent that the introduction and expansion of mass state schooling in Western
countries proceeded along similar lines in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. There were transnational similarities in the purposes of mass schooling, the formation of state administrative apparatuses and even classroom organisation, pedagogy and curriculum (Connell 1988; Meyer, Ramírez and Soysal 1992; Ramírez and Boli 1987). By the interwar years, transnational understandings included the need to tailor curriculum and instruction to the needs of the individual child rather than focusing on the transmission of subject content. Commonly referred to as “progressivism” in the United States or the “New Education” in Europe, these ideas, however, were always mediated by local conditions (Cuban 1993).

While transnational features of mass state schooling have been well documented by historians, less attention has been paid to teachers and their work. Furthermore, until recently, historians have mostly attended to nineteenth century teachers. Research into twentieth century women teachers in Canada and Australia is now proceeding apace and acknowledging similarities in their experiences (Hallman 1992; McCann 1982; Meadmore 1996; Prentice and Theobald 1991; Reid and Martin 2003; Reynolds and Smaller 1994; Whitehead and Peppard 2005; Whitehead 2004; Wilson and Stortz 1995). To date, however, these studies have kept their focus within national boundaries and on local processes, thereby upholding the dominance of national paradigms in histories of education. They have not been reworked into a transnational history of teachers’ work in the early twentieth century. Therein lies the challenge of this paper: to identify elements of transnationalism about rural teachers and their work that were being promulgated by educational administrators in Newfoundland, British Columbia, South Australia in the 1920s and 1930s. These sites shared common backgrounds in that they had been British colonies, and they were struggling to provide education in sparsely populated regions. To date, each has also been marginalised in Canadian and Australian educational histories. This paper therefore contributes to both transnational history and Canadian and Australian histories of teachers’ work.

Keeping in mind the necessity of connecting transnational knowledge with local contingencies, the paper begins with a discussion of each of the three state school systems, their employment practices, and the relative importance of rural teachers in official texts such as annual reports. The remainder of the paper identifies transnational discourses about rural teachers that were being deployed by administrators in each of the state school systems, and investigates the ways in which these understandings were interpreted locally. First, it will show that the rural teacher was conceptualised as a young woman who possessed a natural aptitude for teaching but was deemed to be inadequately trained. Second, administrators were particularly concerned about her classroom practice, judging it to be inadequate to the requirements of progressive education. Finally, there was the issue of her transience within the state school system, namely her tendency to move from school to school annually, if not more frequently. The main argument of the paper is that each of these elements combined to construct “the insufficiency of the low grade teacher” (Annual Report of the Department of Education, Newfoundland, 1922/23, 14. Hereafter Newfoundland, 1922/23) as a transnational matter in the 1920s and 1930s.

“The rural school [teacher] problem”

Colonised by the British in 1836, representative government was introduced in South Australia in the 1850s and legislation for compulsory schooling was enacted in 1875, along with a highly centralised bureaucratic administrative apparatus (Miller 1986). The 1870s also marked the beginning of state schooling in British Columbia, but administration was more decentralised and local school boards elected by ratepayers “exercised considerable authority over the day to day operation of schools” (Wilson and Stortz 1995, 212). However, in both South Australia and British Columbia, curriculum was decided centrally and a bevy of inspectors ensured accountability. Newfoundland had also been granted responsible government by the British in the 1850s, and a denominational system
of schooling was established in 1874. Thereafter, three approximately equal church groups — Church of England, Roman Catholic and Methodist Churches — were funded by the state to conduct schools. However, there was no centralised administration until the 1920 Education Act provided for the establishment of the Department of Education to oversee the workings of all state schools, advise on curriculum, and deal with the training and certification of teachers. Although provisions were made for an inspectorial system, no staff were employed until the late 1930s and schooling was neither free nor compulsory until 1942 (Rowe 1964).

The most significant impact on each of these school systems in the 1920s and 1930s was the economic depression. None of these places was particularly prosperous during the interwar years, but the Newfoundland state school system was much under-funded compared with South Australia and British Columbia. South Australia experienced moderate economic growth in the early 1920s and this was reflected in state school funding, but a prolonged drought brought about the economic depression two years earlier than in neighbouring states. There were no major policy or administrative reforms, but spending on teachers’ salaries was reduced (Miller 1986). The economic depression had a similar impact on British Columbia. In Newfoundland, teachers’ salaries were slashed by 50% and by 1933 the national debt was so severe that responsible government was suspended and a Commission of Government was appointed by the British to run the colony. Funding for education was so limited that in 1930/31 the cost per pupil in daily attendance in Newfoundland was only $18.95. This compared with $85.73 in British Columbia (Newfoundland 1930/33, 6). Even so, the administration and policy of the Department of Education in Newfoundland remained much the same as before.

