Jill K. Conway

Politics, pedagogy & gender

In the mid-nineteenth century the public education system of the United States drew its corps of teachers from the nation's population of young women. In contrast, European public education remained a male-dominated enterprise until well into the twentieth century. Traditionally, the United States' early and extensive recruitment of female teachers has been interpreted as a sign of enlightened attitudes about women and their place in society. Horace Mann's innovative Massachusetts normal schools, which trained young women to be teachers, are customarily cited as examples of feminism in action. So, until recently, was the career of Catherine Beecher, the archetypal proselytizer for the female teaching profession. The development of a public elementary school system before the Civil War and the extension of that system through the establishment of secondary schools in the last quarter of the nineteenth century provide a happy ending to the traditional story of the establishment of the first "women's" profession.[1]

Underlying this popular history of women in teaching is the assumption that access to new work opportunities has the same meaning for everyone. If we stop to ask what gender meant for the nineteenth-century founders of American public education, however, the story takes on new levels of meaning. Some of its themes speak directly to our educational dilemmas today. Its interest lies not in the sex of the teachers who staffed America's one-room schools but in the political and psychological images that men and women held regarding the gender of those teachers. The story of women's opportunities to enter teaching as a respectable occupation for single women outside the home is a case study in the meaning of access. Examination of the case of women teachers' recruitment in the mid-nineteenth century should make us rethink the incremental model of change that is presumed to characterize the liberal state.

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1 Horace Mann, *Eleventh Annual Report* (Massachusetts Normal Schools, 1845), 24.

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The number of women involved in this recruitment is certainly striking. By 1848 women greatly outnumbered men as annual entrants to the teaching profession; in absolute numbers their predominance was established. In that year 2,424 men taught in the public (or common) schools of America beside 5,510 women.[2] During the 1850s the same pattern was replicated in the Midwest. After 1864 one of the impositions of the victorious North on the southern states during Reconstruction was the establishment of a predominantly female cadre of elementary school teachers. In the last three decades of the nineteenth century the same pattern emerged in the public high schools. By 1890, 65 percent of all teachers in the United States were women. Members of the new female profession were remarkably youthful, averaging from twenty-one to twenty-five years of age in different regions of the country.

Popular attitudes encouraged single women to become teachers but discouraged their presence in the schools once they married. The country's teachers were predominantly daughters of the native-born, from rural families. In comparison with European teachers, American teachers were not well educated. As late as the 1930s only 12 percent of elementary teachers in the United States had earned bachelor's degrees.[3] In the nineteenth century many entrants to the profession had not even completed high school. Because so many teachers were drawn from rural farm families, most had not traveled more than 100 miles from their place of birth. Their experience of high culture was minimal. Surveys carried out at the turn of the century recorded that most teachers had never seen reproductions of works of art during their own schooling. As adults their only reading was an occasional novel and the standard popular magazines of the day. To compensate for these deficiencies, the normal schools offered teaching programs that were largely remedial.[4]

The woman teacher, whether rural or urban, earned about 60 percent of the salary paid to men in the same school system. Around 1900 the average woman teacher's salary was $350 per year. Higher earnings were available to women in the textile industry and in most other industrial settings. In some states mechanics and clerks earned twice the annual wages of male teachers, whose earnings were more than a third higher than those of their female counterparts. The universal custom of "boarding out" was a major factor in depressing the level of teachers' earnings: nineteenth-century school districts held down the cost of elementary schools by housing teachers in rotation with families whose children were currently school pupils. This dubious hospitality was motivated partly by economic considerations and partly by the prevailing sentiment that young single women should not be allowed to live outside a family setting. The school district's room and board carried with it a censorious social control that young single women could resist only at their peril. In short, the young teacher's social status was marginal.[5]

2 Redding R. Sugg, Jr., *Motherteacher: The Feminization of American Education* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 37.

3 Lindley J. Stiles, ed., *The Teacher's Role in American Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 279.

4 Lotus D. Coffman, *The Social Composition of the Teaching Population* (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1911), 550.

