

ED SCHOOL FOLLIES



The Miseducation of America's Teachers



Rita Kramer



THE FREE PRESS
A Division of Macmillan, Inc.
NEW YORK

Maxwell Macmillan Canada
TORONTO

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The Free Press
A Division of Macmillan, Inc.
866 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022

Maxwell Macmillan Canada, Inc.
1200 Eglinton Avenue East
Suite 200
Don Mills, Ontario M3C 3N1

Macmillan, Inc. is part of the Maxwell Communication
Group of Companies.

Printed in the United States of America

printing number
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kramer, Rita.

Ed school follies : the miseducation of America's teachers / Rita
Kramer.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-02-917642-5

1. Teachers—Training of—United States. I. Title. II. Title:
Miseducation of America's teachers.

LB1715.K64 1991

370'.71'0973—dc20

91-9774
CIP

Acknowledgments



I would like to thank the faculty, administration, and students of the schools which welcomed me and hope they will not be too dismayed by some of my observations. In the long run, I hope they will find I have been helpful to them and will not regret their hospitality. I also want to thank my husband, Yale Kramer, for patient debriefing after my many trips and for his helpful suggestions along the way. I am deeply grateful to the Committee for the Free World, whose support made the research possible, and most of all to Midge Decter, who planted the idea, watered it, and watched it grow, and then did the necessary job of weeding. Her unfailing interest and good-humored encouragement kept me going to ed schools even when I felt like dropping out.

New York

January 1991

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Introduction

Learning to Teach

What is the trouble with America's schools? This is a question that has been at the forefront of the national consciousness for decades, at least since the Soviets launched Sputnik in the 1950s and we were told that Johnny couldn't read. Since then, the crisis of American education has been proclaimed and described again and again, inspiring a miscellany of panaceas promising reform, only to be followed by new revelations of pedagogical pathology, new diagnoses, new prescriptions, new therapy. The patient, despite all these efforts, does not seem to be improving.

We have seen the new math come and go, along with the open classroom, and neither changes in the curriculum nor changes in the way it is taught seem to have made enough of a difference. Too many Johnnies still can't read, or write, or add, subtract, or multiply. Too many of our elementary pupils are unprepared for high school, and too many of our high schools' graduates are ignorant of the most basic facts about their country's institutions and its past, unacquainted with the literature and art that are the heritage of civilization, unable to make sense of science or technology.

Why?

There are many ways to answer the question. The schools are responsive to conditions in society and to its values. They have to

deal with the children who come through their doors, and with the effects on them of the breakdown of the family, the general permissiveness and loss of respect for authority, the drug epidemic, the effects of television—its form as well as its content—all of which influence young minds. But none of these factors strikes at the heart of the matter, none explains why our schools teach so little to so many children. It is not a matter of money, buildings, materials. The essential ingredients in the learning process are the pupil and the teacher. When we talk about education, we are talking about teaching—who does it and how well—and about what is being taught.

Wanting to know who our teachers are—where they are coming from; how they are being prepared for their critical work with the young and by whom and in what way; what they seem to be making of their training; what their expectations are for their future—in the fall of 1988 I set out on a voyage of which this book is the log.

I spent a year visiting schools, colleges, and departments of education in various parts of the country, sitting in on classes in large public and private universities, smaller private colleges, and the quondam normal schools that are now part of state systems. Wanting to get as representative a sample as possible of the schools, colleges, and departments of education that make up the “ed school” world, I visited institutions in the Northeast as well as the Northwest, on the West Coast as well as in the Southeast, the Midwest, the Southwest. I did not cover all parts of the country, and I visited only a small fraction of the close to 1,300 existing teacher-training institutions, but they were far enough apart and varied enough in character to provide a general picture of their world today and what goes on in it.

Everywhere I went, I talked with faculty, students, and administrators of teacher-preparation programs, and I visited elementary and high schools where education students did practice teaching. I asked many of the student teachers I met, as well as their teachers: Why did you go into teaching? What do you think schools are for? What is the teacher’s job? And I asked the student teachers, What do you see yourself doing as a teacher? Next year? In ten years?