Notwithstanding these legislative, administrative and financial differences, the profiles of schools were remarkably similar in that the one-room school dominated the education landscape in each of the state school systems throughout the interwar years. In South Australia, there were 1,010 state schools in 1920. More than half were one-room schools staffed by mostly uncertificated teachers (Report of the Minister of Education 1920, South Australian Parliamentary Papers 1921, no. 44, 3. Hereafter SAPP 1921 no. 44). In British Columbia, there were 594 rural and assisted schools, most of which were one-room only, out of a total of 922 schools (British Columbia Public School Report of Superintendent 1919/20, C9. Hereafter British Columbia 1919/20). In both South Australia and British Columbia, there were also some very large urban elementary schools with more than 1,500 pupils, as well as a few secondary schools. This was not the case in Newfoundland, where the vast majority of its 1,053 state schools were one-room schools in tiny outport communities (Newfoundland 1919/20, v). This profile did not change substantially in the interwar years, even in the capital of St John’s. As far as the teaching workforces were concerned, women constituted the majority of employees in each of the systems, and predominated in the one-room school. In 1920, 2,257 teachers were employed in British Columbia, 2,330 in South Australia, and 1,423 in Newfoundland, and in each of these systems there were significant numbers of unqualified and partially qualified teachers, again mostly women and mostly teachers in one-room schools (British Columbia 1919/20, C9; SAPP 1921 no. 44, 3; Newfoundland 1919/20, v). In South Australia, all teachers were employed and paid by the Education Department. Although teachers could apply to work in particular schools, the needs of the Department took precedence and individuals could be transferred from school to school at very short notice (Miller 1986). This was not the case in Newfoundland and British Columbia, where local school boards hired the teachers and decided many of their working conditions. Newfoundland teachers’ salaries were paid fully by the Education Department, but in British Columbia, teachers’ salaries were set locally except in assisted schools which were centrally funded (Rowe 1964; Wilson and Stortz 1995). In essence, women dominated numerically as teachers in each of the state school systems, particularly in the one-room schools that were spread across the education landscape.
Each of the Departments of Education in Newfoundland, British Columbia and South Australia produced annual reports during the period from 1920 to 1940. These authoritative records were designed to account for the implementation of state policy, influence public opinion and presage changes. They were generated almost exclusively by middle class male administrators (Directors, Superintendents and Inspectors), senior men who were loyal to their Department and upheld the goals of mass state schooling. Some of these men had travelled abroad, taking educational tours to Europe, the United States and Britain, and others had undertaken post-graduate study in the United States and Britain. All had access to many reports from other state school systems as well as teachers’ journals, books and pamphlets that circulated throughout Western countries.

Although all places had formerly been British colonies, Britain was not conceptualised as the centre of educational ideas, nor Europe or the United States. Rather, administrators were keen to position themselves as abreast of dominant discourses and new ideas, and they drew eclectically on understandings that were in circulation in the interwar years, often deploying ideas from elsewhere to strengthen their case at the local level. Their annual reports, however, reflect men’s perspectives of (mostly) women teachers’ lives and work. They do not necessarily correspond with perspectives of the women who were the subjects of the reports. The transnational understandings that were registered in annual reports, therefore, represent an authoritative but partial view of the rural teacher in the interwar years.