5 Ibid., 550. See also Myra H. Strober and Audri Gordon Lanford, "The Feminization of Public

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This marginality was not borne for long; rates of turnover were very high. Most women elementary teachers taught for only three or four years. Although 90 percent of the elementary instructors by the 1920s were women, their rapid turnover meant that they did not develop as school leaders or as curriculum planners.[6] Men did not remain teachers for long either; they did not form strong bonds to the occupation of teacher as they did to the professions of medicine and engineering. Yet male teachers were seven times more likely to become school administrators than their female colleagues. Despite the social changes that have raised women's work aspirations in recent decades, these early trends have continued unaltered. Today men hold 99.4 percent of all school superintendencies. The only area of school administration in which women predominate is librarianship. Clearly gender shapes one's status within the teaching profession, even though teaching has traditionally been singled out for its supposed hospitality to women. What, then, are we to make of women's early access to teaching in the United States? What values shaped the establishment of the common schools in America, and what was the operative significance of ideas about gender in that process? To paraphrase William James, what was the meaning of the ideas being translated into action when people like Horace Mann began to recruit women for teacher training?

If we look at the political debates that preceded the establishment of the public education system in the 1830s and 1840s, we see that political forces divided over the level of intellectual aspiration desired as an outcome of state-supported education and over the place of elites of education and talent within the young republic. One thing that united Jefferson and his Federalist opponents was the value they saw in an educated elite drawn from the best talent of their new society. Jefferson wanted his elite to be democratically recruited, its education publicly supported; he expected the result to be the highest intellectual achievement.

One of the major shifts of value in the Jacksonian era was the rejection of the idea of a socially valuable elite formed by education and high culture. Instead, Americans of that era favored a popular education that was broadly accessible and limited in its intellectual goals. As Michael Katz has shown in his study of the development of public education in Massachusetts, some of the old Federalist elites found popular education attractive not so much as a means of training the mind but as a way of providing instruction in behavior.[7] Many New England moralists who sought to control the excesses of frontier behavior thought that this goal might be achieved through the common schools. Their intellectual aspirations for the students who were expected to attend these schools were minimal.

We know from recent studies of the legislative decisions approving the establishment of the common schools that Federalists and Jacksonians alike sought to develop public education as inexpensively as possible. The compromise that led to agreement on tax-supported public education combined the older Jeffer-

School Teaching: A Cross-Sectional Analysis, 1850 – 1880," *Signs* 11 (2) (1986): 212 – 235, and Willard S. Ellsbree, *The American Teacher: Evolution of a Profession in a Democracy* (New York: American Book Company, 1933), 281.

6 Ellsbree, *The American Teacher*, 206.

7 Michael Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

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sonian ideal of wide access to public education with Federalist and Jacksonian concerns for limited education at minimal cost to the taxpayer. The goal of cost containment made the recruitment of women completely logical because all parties to the educational debate agreed that women lacked acquisitive drives and would serve at subsistence salaries. The potentially explosive conflict over the intellectual goals of public education could also be avoided by choosing women as teachers. Their access to education was slight, so that male control over the normal schools that trained teachers insured control over the content of the curriculum. Furthermore, beliefs about the female temperament promised that the pedagogical style of women teachers would be emotional and value-oriented rather than rational and critical. Thus neither Jacksonians nor Federalists needed to make resolution of their conflicts over the goals of education an explicit part of their political agenda.[8] The resolution of fundamental contradictions about a strategic institution for the evolving society could safely be postponed as long as women teachers presented no threat to the objectives of low cost and strictly utilitarian public education.

The following three quotations demonstrate gender stereotyping at work in the public-education policy discussions of late nineteenth-century legislators and public officials. Each of the speakers favored the recruitment of women teachers. These passages illustrate the important components of the gender ideology accepted by all parties to the dispute over the goals of education.

> [Women] manifest a livelier interest, more contentment in the work, have altogether superior success in managing and instructing young children, and I know of instances, where by the silken cord of affection, have led many a stubborn will, and wild ungoverned impulse, into habits of obedience and study even in the large winter schools (Henry Barnard, *Second Annual Report* [Connecticut School, 1840], 27 – 28).

> [Women] are endowed by nature with stronger parental impulses, and this makes the society of children delightful, and turns duty into a pleasure. Their minds are less withdrawn from their employment, by the active scenes of life; and they are less intent and scheming for future honors and emoluments. As a class, they never look forward, as young men almost invariably do, to a period of legal emancipation from parental control .... They are also of purer morals (*Fourth Annual Report* [Boston Board of Education, 1841], 45 – 46).

> In childhood the intellectual faculties are but partially developed – the affections much more fully. At that early age the affections are the key of the whole being. The female teacher readily possesses herself of that key, and thus having access to the heart, the mind is soon reached and operated upon (Assemblyman Hurlburd, *New York State Education Exhibit* [World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893], 45 – 46).