What I saw and heard in “ed school” was a revelation.

When I began this project, it was without an agenda. I set out to see what was out there in the world of ed schools, with only one question already clearly formulated. It had to do with the pool of prospective teachers. I was curious about the effects of the two great social upheavals of our time on the teaching profession, traditionally populated by women and minorities, which used to mean

not only blacks but second-generation Americans, the children of immigrants on the way up the social ladder or the upwardly mobile children of workers who were the first generation of their families to go beyond high school. Both women and blacks had many other options now. How many of them, I wondered, were going into teaching? What I found was that there were more women and fewer blacks than I expected.

While young women no longer automatically go into teaching until they find husbands or, failing to marry, remain as the ubiquitous “spinster” teachers of my childhood, today large numbers of older women with children, whether married or single parents, are reentering the labor force by choosing to become teachers. Why there are relatively few blacks preparing for a career in teaching despite the many kinds of affirmative action programs designed to encourage them to do so would not become as quickly obvious as why so many women are still doing so.

Who are the nation’s teachers? According to figures made available at the end of 1986, 70 percent of the country’s two-and-a-half million public school teachers are women—76 percent at the elementary and 51 percent at the secondary level—and 9 percent of the current teaching force is classified as “minority,” of which 6 percent are black. Another fact about the teaching force is that it is currently the most unionized occupation in the country, with 80 percent of public school teachers belonging to a union, as contrasted with only 12 percent of college graduates employed full time year-round.*

In the late 1980s, enrollment in undergraduate teacher-education programs had been steadily increasing in response to the job market; there were more positions available and they were paying more. (Data compiled by the American Federation of Teachers in 1985 showed that every state in the nation raised its average salary for teachers at rates higher than inflation and higher than those of other government employees; the average salary for teachers was over \$25,000 a year, higher than annual earnings of workers in the private sector in every state in 1986.) Who are these prospective teachers?

According to a survey by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education in 1989, teaching as a career does not seem to be attracting increasing numbers of blacks and other minorities, who continue to constitute only about 5 percent of the enrollment,

* The figures are from C. Emily Feistritzer, “Teacher Crisis: Myth or Reality?” (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Information, 1986).

which remains primarily white and female. The median age of the students enrolled in undergraduate teaching programs is 24. A quarter of them are married, many have children at home and many work part-time. The survey also found that more than three-quarters of the graduates of colleges of education preparing to teach in elementary school had no academic major other than education. Almost as many had no academic minor.

The requirements for admission to the more than twelve hundred various kinds of institutions that prepare teachers for state certification vary wildly. The large public universities responsible for producing more than half of the nation's teachers are more selective than small private institutions, which usually enroll education students earlier in their careers—before they can be said to have had a general academic education—and which rarely reject an education applicant. Also varying from state to state are the requirements for certification that determine what will be required in order to graduate from a teacher-preparation program.

Some states with large numbers of inner-city problem schools are issuing emergency credentials to fill their teaching needs. Noncredentialed teachers are paid on a per diem basis, although they may be employed on a regular schedule, a makeshift if not hypocritical solution. Some of these people may be better qualified academically and better teachers than those whose credentials depend merely on having accumulated the prescribed number of education course credits in college.

In other states, notably New Jersey, alternative routes are openly designed to circumvent traditional teacher education programs altogether, issuing a provisional certificate that lets a qualified college graduate teach while fulfilling the pedagogical requirements for certification. Alternative certification programs are intended to serve a diverse population including blacks and members of other minority groups and older people—former teachers returning to the field, and midcareer changers and retirees who would like to teach.

The assumption is that these people already have an adequate general education and can be taught what they need to know about the theory and activity of teaching while they are doing it. This may be truer of the older applicants than of the recent college graduates, who, while they may have the advantage of not being overburdened with knowledge of pedagogy, may not be overburdened with general knowledge either. That, of course, depends on the standards of the colleges and universities from which they have graduated.

Schools of education as such are only about 150 years old. In 1839 Horace Mann established the first of the state institutions to train teachers for the nation's common schools by acquainting them with the principles or "norms" of classroom instruction. These single-purpose institutions devoted to vocational practice, which came to be known as "normal" schools, were largely staffed by faculty with teaching experience but no academic credentials. Those they enrolled, the majority of them women, were taking what amounted to a step upward on the socioeconomic ladder.