Given the numerical dominance of rural schools in each state school system, it might also be expected that the annual reports would focus closely on them. This was the case in Newfoundland, where most of the discussion pertained to the one-room school and its teachers, the insufficiencies of both being a dominant theme. The tenor of the annual reports in British Columbia and South Australia was quite different. The South Australian reports were invariably constructed as a story of continuous improvement and progress in the provision of buildings and equipment, trained teachers, curriculum and pedagogy “up to the limits of funds available for such purposes” (SAPP 1921 no. 44, 26). Reports on teachers’ work were organised under headings such as Attendance, Government and Moral Training, Methods of Instruction, rather than categories of schools. Given this format, discussion about rural schools, teachers and their practice was muted but rarely were they seen to be achieving the same standards as urban teachers and larger schools. In British Columbia, it was also said that “the custom is to report on progress” (British Columbia 1921/22, C27). Discussions of teachers’ work began with those in the city schools, mainly in Vancouver and Victoria, and were followed by comments on the municipal schools and teachers, that is those located in more substantial towns and communities. City schools and teachers were invariably seen to be centres of “progress and progressive spirit” (British Columbia 1919/20, C26) but administrators were more ambivalent about municipal schools. When they turned their attention to the rural and assisted schools and their teachers, however, there was no reticence, for time and again they argued that “the rural school problem is the most serious question confronting educational administrators in this province” (British Columbia 1919/20, C34). Their complaints about this category of schools encompassed inadequate buildings and equipment, insufficient local interest and financial support, but ultimately “the blame for the rural school problem was placed squarely on the teacher” (Wilson and Storz 1995, 211) as she alone bore the responsibility for implementing the ideals of mass state schooling in the one-room school. In Newfoundland and South Australia, emphases varied, but administrators also blamed the teacher for the inadequacies they perceived in rural schooling. As the following section will show, the first of the insufficiencies of the rural teacher stemmed from her own schooling.
“The proper disposition” but “insufficient personal education”

Notwithstanding differences in age, gender, qualifications and experience, the rural teacher in administrators’ reports was primarily associated with youth and femininity, that is, the rural teacher was conceptualised as a “girl” rather than a woman, and young and therefore inexperienced rather than mature. These understandings reflected the situation that by the early twentieth century elementary teaching was indubitably women’s work, and the operation of the marriage bar also resulted in the numerical dominance of young women as teachers. Furthermore, women teachers who chose not to marry gravitated to urban areas, thereby emphasising the rural school as the domain of young women.

Administrators’ reports also portrayed the rural teacher as one who possessed a “natural aptitude” for teaching (British Columbia 1920/21, F46). Discussions about rural teachers were underpinned by the idea that good teachers were “born” not made (The Daily Colonist 10 November 1925). In other words, the key to good teaching was seen to be inherent or intrinsic qualities of character. These qualities, often referred to as “personality,” included the capacity to inspire and enthuse students so that they would be interested in learning. The born teacher also secured children’s obedience through tact and sympathy, not harshness and force (Rousmaniere 1997). Personal attributes such as a positive outlook, diligence and a spirit of service marked the born teacher, and these qualities were meant to be emulated in the characters of their students. While the born teacher was not explicitly gendered female, many of the qualities that marked this teacher were consistent with contemporary understandings of femininity. Thus rural teachers were referred to as “good meaning and zealous young girls” (Newfoundland 1921/22, x) and statements such as “they have the proper disposition, the heart and the will are right” (Newfoundland 1924/25, 37) were complemented by descriptions of their “zeal, interest and enthusiasm” (British Columbia 1926/27, M31). Indeed, rural teachers were portrayed as “a faithful and devoted body of workers who were earnestly striving to take their part in forming the characters and training the minds of future citizens” (SAPP 1921, no. 44, 56).

If understandings of the rural teacher as a young woman who was born to teach transcended national boundaries, so too did two deficiencies. First, there was the matter of her “insufficient personal education” (SAPP 1921, no. 44, 56). Administrators asserted that rural teachers’ educational backgrounds were substandard and argued that “were a higher standard demanded the result would be seen in better speech, wider general knowledge and a broader outlook” (SAPP 1921, no. 44, 56), attributes it was hoped would be emulated by their students. Rural teachers’ reputedly poor education also meant that they had insufficient knowledge of the “subject matter” (British Columbia 1921/22, C49) of the prescribed curriculum and thus were unable to challenge their students intellectually. The second deficiency was said to be a lack of “rural-mindedness,” that is, an appreciation of the conditions of rural life that could be translated into a commitment to living, working and actively participating in rural communities (British Columbia 1919/20, C30). Rural teachers... must know much more than their books... they must have an understanding and appreciation of the lives and occupations of the people among whom they labour and they must be willing to share these lives (Newfoundland 1934–37, 7).

Such teachers would deploy their “strong personality and sound influence in the community” (SAPP 1921 no. 44, 29) to persuade students to attend regularly and also use their literary attainments to raise cultural standards. In essence, rural teachers possessed a natural aptitude for teaching, but required a higher standard of personal education and rural-mindedness.