At the center of the cluster of ideas that made up each writer's picture of women we see a belief in women's capacity to influence children's behavior through the emotions. Barnard's "silken cord of affection" and Hurlburd's "access to the heart" were characteristic themes in discourse about women as teachers. The writer of the Boston Board of Education's annual report associated

8 Sugg, *Motherteacher*, 4 – 25.

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women's ability to establish emotional links with children with women's lack of acquisitiveness and acceptance of dependence. These presumed qualities made women ideal candidates to teach in elementary schools, the purpose of which was to instill principles of behavior and convey basic literacy at a minimum cost to the public purse. Women were favored and actively recruited as elementary teachers because their presence in the schools satisfied a larger political agenda. Their perceived gender characteristics and their lack of academic preparation were positive advantages in the eyes of early public education officials; with a corps of women teachers there was no danger that investment in public education might foster the creation of new elites.

What, then, were the consequences of this congruence of ideology and economic concerns that served to give women preferred access to the teaching profession in the United States? The first consequence, extensively commented on by foreign visitors, was that discipline in American schools was very different from any known in European classrooms. As women were not thought suited to administering corporal punishment, the rod was virtually absent from America's schools. Maintaining discipline and conveying knowledge became more a matter of persuasion than an exercise of power based on authority. One learned because one liked the teacher, not out of respect for the learning that the teacher represented, as was the case in the French lycée or the German gymnasium. The climate in the American schoolroom was wholly different; the classroom was considered an extension of the home.

This should not be taken to mean that the stereotype of the steely-eyed New England schoolmarm was incorrect; there were many such outstanding women. What it did mean, however, was that maleness involved rebellion against the values for which the schoolmarm stood. Many celebrations of maleness in American culture have retained overtones of adolescent rebellion against a female cultural presence that ostensibly cannot be easily incorporated into a strong adult male identity.

We may speculate about the consequences of subsuming school and home within a maternal, domestic culture rather than having the school serve as an impersonal agent of cultural authority, much like the church or the army. How would *Huckleberry Finn* read if the journey on the raft were an escape from male institutions? Huckleberry Finn's journey raises many profound questions about American culture. One critical question is whether the overrepresentation of one gender in the early stages of schooling permits either boys or girls to develop the balanced identities we associate with creativity. For the purpose of understanding American educational institutions, another question that requires answering is this: If the school exists in opposition to male values and frontier life, how are we to understand higher education? In what ways is there a cultural imperative to redress the balance between maternal and masculine values at different levels of the system? What has that cultural requirement meant for American intellectual life?

Teaching through love made the school a setting in which many ideas about child development were played out; it was never an agency for strenuous effort to discipline and develop young intellectual talents. Thus, the traditional twelve years of schooling did not bring the young American student to the levels of learning aimed at

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by the lycée or the gymnasium. Instead, and increasingly, American education came to require a further four years of intellectual exploration at the college level before the young person was considered to be in a position to make adult career commitments. Moreover, because of American public schools' identification with maternal functions, colleges and universities have distanced themselves from schools and stressed the "masculine" tough-mindedness of American scholarship. This difference remains an enduring puzzle to Europeans, who see both schools and universities in a continuum of intellectual endeavor, and who value intellectual playfulness.

We may interpret this impulse to distance higher learning from schools as a natural response to some of the major nineteenth-century curricular debates. Because the schools operated as agents of maternal values, school curricula were organized along the lines of accepted models of child development. G. Stanley Hall's celebrated theories of child development, which held that the child recapitulated the various stages of human evolutionary development, required that the teacher act as a helpful director as the pupil traversed these stages. It is unlikely that Hall would have designed so unintellectual a teaching role had he assumed that most elementary school teachers would be men. His ideas about child development were revolutionary in their largely successful redefinition of childhood as a series of developmental stages rather than as a time when the "imp of Satan" had to be disciplined; however, his view of the teacher was based on earlier nineteenth-century assumptions about the female temperament.

