

Working Paper Series

History of 19th Century Women's Education: A Plea for Inclusion of Class, Race and Ethnicity

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The history of women's education can be taught differently now than twenty years ago owing to new work. This paper provides an overview of the excellent precedents set in discussing the informal and formal education of women in the nineteenth century. It concentrates on the plethora of rich material written about the education of the privileged, but constantly points out the need to complete the picture by discussing the education of women of color, different classes, and various ethnic backgrounds.

To date, a great deal of the recent research has been done on the formal and informal education of privileged women in the nineteenth century, and much of the history of women and education concentrates on educational pioneers such as Catharine Beecher and Mary Lyon. Combing through and interpreting informal education couched in nineteenth-century popular literature, especially that directed at literate women, complements this area of study. The writings of both nineteenth-century educational theorists and prescriptive literature combine to provide a rich data source, one which enriches our understanding of the social expectations of nineteenth-century womanhood. Thus, it is no small wonder that scholars have paid so much attention to these sources.

Another principal concern among recent historians of education has been the cultural imposition and cultural hegemony that school and school reform implied. Historians such as Michael B. Katz, Carl F. Kaestle, Marvin Lazerson, and David B. Tyack have introduced a revisionist approach to history of education.¹ Their primary interest is in tracing how school

reform in its broadest definition affected class, ethnicity, and, when appropriate, race. Their work was followed by a vigorous attempt to rewrite the previous "march of progress" interpretation popularized by earlier historians such as Ellwood Cubberly. Although the new revisionist interpretation of the history of education did a great deal to correct for biases in ethnicity, class, and race, very little work was done to include issues of gender in a systematic fashion.

Although at present some historians, many of whom are women, have interwoven women's history with educational history to try to remedy this void, the thread which has been used to lace together these two areas of study has been one which discussed the elite women's struggles for education. Poor women are still often neglected. The number of these works on the education for female elites is substantial. A short list includes: Elizabeth Alden Green's Mary Lyon Opening the Gate, Joan N. Burstyn's Victorian Education-The Ideal of Womanhood, Jill Conway's "Perspectives of History of Women's Education in the United States," Patricia Aljberg Graham's "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education," Elaine Kendall's Peculiar Institutions, Sally Schwager's Harvard Women, Kathryn Sklar's Catharine Beecher, Patricia Palmieri's In Adamless Eden, and Maris Vinovskis' and Richard Bernard's "Female Schoolteachers in Antebellum Massachusetts."²

As already mentioned, social historians have also examined prescriptive literature in an effort to decipher further the education that nineteenth-century women received informally through popular magazines and journals. This work has been fairly comprehensive and, therefore, allows us insights into the impact of popular literature on women's attitudes and expectations. The breadth of this work, as outlined below, must now be matched by new research about the messages directed toward or received by women of other classes and of color.

Historians such as Mary Ryan³ and Carl Degler⁴ have detailed the didacticism embedded in women's reading, which appeared in journals such as Godey's Ladies Book, Ladies Home Companion, Mother's Magazine, and Ladies Home Journal.

The magazines reinforced and reflected the behavioral expectations for the nineteenth-century woman. Literate women, those who tended to have money and leisure, avidly read such magazines, tracts, and books, and they imbibed the messages tucked into their pages. The overall themes of this literature echoed a belief in the importance of living lives devoted to being good wives and mothers. As Linda Kerber has pointed out in Women of the Republic, women were essentially mothers of the Republic.⁵ Their responsibility was to bear and train first-rate citizens to be both responsible and loyal. In The Young

Housekeeper Reverend William Alcott justified the domestic role of women and advocated their perfecting that role. He elevated the importance of housekeeping by calling it a science which "results in the formation of human health and character, and is as deserving of study as geography and mathematics." He then waxed enthusiastically about the central role women were to play. "The elements of the nation, nay, of the world itself, are prepared, to a very great extent in our nurseries and around the domestic fireplace."⁶

A prime example of this informal education which sought to mold female consciousness can be found in Sarah Hale's Good Housekeeping, Hints to Help.⁷ The more educated and intelligent a woman, "the more importance she will attach to her station, and the name of a 'good housekeeper.'" Hale lauds the role of women, to whom she attributes "a high degree of purity and moral relations of domestic life."