While the aforementioned understandings about rural teachers could be said to be transnational, they were inflected differently at the local level in South Australia, British Columbia and Newfoundland. In South Australia, for example, the concern about rural teachers’ standard of personal education related more to their potential...
influence in the community than in the one-room school. The minimum educational requirement for prospective teachers in South Australia was three years of secondary schooling, and in the interwar years these opportunities existed in the form of district high schools, central schools and technical schools (Miller 1986). Administrators argued that

... a high standard of attainment can give the kind of teacher particularly needed in country districts, where he is often the leader, pattern and standard of knowledge, conduct and manners (SAPP 1921 no. 44, 49).

British Columbia required the same educational qualifications as South Australia and had similar infrastructure in the form of district high schools, but here the problem was seen to be a lack of rural-mindedness on the part of the teacher. According to administrators, the problem was that the “great majority of teachers have received their elementary school education in regularly organised municipal schools” (British Columbia 1930/31, L24) and thus had no experience of the one-room schools in which they were employed, or of small, isolated communities. It was a different matter again in Newfoundland where there were no “institutions devoted wholly to secondary education: the smallest one-teacher school offered work from the kindergarten up to matriculation” (Rowe 1964, 113). Administrators complained that “any little girl from 16–18 years who has obtained a Preliminary Grade Diploma” (Newfoundland 1920/21, vii) in the Council of Higher Education (CHE) examinations could be employed as an ungraded teacher in a one-room school. Having been educated in one-room schools, rural-mindedness was rarely seen to be a problem and these girls had the proper disposition,

... but unfortunately they have not the knowledge or educational equipment that is necessary to enable them to satisfy the rapacious and curious mind of youth, or to arouse and stimulate their latent powers (Newfoundland 1924/25, 37).

These young teachers were “doing their best” (Newfoundland 1921/22, x), but were portrayed as insufficient because they knew no more than their students. As the next section will show, rural teachers’ insufficient education was compounded by inadequate training for the occupation.

**“A natural aptitude and intensive professional training are both essential to the teacher of today”**

In the 1920s, there was much angst among administrators regarding the training of prospective teachers. As one administrator in British Columbia remarked,

In those remote days before the training of teachers was undertaken by the state the idea was generally held that the successful teacher was one who was “born” to be a teacher. [However,] natural aptitude and intensive professional training are both essential to the teacher of today” (British Columbia 1923/24, T55–56).

There was general agreement that lengthy training prior to entering the occupation would enhance the status of the profession as well as classroom practice (SAPP 1937 no. 44, 29). There were common understandings about the constitution of courses of teacher training, but the relative importance of each component was a matter of some debate. First, academic studies beyond those undertaken in secondary schooling were needed to “improve the general culture of the student” (SAPP 1921 no. 44, 21) and cultivate character and “breadth of outlook” (The Colonist 15 April 1925), attributes that were deemed important to good teaching. Academic studies also provided “knowledge of the subjects they are going to teach” (British Columbia 1920/21, F46). Then came professional studies in the science and the art of teaching (SAPP 1937 no. 44, 29; The Daily Colonist 10 November 1925). The science of teaching developed theoretical frameworks. It was based on “the child study movement and the development of experimental psychology” in the late nineteenth
century, and by the interwar years it was said that students should “thoroughly and scientifically” investigate “the nature of the child and the nature of the learning processes” (British Columbia 1927/28, V41). Classroom management, modern instructional methods and periods of practical teaching constituted the art of teaching. These studies applied theoretical frameworks and developed the “intuitive” skills of the born teacher (SAPP 1937 no. 44, 29). In the ideal pre-service preparation there was also some differentiation in that specialist courses were required for potential infant, elementary, rural teachers and so on (British Columbia 1927/28, V44). Teachers who spent a mere six months or even a year at Normal School therefore could not complete all that was required for certification as a professional.

