

“Unsaleable Men and Unmarriageable Women”: Class Politics in Historical and Contemporary Views of the Teaching Profession

“Education is, and forever will be, in the hands of ordinary men and women.”

- John Dewey, 1895.

Browsing the non-fiction section of any local bookstore, one is immediately struck by the urgent tenor of the education titles: *The Teacher Wars*, *Savage Inequalities*, *Reign of Error*, *Fierce Conversations*, *Whatever it Takes*, *The Education Revolution*. Educators are urged to build a *Bridge to Brilliance*, to *Get Better Faster*, to *Harness the Adolescent Brain*, *Teach Like a Champion*, and create a *Passion-Driven Classroom*. As many observers have noted, it seems everyone – parents, politicians, taxpayers, billionaires, conservatives, liberals – knows what is needed to improve our schools because everyone went to school, everyone remembers their teachers. But the notion that schools must be improved is not a new sentiment; in fact, calls to revitalize, reform and recreate American education policies and standards echo throughout our nation’s history since the 18th century. But even educational historians have noted that the criticism leveled at teachers over the past ten years has reached a fever pitch. Magazine covers splash the topic across newsstands: from former D.C. School Chancellor Michelle Rhee holding a broom on the cover of *Time*, to chalkboards covered with the scrawl “We Must Fire Bad Teachers” in *Newsweek*, the call to cleanse our public schools of teaching’s “rotten apples” has never been louder. At the same time, more Americans than ever before are graduating from four-year colleges and universities, including a

surge of first generation college students, many of whom are entering the field of education. For many folks from blue collar backgrounds, a teaching career represents “their first, tentative steps out of the working class” (Goldstein 9). Yet as teacher evaluation procedures increasingly become the primary tool through which we determine student success, we are seeing a sharp focus not only on who is at the front of the classroom, but how they got there.

In America, teaching has never been afforded the professional status of other careers with comparable education and training. From the very start, our nation has viewed teachers alternately as parental surrogates, religious mentors, vocational guides, pseudo-intellectual wastrels, or bookish loners without social or occupational ambition. American schools were initially fashioned on the traditional European model, with its seminary-style grammar school curriculum: heavy on Latin and Greek, steeped in moral instruction, led by a young man of “good breeding,” designed to prepare young boys for university study. On the heels of revolution, as the nation determined an informed electorate would be necessary to properly enact its vision for democracy, Thomas Jefferson outlined his vision for the establishment of public schools in *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*: “it is believed that the most effectual means of preventing [tyranny] would be, to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large” (365). Education becomes not merely a way for families of means to prepare their children for leadership roles, it provides basic moral and civic instruction to the masses who will properly elect them.

As the nation grows throughout the next century, we see a more emphatic need to distinguish between the elementary education adequate for the majority of young men destined for the workforce, and the preparatory schooling necessary to provide the foundations for university study. This split, so early in our nation's history, sets the precedent for the debate over teaching credentials for the next 200 years. Just who has the moral, intellectual, spiritual and philosophical authority to instruct our impressionable young people is a debate that continues to rage today.

Latin grammar schools, as educational historian James Fraser notes, were schools designed specifically to prepare young boys for university and were most often taught by college educated young men: "It is a mistake to view the colonial grammar schools that were a prominent part of the educational system in New England and present in other colonies as forerunners of the modern high school. The grammar schools were highly specialized schools preparing a small subset of the population for college admission" (13). The curriculum at these schools demanded a university-trained male instructor, well-versed in classical texts, who reflected the moral and intellectual ambitions of his pupils. These positions were most often held by college students on break or recent graduates looking for "a way to earn money to continue their education or to keep themselves gainfully employed while waiting for other - and better - opportunities" (Fraser 11). Many college graduates spent at least some time teaching, though "while 40 percent of Harvard's colonial graduates may have taught, only 3 percent stayed in teaching as a lifetime career" (Fraser 25). Already we see that, for most, teaching is not considered a life-long pursuit, but rather a temporary gig between

one's own education and the career into which one ultimately settles. Perhaps in this practice we see the long shadow of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, in which the philosopher suggests "that the governor of a child should be young...that he might become the companion of his pupil, and gain his confidence by partaking of his amusements" (391). The idea that a bright young college graduate might best temporarily fulfill the demands of educating college-bound hopefuls will resonate even into the 21st century.

These Latin grammar schools were quite different from the "common schools" that became more widespread during the 19th century. Designed to be publicly-funded, locally-run centers for young boys and girls of all social classes, these schools most directly reflect our modern-day elementary schools. As Diane Ravitch describes the structure of these schools in her chapter "The Educational Ladder" in her book *Left Behind*:

The common schools emphasized reading, writing, speaking, spelling, penmanship, grammar, arithmetic, patriotism, a clear moral code, and strict discipline, enforced when necessary by corporal punishment. The values they sought to instill were honesty, industry, patriotism, responsibility, respect for adults and courtesy. The schools were vital community institutions, reflecting the mores of parents and churches; events at the local school, such as spelling bees, musical exhibitions, and speaking contests, were often important community events. (21)

As valued a community institution as these common schools appeared to be, finding qualified and enthusiastic teachers proved to be difficult. Almost every history of American teaching has noted that neither Herman Melville nor Henry David Thoreau lasted more than a year teaching; common school teachers of this era complained of low status, lower wages, destitute conditions and myriad frustrations (Glenn 174-5). As the country and the need for a consistent supply of teachers grew, the development of state “normal schools” came about to fill the void in teacher preparation and retention.

Likewise, as the early female graduates of the common schools came of age, female seminaries were created to help prepare women for the expanding opportunities now available to them in elementary school teaching. By the 1870s, African Americans too were securing pathways into teaching throughout the Reconstruction South (Fraser 98). By the end of the 19th century, public school teaching had become the domain for upwardly mobile whites and newly emancipated blacks for whom broader economic avenues were not yet available.

The nomenclature of the history of American schools is notably fuzzy; as James Fraser notes, there were “academies,” “institutes,” “normal schools” and “high schools with normal courses of study” all catering to students with different educational ambitions (80). As high schools became more prevalent after the Industrial Revolution, students had more choice in their course of study: “They were very popular with middle-class parents who saw in them the opportunities for an academy-like education at public expense” (Fraser 81). While top students could pursue a college preparatory program, the majority prepared for work in commerce and industry or pursued a

shorter two-year program to train to be common school teachers. However, the qualifications for teaching at these high schools was remarkably inconsistent well into the early 20th century. By 1937, state requirements for teachers still ranged from “some high school” to a “diploma plus 4 years of training” (Fraser 93). While rural school districts in particular often culled their teaching staff from their own high school graduates, urban areas were developing two-year collegiate teacher prep programs to better prepare a whole new crop of high school teachers (Fraser 89). The national economy during this time had dramatic effects on both the quality of the teachers available and the number of positions for them to fill. As Fraser notes, “The decade between 1929 and 1939 saw the fastest increase in teacher qualifications of any in the nation’s history” (77). In the course of fifty years, education in America went from a hodgepodge of different school types, missions, and teachers often designed around local workforce demands, to a more uniform national vision of education designed to fulfill the promise of 20th century industry.

Yet formal schooling for the preparation of teachers was always viewed as an utterly separate enterprise from traditional collegiate study established for the pursuit of law or medicine. As normal schools became state teachers’ colleges during the midcentury, both the admission requirements and the rigor of the classes taken by teachers in training came under fire (Fraser 221).

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