In the early years of this century, the normal schools began to evolve into four-year teachers' colleges, which could grant degrees enabling their graduates to teach not just in the elementary grades but in the increasingly important high schools. Eventually they became general purpose state colleges and universities, part of the expanding system of public institutions of higher education that gained momentum in the years following World War II, when the federal government and state legislatures appropriated unprecedented sums for the education of returning veterans. As a result, an apprenticeship model was replaced by that of professional training and scholarship, and to the preparation of classroom practitioners was added that of educational bureaucrats.

The quest for academic status and acceptance as an equal of the other professional faculties such as law and medicine led to the abandonment on many college and university campuses of the connection with the lowly women who taught children in elementary classrooms.* Those who are trained in the vocations of law and medicine profess to know more than their clients about their fields and their clients' needs; they work independently and not under bureaucratic control; and they possess a fixed body of specific knowledge. In contrast, teachers are directed in their daily work by political bodies outside of their field, and their training institutions have no agreed-on disciplinary content. This may help to explain why, as Glazer puts it, "They never seem to be long secure in their adoption of any curriculum and mode of training, and they undertake 'radical revolutions' every decade or so." Professors were too busy inventing a discipline of education to concern themselves with the present realities of the public schools. That was left to the less elite—and less selective—institutions. And even at those, more and more courses in theory began to supplement practice teaching under the influence

* An interesting discussion of the characteristics of the various professions and their respective training institutions is Nathan Glazer's "The Schools of the Minor Professions," in *Minerva*, Vol. XII, No. 3, July 1974 (London).

of the graduate school culture, with its emphasis on the scientific study of education rather than on the practical training of teachers.

Today graduate schools and departments of education exist alongside the other professional faculties like law and medicine, business, and engineering in the large prestigious research-oriented universities, both private and public, from which their influence emanates. Harvard's and Berkeley's schools of education are not in the business of training classroom teachers. More devoted to research, grantsmanship, publication, and the other trappings of scholarship that define academic pursuit than to teacher training, they produce a leadership cadre for the educational establishment: professors and deans of other education faculties, high-level administrators, superintendents, principals—all those whose careers in education lie outside the classroom. Their eye is on policy and theory, not practice, but the theories they generate—their interpretations of their findings on how children learn and how teachers should teach—influence what is taught in teacher-training programs and thus eventually in the nation's classrooms.

There are some 150 graduate schools of education in the United States today, comprising less than 10 percent of the thirteen hundred institutions—from small private colleges with religious affiliations to major state campuses—that prepare teachers. The influence of the most prestigious dozen or so of the graduate schools is enormous. Their deans and their alumni elsewhere in the education establishment sit on—and often chair—the boards and commissions empaneled by government and foundations to pronounce on matters affecting the schools. Those pronouncements then define the direction of policy in the years until another blue-ribbon panel issues another report explaining why matters haven't improved much since the last one.

As normal schools evolved into state teachers colleges and eventually became absorbed into university graduate schools of education, there remained a number of colleges of education, both on private campuses and publicly supported ones, that provided teacher-training programs for undergraduates. Notoriously nonselective, they offered three or four years of concentration on pedagogy to students barely out of high school, whose general education was slighted while they prepared to devote themselves to the education of others. On the one hand, graduate schools were producing specialists in such matters as the psychology and philosophy of education while, on the other, undergraduate programs were turning out classroom teachers with

minimal background in the subjects they were destined to teach. All of them knew more about how to teach than what to teach.*

By the close of the 1970s, most of the country's teachers were coming not from the education schools and departments of liberal arts colleges and elite universities but from the upgraded state teachers' colleges, less well known, less selective, and less demanding. They had already come under attack in numerous works two of whose titles told the story: *Educational Wastelands* and *The Miseducation of American Teachers*. Gradually, the idea began to take hold among critics that undergraduate teacher education should be abolished altogether and replaced with a liberal arts education followed by a fifth year of education courses and practice teaching leading to a master's degree in teaching. A year of internship in the schools would precede taking on full classroom responsibility. This was the recommendation of both of the much-publicized reports issued in 1988, that of the Holmes Group of deans of leading graduate schools of education in research universities and that of the Carnegie Corporation's Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, a group of business leaders and government, union, and school officials.†

Both groups saw the move to place all teacher education at the graduate level as a step toward improving the quality of teaching. Teachers would be professionals if they were certified only after graduate professional study. Professional education would replace vocational training and people who knew something they had studied as undergraduates would turn to the matter of how to teach it in graduate school.