As far as professional training was concerned, the minimum requirements varied considerably in each of the three state school systems, but the common understanding was that rural teachers were inadequately prepared for the occupation. In Newfoundland, ungraded teachers in one-room schools had no professional training whatsoever, and nor did teachers who held the minimum credential, a Third Grade Certificate, which was based on their personal education and six months teaching experience. The establishment of a Normal School in 1920 did little to resolve the problem of training as it was too expensive for most potential teachers (Rowe 1964). However, rural teachers were blamed for lacking the “ambition” (rather than economic resources) to attend the Normal School, and there were specific references to “female teachers as the greatest offenders” in this matter (Newfoundland 1922/23, 3). In South Australia, prospective rural teachers enrolled in the “Short Course” for six months (later increased to one year) at the Teachers College before being appointed to one-room schools, whereas a two year course was required for professional certification (SAPP 1921 no. 44, 21–22). Short Course students

... engaged in College studies which are of direct “equipment” value to them in their future work... the subjects being dealt with as to give them both a deepened knowledge and interest the subject matter itself, and also an appreciation of the most useful methods of teaching the subjects (SAPP 1927 no. 44, 26).

They also undertook practical teaching at the Model Country School. Administrators reported favourably on the focus and content of their truncated but specialised training at the Teachers College, but their constant refrain was that rural teachers lacked the academic studies, and thus the culture and vision, of their colleagues who completed the two year courses (SAPP 1921 no. 44, 49). In British Columbia, prospective teachers also spent six months (later increased to one year) at Normal School. Even so, administrators claimed that “there is no doubt as to the insufficiency of a three year High School preparatory course followed by a single year at Normal School” (British Columbia 1927/28, V44). However, their trenchant criticism applied as much to the course at the Normal Schools as to rural teachers. It was said that

Instead of accepting the principle that education is an art based on well established sciences like educational and social psychology, [the Normal Schools] have founded their courses of study and methods of training on the idea that teaching is to be regarded as a trade which can be learned by well-directed practice in definite methods laid down by competent instructors (Daily Colonist 10 November 1925).

Not only were the Normal Schools and thus rural teachers deficient in the art and science of teaching, the maximum period of training at British Columbia Normal Schools was one year, and there were no academic courses and no specialist courses for different categories of teachers, the latter exacerbating the problem of rural-mindedness among rural teachers.

In essence, local peculiarities shaped the ways in which transnational discourses of teacher training were registered in relation to rural teachers in each of the state school systems, but the common understanding was that they were inadequately prepared to teach.
The following section will show that variations in rural teachers’ pre-service preparation were also registered in administrators’ assessments of their classroom practice.

**Classroom practice: Keeping “the various classes profitably employed”**

Rural teachers may have been born to teach, but without professional training in the science and the art of teaching to theorise and modernise their natural capabilities, administrators were reluctant to portray them as exemplars of good teaching, especially in relation to their trained colleagues in urban schools. Unlike large schools where there was one grade per teacher,

... a matter of concern to all rural teachers was the problem of orchestrating the simultaneous instruction of a group of children of varying ages, abilities and attainments. The design and then implementation of a structured academic programme to serve [5–8 separate] grades in the... one-room school was an extremely difficult task, often made all the more time-consuming when the previous teacher had failed to leave any progress reports on the pupils (Stephenson 1995, 236–7).

Basically, rural teachers needed to construct and implement a timetable that would enable them to instruct one grade at a time while occupying the other grades with activities that did not require a teacher’s presence. As far as administrators were concerned, the crux of rural teachers’ insufficiency in the classroom was that they were unable to “keep the various classes profitably employed while at their seats” (British Columbia 1919/20, C27). Rural teachers reportedly relied too heavily on textbooks from which they set lessons, rather than actively engaging students. It was said that “in practically all our schools there is too much book work and too little oral work and mental work” (British Columbia 1921/22, C24). And “there is not enough of ‘doing’ in the programme: it is largely sitting idle or memorising or copying” (Newfoundland 1921/22, 24). As previously mentioned, most rural teachers were doing their best, but their teaching practices were deemed to be archaic. Administrators reported that “the old notion of “imparting” information to the child was now entirely obsolete. In its place has come the concept of individual growth in a social environment” (British Columbia 1927/28, V41). Progressive, trained teachers tailored curriculum to the children’s interests and stimulated a “spirit of inquiry” with discussions and small group activities, whereas in the untrained rural teachers’ schools “the work is not linked up with the affairs of life: it is artificial; the children, therefore, are not interested” (Newfoundland 1921/22, 24). Finally, the problem of “academic retardation,” which is older children being kept in the lower grades, was greater in rural schools than in urban areas (Newfoundland 1919/20, vi; British Columbia 1921/22, C31). According to administrators, retardation “was due in great measure to the fact that almost all our teachers have not been trained for their work” (Newfoundland 1921/22, xiii), and was exacerbated by their archaic teaching practices.