John Dewey's Progressive schools discarded the notion of a fixed body of intellectual skills to be acquired entirely in school. Progressive pedagogy asked that the teacher help the young to discover the world through their innate intelligence. It took individuals with an almost superhuman capacity for nurturing to manage this kind of schoolroom. Few teachers could completely repress the desire to instruct, as Dewey's theories required. Many rueful survivors of Progressive schools testified to the demoralizing nature of such self-abnegation. It is reasonable to ask whether educational theorists would have designed teaching roles of such preternatural maternal patience had they expected their male colleagues to take principal responsibility for such instruction. Had the standard levels of education required for elementary school teachers been higher, educational reformers of the Progressive variety might have found earlier curricular ideals less easy to disregard. It was because the minds of young teachers were seen as tabulae rasae that older notions of learning could be easily ignored. Certainly if one assesses Dewey's pedagogy from the standpoint of the gender stereotypes enshrined within it, its conservatism is striking. Dewey advanced a new theory of learning and stated new political goals for American schools, but his assumptions about the temperamental and intellectual characteristics of teachers differed little from the assumptions made by Henry Barnard and his colleagues in the 1840s.[9]

While many of the goals of Progressive education were admirable, the fact that the overwhelming majority of teachers in the American elementary school sys-

9 On G. Stanley Hall's educational theories, see Dorothy Ross, *G. Stanley Hall, The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). On Dewey and Progressive education, see John Dewey, *On Education* (New York: The Modern Library, 1964).

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tem were young women was a substantial influence on the way reformers thought about the role of teacher. Because of the persistence of the idea that women related to children primarily through the emotions, reformers prescribed intellectually demeaning roles for teachers – roles that often ignored the teacher's intellectual capacity in relation to the child's.

Similarly, the fact that most teachers did not have the right to vote affected the dynamics of the political relationship between the common schools and the larger society. From its inception the public education system operated at the center of a vortex of political forces, many of which were intrinsically unrelated to pedagogical issues. The schools were affected by political battles over such issues as patronage rights, appointments to teaching staffs and desirable jobs on maintenance staffs, which districts would be granted the economic benefits of building contracts, and which merchants should benefit from the purchasing power of students and their families. Moreover, it was taken for granted that parents, who had an abiding interest in the curriculum and its relationship to employment opportunities, and whose taxes paid teachers' salaries, had a democratic right to influence what was and was not taught to their children. These interests found expression in city and state politics, but women teachers were disfranchised until 1919 and consequently were unable to directly participate in the political process that shaped and established priorities for public education. Fathers and men teachers could mobilize voter support for school policies through their lodges or friendly societies, or later through Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions Clubs; women could not. This situation affected women's status as teachers and indirectly affected the political importance of schools: an important component of professionalization in all modern societies is the degree to which would-be professionals are able to persuade economically or politically powerful elites that their services are important enough to command special rewards. Women teachers, unable to undertake this effort effectively, found their logical political allies in the ranks of organized labor.

The history that produced this logic is vividly illustrated in the disputes affecting the Chicago school system in the 1880s and 1890s. The city's total population was 500,000 and there were 59,000 pupils in the public schools, which expended a budget of over $1 million. The school system was the biggest employer in the city. The school board was appointed by the mayor, and it controlled or influenced three sets of resources critical to Chicago's economic future: land voted to support the public schools, contracts for school buildings, and tax abatements for corporations occupying land within the city. The major issues of concern to teachers were security of tenure, pension rights, and professional evaluation for promotion.[10] Women teachers felt considerable social distance from the exclusively male school superintendents in the city, who were themselves political appointees. In the campaign to secure teachers' pension rights, the female-led Chicago Federation of Teachers found that it carried no weight with the municipal government, so it waged battle in the courts. In her autobiography, Margaret A. Haley, the founder

10 Robert J. Braun, *Teachers and Power: The Story of the American Federation of Teachers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 21 – 27. See also Robert I. Reid, ed., *Battleground: The Autobiography of Margaret A. Haley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

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of the federation, records the process by which she came to conclude that, because of women's limited voting rights, her union's predominantly female membership would gain political leverage by affiliating with a strong political organization – the Chicago Federation of Labor. She recognized that laws were only enacted in response to the political pressure of voters. "Except in a few western states," she wrote, "the women of the nation had practically no voting power."[11]

The early choice of unionization was a natural one for nonvoting workers; its consequences were profound. As early as the Chicago Federation of Teachers' 1902 decision to affiliate with the Chicago Federation of Labor, the city's elementary teachers were in a confrontational relationship with political and social elites. The male school principals and superintendents, who identified with management in the labor-versus-management model of the school and the teacher's role within it, were even more distanced from teachers. The working peers of the school administrators were the political actors who had selected and appointed them. The place of the school in political priorities reflected the fact that most of its constituency could not vote and that its spokesmen were distant from the classroom. Decisions about educational policy were usually based entirely on the budgetary priorities of individual districts and regions. Economic considerations favored the selection of women teachers and, by the late nineteenth century, women principals; women's salaries in such positions did not reflect high esteem for their professional achievements. Jessie May Short, an assistant professor of mathematics at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, described her experience in an Oregon high school in the 1920s.