Would this bring better people into the classroom? There were those, like Peabody College's Dean Willis D. Hawley, who disagreed with the Holmes and Carnegie reports' recommendations and maintained that a solid liberal arts background could be integrated with course work on learning theory and teaching methods while at the same time getting future teachers into the classroom much earlier in their careers. And there were still others who sought to circumvent the existing systems of teacher training altogether—both graduate and undergraduate—for alternative routes.

* For a general overview of this topic, see Geraldine Joncich Clifford and James W. Guthrie, *Ed School: A Brief for Professional Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). See also Harry Judge, *American Graduate Schools of Education: A View from Abroad* (New York: Ford Foundation: 1982).

† Holmes Group, *Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group* (East Lansing, Mich.: Holmes Group, 1986); Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (New York: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986).

Since the federal government's move into the education scene in the late 1950s and subsequent legislation, a vast education industry has proliferated in response to the availability of funds for mandated programs addressed to problems of racial integration, the disadvantaged, education of the handicapped and of the non-English speaking, and so on. Government-funded research projects are ubiquitous on campuses and in consulting firms all over the country. Publications abound, with reports and surveys filling data banks and spilling over library shelves.

As federal money was becoming available to those in the education field, another change was being put into place. The "new left" social scientists who came on the scene in the late 1960s began to reinterpret American history and sociology from a preponderantly Marxist point of view, and nowhere were the revisionists more radical than in the field of schooling. The books by Kozol, Goodman, Illich, and others became best sellers and their ideas about the relationship between school and society, teacher and pupil, permeated the ed school world, both in terms of what was taught and how research was designed, carried out, and interpreted.

With a few exceptions, such as Teachers College of Columbia University and the College of Education at Michigan State University, the leading institutions in the field of education largely shy away from identification with the preparation of the elementary school teaching force. They are more intent on proving that education is an academic discipline with its own subject matter worthy of a place alongside the other university schools and departments. To that end they emphasize graduate education, research, and publication. The training of primary school teachers thus devolves upon the second-tier institutions, from small private colleges to large state universities, less selective in admissions and less demanding of those they admit.

In the year I spent observing these programs, I saw examples of both systems and came to think that such structural changes neither address the real problem nor provide a real solution. To show why, I propose to take my readers back to the beginning as I retrace my steps through the ed school world. They may not share all my feelings and judgments about everything I have seen, but I invite them to look at it with me, to join me in the classrooms and corridors and off-campus haunts I visited during a year-long odyssey among some of the schools and departments of colleges and universities that prepare teachers to instruct schoolchildren in America today.

PART ONE



The Northeast

1



Teachers College

From Progressive Education to Peace Education

The journey began on the way up the steps leading to the entrance to Teachers College, the graduate school of education at the uptown edge of Columbia University in New York City. Arguably the country's most venerable teacher-training institution, TC is the fount of progressive education and the source of innumerable trend-setting projects and influential publications in the field. There facing me on the massive wooden door of the red brick building was a sign pointing the way to "Conflict Management Training for Educators." Conflict Management? Then it occurred to me that perhaps what was meant by conflict management was discipline.

I found my way to a large lecture hall, took a seat, and looked around me. I was immediately cheered by what I saw and surprised by my own thought: How nice that all these lively, attractive young people want to be teachers! A tall, blond young woman in tight jeans and boots was talking to a young man in a ski sweater and a black woman in a pin-striped suit. I judged there were over a hundred students filing in or already seated. My impression was that there were more whites than blacks, more women than men, but it was a close call.