As with other transnational ideas about rural teachers, discussions about their teaching practices were mediated by the local context of each state school system. In British Columbia administrators complained specifically that inexperienced rural teachers “were unable to make and follow a timetable that would keep the various classes profitably employed” (British Columbia 1919/20, C27). Here, the lack of a specific course of training for the one-room school was reflected in administrators’ comments. This was not the case in South Australia, where Short Course students were provided with a timetable for a one-room school during their training. However, “distinct weaknesses in Short Course” included “non-acquaintance with best methods of teaching... the upper grades” and “the lack of system by which all grades are kept busily engaged all day” (SAPP 1921 no. 44, 56). South Australian administrators also argued that the “centralised system of control of education” with “a more or less uniform curriculum” in all state schools enabled rural teachers to produce “consistently high standards,” especially in essential subjects (SAPP 1940 no. 44,
Another form of infrastructure was the Education Department’s monthly publication, the Education Gazette, and inexperienced teachers made extended use of its advice on curriculum (SAPP 1921 no. 44, 43). In Newfoundland, however, there was little administrative support for rural teachers. For example, there was no standardised and sequential curriculum and matching textbooks until 1936, the year in which the first inspectors were also appointed (Rowe 1964). For most of the interwar years, therefore, rural teachers, many of whom had no training whatsoever, were left to set their lessons from readers which were “out of date and in other ways unsuitable” (Newfoundland 1924/25, xiii). However, administrators in Newfoundland did acknowledge that the inadequate infrastructure and rural teachers’ working conditions, as well as their lack of training, contributed to their insufficiency in the classroom. The final section of this paper will show that Newfoundland administrators also attributed another transnational problem that pertained specifically to rural teachers, namely the “frequent change of teacher in many, many schools” (Newfoundland 1924/25, 37), at least partially to the conditions under which they lived and worked.

“Young inexperienced teachers still come as a sort of migratory species”

In the 1920s and 1930s, one of the most persistent problems reported by administrators was the rapid turnover of rural school teachers, especially in the smallest and most remote one-room schools. Unlike their city counterparts who often returned to the same school year after year, it was said that “young inexperienced teachers still come as a sort of migratory species” (British Columbia 1919/20, C26) to the rural school, rarely staying for more than a year in the same place. The transience which attracted administrators’ comments was not young women’s resignations due to marriage, for that was seen to be a women’s natural destiny; but their tendency to move from school to school annually, if not more frequently. In some districts, the annual turnover rate was more than eighty percent, and a few teachers changed schools as many as three times during the school year (British Columbia 1921/22, C23; Newfoundland 1922/23, 12–13). Administrators’ explanations for the phenomenon varied, but individual motivations on the part of rural teachers held sway over social conditions. Sometimes transience was seen as “restlessness” (British Columbia 1927/28, V26) or a flawed character on the part of young rural teachers, and it was argued that “teachers of the rising generation should display those qualities of steadiness and quiet self-control so essential to the restoration of a saner mental outlook” (British Columbia 1919/20, C34). Then there was the issue of rural-mindedness on the part of some teachers. Their lack of interest and understanding of rural communities led them to change schools frequently. Sometimes transience was portrayed as a “search for promotion” (Newfoundland 1924/25, 37) and, indeed, “a sign of progress, as in the majority of cases these teachers have gone to better positions which they secured by reason of their successful experience” (British Columbia 1927/28, V26). Administrators also highlighted rural teachers’ very poor salaries as a causal factor (British Columbia 1921/22, C31) and finally it was pointed out that in some places, the conditions of life cannot be endured for more than the school year. It is perfectly true that the conditions may be just as bad, possibly worse, in the next place, but there is always a sporting chance of their being better (Newfoundland 1924/25, 37–38).

Whatever the reasons for transience, administrators claimed that it was “one of the chief factors retarding progress in the rural school” (British Columbia 1919/20, C34). With frequent changes of teachers there was often a lack of continuity in terms of student record-keeping, and this contributed to the problem of retardation. With little information, professional training or experience, rural teachers struggled to assign their students to the appropriate grade and keep them profitably employed. One administrator asserted, 

... it is a well-recognised fact that it takes the teacher some time to be acquainted with conditions in a new
community and the children whom she is to teach. If, just when she has acquired this very necessary knowledge, she moves to another school with its new group of children and new conditions, there is bound to be a loss of efficiency. When there is excessive amount of moving from school to school each year this loss of efficiency is very great indeed (Newfoundland 1940, 19).