> A personal experience will illustrate the discriminations that are considered normal in the smaller schools....For five years I was principal of a high school in a delightful county-seat town. During the five years the high school enrollment doubled, a new building was erected, I had salary increases each year. I resigned for graduate study although I was offered a small salary increase if I would remain. The man who took my place was freely given a salary fifty percent higher than I had received. Before his first year had closed he was literally taken from the school and thrown into a snow bank. The school board asked me to return and made me what they considered a generous offer, a ten percent increase over my former salary. I suggested that I might consider the appointment at the fifty percent increase the board had willingly given the man who could not handle the situation. The idea of compensating the service without regard to the sex of the one rendering the service was, as I had anticipated, beyond their comprehension.[12]

Short's experience strikingly illustrates that the public's view of the worth of the predominantly female teaching profession and of the predominantly male management of the public schools was fundamentally shaped by the gender of those who served in the system. Because there was little popular respect for the function of the teacher, most important professional prerogatives were gained only after protracted battle. The early decades of unionizing and struggling against low social esteem focused

11 Reid, *Battleground*, 90.

12 Jessie May Short, *Women in the Teaching Profession: Or Running as Fast as You Can to Stay in the Same Place* (Portland, Oreg.: Reed College, June 1939), 10.

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teachers' concerns on job security to the neglect of curricular issues. The cherished right of tenure, sought since the 1880s, was not achieved until the 1950s, when the postwar baby boom and the cold-war mentality of the Sputnik era gave schools and teachers national importance.

The public's low esteem of the profession was also related to the youthfulness of women teachers. As most of them remained teachers for no more than three or four years, it was easy for local school boards to disregard their opinions. The assumption that young women need protection gave school boards and committees ample justification to scrutinize teachers' conduct and to represent such activity to be in the teachers' best interest. The small minority of men teachers acquired the status of their women colleagues by association. Because society accorded such scant respect to the role of teacher, it was considered perfectly appropriate to pay teachers wages equivalent to those of unskilled labor. By 1900 teacher turnover was as high as 10 percent a year; every year 40,000 new recruits had to be brought into the common school system.[13] The high annual rates of change in teaching personnel throughout the first century of the profession made teachers seem much more like transient workers than career professionals (teaching was not accepted as a lifetime career for women until the Second World War). School reformers even today struggle with the consequences of Margaret Haley's accurate perception that to bargain successfully, women teachers had to unionize like industrial laborers.

If we compare the public esteem accorded to teaching in the late nineteenth century with that held for other emerging professions, we begin to see that the difference lies in the fact that most of the people recruited into public education were women. Consider, for instance, attitudes toward the engineer – the male professional who emerged to meet national needs in transportation, communication, and industrial technology over the same one hundred years that saw the establishment of public education. In the United States the social origins of engineers were almost identical to those of teachers. Engineers too came from rural and blue-collar families. Initially, their training was not highly theoretical and their tasks were strictly utilitarian. Yet engineers were held in high public esteem.

Clearly, gender categories and cultural values had a tremendous influence on the process of professionalization. We have only to read Henry Adams's assessment of the new technology in his commentaries on *The Virgin and the Dynamo*, or Thorstein Veblen's description of the engineer in *The Engineers and the Price System* (1919), to see what a difference gender made. "These technological specialists," Veblen wrote, "whose constant supervision is indispensable to the due working of the industrial system, constitute the general staff of industry, whose work is to control the strategy of production at large and keep an oversight of the tactics of production in detail."[14] During the Depression, when married women teachers were dismissed by school systems to create openings for unemployed men, Lewis Mumford wrote, "The establishment of the class of engineers in its proper characteristics

13 B. A. Hinsdale, "The Training of Teachers," in *Education in the United States: A Series of Monographs Prepared for the United States Exhibit at the Paris Exposition, 1900*, ed. Nicholas Murray Butler (Albany, N.Y.: J. Lyon, 1900), 16.

14 Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System* (New York: Heubsch, 1921), 52 – 53.

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is the more important because this class will, without doubt, constitute the direct and necessary instrument of coalition between men of science and industrialists, by which alone the new social order can commence."[15] No one thought to exclaim on how much the new social order might depend on the labors of "the class of teachers." Engineers, of course, pursued their training at the college level and developed a professional culture of aggressive masculinity. Their skills were of critical and immediate importance to the business elites of American society – but then so were the skills of teachers, although no one recognized their value.