The good housekeeper was indeed a domestic priestess. The language chosen by female educators as well as by nineteenth century writers of advice literature constantly reminded their audience that marriage and motherhood, like education, were religious callings. In so doing, they reiterated the messages of earlier ministers such as Reverend Joseph F. Buckminster, who, speaking before the Boston Female Asylum in 1810, explicitly

expounded upon the religious superiority and upon the duties of women:

I believe that if Christianity should be compelled to flee from the mansions of the great, the academies of the philosophers, the halls of legislators, or the throng of busy men, we should find her last and purest retreat with woman at the fireside; her last altar would be the female heart; her last audience would be the children gathered around the knees of a mother; her last sacrifice, the secret prayer, escaping in silence from her lips, and heard perhaps only at the throne of God.

The "scribbling women" that Nathaniel Hawthorne called the popular domestic novelists of the day dispensed advice freely, thinly cloaking moral didacticism in their stories. The general reading public poured over books written by authors such as Lydia Maria Child, Lydia Sigourney, and Catherine Sedgwick. Their words and others of this genre were considered to be that of literary as well as of educational and moral value. For example, Catherine Sedgwick concentrated on themes which informed her readers that goodness was rewarded, repentance condoned, salvation desired, altruism praised, and religious devotion and duty revered above all. Sedgwick's novels such as Hope Leslie and the Linwoods, her tales such as The Poor Rich Man and the Rich Poor Man and Live and Let Live, Domestic Service Illustrated, and her literary contributions to magazines and annuals sought to advise, counsel, and inspire.

None of the scribbling women forgot children. Stories, tales, and sketches were written especially for young readers

and proliferated during the first half of the nineteenth century. Lydia Sigourney's advice to children in her How to Be Happy, reads like a recipe for the happiness of women. The similarity of the social prescription for women and children should not be surprising; women, like children were assumed to need guidance, protection, and supervision. Sigourney instructed children on how to ascend the "steps to the temple of goodness. . . the temple of happiness." If they "1. discharged their duties among them praying to God, obeying parents, being grateful, and shewing (sic) respect to Age; 2. did good to others, including treating domestics well, comforting the sick, instructing the ignorant, and remembering the heathen; and 3. loved good things, including knowledge, obeying superiors, the Bible, the Sabbath, and all Mankind, Heaven would be theirs."⁹ The same language was used for women's happiness and salvation.

Women such as Catharine Beecher reiterated the sentiments of the scribblers. Ostensibly writing advice for domestic servants, she tied together Christian morality and female piety and stated that the expectations for domestics reflected those prescribed for all women. In her treatise entitled Letters of Domestic Servants she admonished domestics, "God has created us to be happy. . . .But the only way for us to be happy is to form that holy benevolent, self-denying, character which Christ came to inhabit on earth. Such a character as this none of us

have when we are born. . . And yet submission of the will to God, and self denial in securing our own good, and doing service to others, are habits that are indispensable."¹⁰ Novelists like Sedgwick, educators like Beecher, and editors like Hale constantly repeated the importance of women following social prescriptions, and thereby fulfilling both popular and divine will.

Discussion of the role of education in the lives of nineteenth-century women has been enriched by new and exciting efforts to interpret the motives of educational theorists such as Willard, Beecher, and Lyon. While some scholars believe that these women were functioning within their prescribed sphere and did little, in fact, to try to change the status quo, others suggest that women such as Willard were creating political avenues within which they could begin to break out of their socially dictated positions. Regardless of historical interpretation, however, it is noteworthy that they fought for new rights for women--in this case to have an education. Yet, they insisted, both in their rhetoric and their program, that women be educated as females. Women were still wives and mothers and teachers of the next generation. These educational pioneers also recognized that some women would not marry; economic necessity meant that many would have to work at least for a short time. Their rhetoric justified women accepting gainful employment as teachers without violating social norms.