Aside from record keeping and students’ progress through the grades, transience impeded modern teaching practice:

If teachers were merely dispensers of subject matter the loss of efficiency would not be so great. Such is not the case, however. The children and the community conditions generally must be known and understood by the teacher if real teaching and learning with all that these imply are to be realised (Newfoundland 1941, 20).

Last but not least, the rapid turnover of rural teachers was deemed to be a major hindrance not only to students’ learning, but also to the administration and public promotion of an efficient state school system. Administrators complained that “some teachers do not fill out their returns accurately and these have to be returned for correction, others fail to send them at all. Failure in this direction means much correspondence” (Newfoundland 1929/30, xii), made all the more difficult when teachers moved from school to school so frequently. This was not just a matter of delays in the compilation of statistics. As one administrator pointed out “public opinion is influenced by the reporting of facts and a good system of records and reports is vital to the success of a modern school organisation” (Newfoundland 1920/21, xii). Thus it seems that in the minds of administrators, rural teachers’ transience had the potential to undermine the efficiency and reputation of the state school system.

Of all the transnational understandings about rural teachers that have been outlined, transience was the only one not explicitly registered in all of the state school systems. It was a constant refrain in administrators’ reports in British Columbia. They were more likely to conceptualise the problem as a lack of rural-mindedness or other individual failings on the part of rural teachers, and their anxieties were such that they were keen to report any reduction in the numbers of “teachers of the ‘chronic itinerant’ class” (British Columbia 1921/22, C37). In Newfoundland, it was rural teachers’ working conditions, their physical and social isolation in tiny outport communities, which were more likely to be understood as the reason for their transience. Indeed, one administrator devoted two pages of his annual report to describing the typical conditions faced by young rural teachers “in such a way as to capture [his readers'] sympathy” (Newfoundland 1924/25, 38–39). In South Australia, “the difficulties encountered by the Department in filling small schools was great” (SAPP 1923 no. 44, 22), but administrators did not usually admit the problem as being one of transience on the part of teachers. This relative silence might be explained in terms of the centralised system of teachers’ employment. Teachers were employed by the central office of the Education Department rather than local communities, and they had little say in their appointments to particular schools. Furthermore, the regulations stated that barring exceptional circumstances, teachers should spend at least two years in a school before requesting a transfer. While many rural teachers did move schools as frequently as their counterparts in Newfoundland and British Columbia, they did so at the Department’s behest rather than their own volition. In this situation, responsibility for transience lay with the Department, not the failings of individual teachers, and thus was likely to be submerged in administrators’ reports. The Department did admit that some rural teachers “resigned their positions rather than taking up appointments in undesirable localities” (SAPP 1923 no. 44, 22), thereby implying that transience was an issue, but focused on the need to recruit more teachers. In essence, the South Australian Education Department encountered as many difficulties in staffing small isolated schools as its counterparts in Newfoundland and British Columbia, but conceptualised this as a recruitment issue rather than transience within the system.
Conclusion

This paper has begun the process of identifying transnational discourses about teachers and their work that circulated among Western countries in the interwar years. It has focused specifically on rural teachers, a large and predominantly female cohort of the teaching workforce, on whom the expansion of mass state schooling depended, but whose insufficiencies could be readily identified and individualised as they taught alone in one-room schools. Administrators across the three state school systems were co-opting transnational ideas when they conceptualised rural teachers as young women who possessed a natural aptitude for their work, but were deficient in terms of their education, training, teaching practices and commitment to rural communities. Of equal importance, however, is first that these ideas manifested differently according to local circumstances. This paper has highlighted ways in which variations in teacher training and administration in Newfoundland, British Columbia and South Australia were played out in relation to rural teachers and their work. It could also be that other local political, social and geographic conditions mediated understandings about these teachers. Second, it should be reiterated that this paper is based on male administrators’ perceptions that were registered in official documents. It is important to explicate these views, but it should be kept in mind that understandings about teachers, rural teachers included, are always contested and ever-changing. Research that privileges more and different voices is now necessary to reveal the complexities of a transnational history of teachers’ work during this era.

Works Cited


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