Gender stereotypes helped to account for the differences in social mobility experienced by women and men drawn from the same social background. If we look at the gender composition of the teaching profession cross-culturally, we see that the American pattern established at the time of the creation of the public school system was unique. In 1930 – 1931, a national survey of American teachers showed that women outnumbered men by 19 to 1 in elementary education and by 3 to 1 in secondary education. In contrast, men held 65 percent of the elementary teaching posts in Norway and 69 percent of the secondary teaching positions there. In Germany 75 percent of the primary school teachers and 71 percent of the secondary school teachers were men; the ratios for France were similar.[16] These figures reflect the conditions that existed in societies that had had relatively stable populations when the public system of elementary and secondary education was being established, and that made strongly centralized educational planning a high national priority.

In these European countries, lifetime careers of steady progression through the different levels of the public school system were established; entry-level positions based on long and strict academic preparation were accepted as the norm. In France, for instance, completion of the baccalaureate was required to become a lycée teacher; further progress in the system required an advanced degree. Besides contributing substantially to the intellectual level of the schools, this pattern of recruitment defined the teacher as an agent of the nation's culture, not simply a representative of its maternal values.

When the possibility of recruiting more men to the profession or requiring teachers to undergo more rigorous academic preparation was broached in the United States, it was generally discarded as prohibitively costly. In 1906 – 1907, for instance, the New York City school superintendent acknowledged the desirability of having a cadre of teachers more balanced in gender composition. In a report, he commented that the achievement of this goal would require equalizing the pay scales of the gender groups and raising all salary levels. This, he calculated, was politically impossible. It would add between $8 million and $11 million to the annual school system budget. To propose such a budget increase in the absence of popular demand would be political suicide, and there was not the slightest popular sentiment for such action.[17]

15 Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934), 219 – 220.

16 Edward S. Evenden, Guy C. Gamble, and Harold G. Blue, "Teacher Personnel in the United States," in *National Survey of the Education of Teachers*, vol II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 20.

17 Sugg, *Motherteacher*, 122.

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Gender was a highly significant factor in the way American society mobilized its resources to develop its public education system. Assumptions about female temperament and motivation dovetailed with the often contradictory ideals and values of the public school system's creators. Stereotypes about women coincided neatly with the economic priorities that dictated how much money was appropriated for public education, and reinforced popular preferences regarding the purpose of public schooling. Assumptions about the gender and intellectual level of the typical teacher influenced successive waves of curricular reform. Culturally, these gender stereotypes had a tremendous impact on everyone involved in the schools – teachers, pupils, principals, superintendents, school board members. These assumptions played a part in what it meant to grow up male or female in America. Their enduring power explains the continued inability of our affluent society to muster either the will or the resources to create and maintain schools that are intellectually demanding and that accord the profession of teaching sufficient dignity to engender high teacher morale.

Much has been made of the degree to which teaching offered American women the opportunity to move out of family subordination and into an independent existence. The memoirs of some of America's greatest women reformers tell us that this new life outside the family was a heady experience. Frances Willard, for example, wrote of learning to live without reliance on her parents as a very young teacher. Through her struggles with unruly children in rural one-room schools, she came to see herself as an agent for improving society. Dozens of other young women documented similar experiences. Service as teachers inspired many young women to seek other active careers. Both as individuals and as a group, women proved themselves capable of creating and sustaining demanding intellectual tasks when they were given adequate preparation and appropriate renumeration. It was not the sex of women teachers that created problems in the school system and made the status of teachers so lowly; it was the gender identity that women carried into the schools with them. It is the terms on which women enter occupations that govern their opportunities. The mere fact of entry does not create opportunities. Horace Mann and Henry Barnard, two of America's greatest educational reformers, actively admired women and thought that by employing them as teachers they could secure both a better society and important advantages for women. They bore women no ill will whatsoever. Their assumptions about women, however, established the terms on which women entered the teaching profession, and those terms were far more consequential than the great numbers of women who were invited to teach in the public schools. Those terms still matter today. So too does our ambivalence about the goals of public education. This piece of unfinished business from the politics of the Jacksonian era matters as much today as it did in the 1840s. We cannot conclude it satisfactorily without taking into account the unintended consequences of our assumptions about the gender of teachers. They matter not only to women but to our whole society.

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