All three educators fought for educational programs in which the curriculum would offer female religious training and inspiration as well as courses similar to those offered in the male academies. They assumed, however, that the purposes of education for women would differ from those adopted for males. Unlike men who, presumably, would use their education as a stepping stone to pursue their careers, it was assumed that most women would use their education to enhance their womanly "callings." Therefore, they would become knowledgeable and caring wives and mothers. Some would become teachers of young children--a profession considered similar to motherhood as it necessitated nurture and care of the young. Ideally, a young woman could be both teacher and mother in a supposedly logical progression. In keeping with this sentiment, Emma Willard made a case for women having a special place as teachers of the young:

There are many females of ability, to whom the business of instructing children is highly acceptable, and, would devote all their faculties to their occupation. They would have no higher pecuniary object to engage their attention, and their reputation as instructors they would consider as important.¹¹

Willard still claimed that there should be a difference between the education offered to females and that offered to males. She argued that education for females should be widespread, state-supported, and more readily available. This would ensure both that more women would be properly educated

and that female education would not be vulnerable to private whim.

Willard ranked those discipline areas that she considered critical. In the order of importance, she wanted women to learn: religious and moral subjects, literary interests, domestic skills, and ornamental crafts such as needlepoint, drawing and music.

Several years later, Catharine Beecher spoke in a similar vein. Using traditional terms, she justified the need for females to be educated:

It is to mothers and to teachers, that the world is to look for the character which is to be stamped on each succeeding generation, for it is to them that the great business of education is almost exclusively committed. And will it not appear by examination that neither mothers nor teachers have ever been properly educated for their profession. What is the profession of a Woman? Is it not to form immortal minds, and to watch, to nurse, and to rear the bodily system.

Thus, like Willard, Beecher saw the need for the development of financially sound educational institutions for women. She advocated the need for a sound curriculum tailored to the needs of students. Female education should "have a decided influence in fitting a woman for her particular duties, . . . the physical, intellectual, and moral education of children." She specified what she considered a desirable course of study which should "include fitting a woman for her practical duties . . . to form correct moral principles and to strengthen

religious obligation. . . and . . . to store the mind with useful knowledge." Beecher, more than Willard, stressed the importance of female education as a means of ensuring that women learn domestic roles. Like Willard, she also saw the critical role that female teachers could and should play in society. Furthermore, Beecher regarded teaching as a means of employment that was "critical" for social stability, since women were the ultimate educators of the very young. In addition, an educated citizenry was critically important since in her words, the "degraded were foreigners and their ignorant families were pouring into this nation at every avenue."¹² According to Beecher, women should be educated to function excellently within their own sphere; excellence was clearly defined in her treatises. However, women's special social roles could be expanded so that women were mothers to their own children as well as mothers to the Republic.

Mary Lyon included courses similar to those of Willard and Beecher. At Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, students were to study the following: Geography, History, Algebra, Political Class Book, Botany, Physiology, Rhetoric, Philosophy, Grammar, Chemistry, Astronomy, Euclid, Logic, and Literature. Although there was no specific course on domestic science, it was assumed that students would come to Mount Holyoke already prepared for domestic chores. Certainly, the expectation that the students would spend part of their day maintaining the Seminary meant

that the program at the school was already heavily based on domestic science.

Lyon's "New England Female Seminary for Teachers," written in 1832, specified that the main purpose of Mount Holyoke Female Seminary was to prepare young ladies to become well educated teachers, and by so doing to relieve men of the burden of educating the young. If the "labor of instruction / is put / into the hands of the benevolent, educated ladies," men would be free to pay attention to worldly affairs. Blending together the roles of women in the public and private spheres, Lyon clarified the role she felt female education should fill. For her, education would also prepare women for God's work, including the religious calling of missionary work. In her pamphlet, "Principles and Design of the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary," which appeared in 1837, she stated:

It is to be principally devoted to the preparing of female teachers. At the same time, it will qualify ladies for other spheres of usefulness. The design is to give a solid, and extensive and well balanced English education, connected with that general improvement that moral culture, and those enlarged views of duty, which will prepare ladies to be educators of children and youth, rather than to fit them to be mere teachers, as the term has been technically applied. . . and when she has done with the business of teaching in a regular school, she will not give up her profession; she will still need the same well balanced education as the head of her own family and in guiding her own household.¹³

Mary Lyon effectively translated the societal norms for womanhood into an educational program which she believed was

suitable for the needs of young women and society. She offered a convincing argument for the education of women.

Although educational theorists attempted in various arguments to make female education fit with the social prescriptions, they also had to contend with the fact that many women needed some employment outside the home. They did not, however, extend their discussion to those who needed to work to survive and who were unlikely to have the time or privilege for formal schooling. Instead, they chose to train teachers and believed that teaching was suitable; they did not acknowledge that economic factors could constrain the education of mothers and/or teachers. The vast majority of American women could not go to those institutions. For many women, the district or common school was as far as their education would go. For a large number, any education was nil. Even the popularizers of public education soon indicated concern that girls learn both the common curriculum as well as those areas of study that were more appropriate for the socialization of female students, particularly those who were young and poor. Therefore, in spite of a popular ideology claiming that common schools would offer equal education to all sons and daughters of the Republic, school reformers constantly grappled with issues of social stability and schooling necessary for children to assume their proper places as adults.

In a somewhat lame effort to respond to the poor, the Boston school committee voiced the belief that education for young women should lead to suitable employment as well as offer correct training for their future lives as women. By 1867, the Boston School Committee Report expressed the need for some gender differentiation:

Boys graduate to prefer. . .the sea or the farm, of little taste or qualifications for household duties. . . .Girls are not fitted to be poor men's wives' they know not how to prepare the family repasts or make neat the family garments--possess aptitudes to make home attractive. If their training had prepared them to become intellectual, cheerful and amiable companions. . .and a competent knowledge of how to discharge with graceful propriety and skill, housekeeping obligations, more limited means would admit of family ties, the meagre and deteriorating discomforts of boarding house life would be escaped and happy homes be more numerous than they are.¹⁴

Thus, social prescription considered suitable for one class of women served as a beacon for social policy and programs designed for a less privileged group. It is important that historians of education consider the role female consciousness played in internalizing the social norms which were more applicable for one group than for another less leisured group. All women were to live lives which were in keeping with the ideology of domesticity, regardless of demographic changes and economic realities.

Studying prescriptive literature is central to any investigation of cross-class female consciousness. This is so because

the standards and values set out for middle-class women were adopted as a single standard to which all women were to aspire. Research on reform schools, social reform, and social reformers enhances our understanding of the application of this standard and the intra-class relationships to achieve these norms.¹⁵

Furthermore, it is likely that teaching played a key role in women's development. Historians of education are beginning to examine the work lives and psychological development of women teachers. This examination is particularly critical when we realize that teaching in the nineteenth century allowed Yankee girls with some education the chance to earn money on a temporary and seasonal basis. The availability of teaching positions as indicated by the historians Maris A. Vinovskis and Richard M. Bernard was such that "approximately one out of every five women in Massachusetts was a school teacher at some point in her life." An examination of the national census returns indicates that the employment of female teachers increased throughout the nineteenth century so that by 1870 4.6 percent of the unemployed women were reported as teachers. A decade later, this figure had increased by approximately one half, and by 1890, 8 percent of women who were employed taught school.¹⁶ Educating the young allowed unmarried women respectable employment which was similar to the idealized role she was expected to occupy. Later, it gave women of the less privileged classes an entree into genteel living.¹⁷

Myra Strober and David Tyack, in "Why do Women Teach and Men Manage," move beyond our discussions of teaching to ask what caused the gender differentiation within education itself.¹⁸ To elaborate on the discussion of the critical role teaching played for women, as outlined in Nancy Hoffman's excellent book, Women's True Profession,¹⁹ David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot discuss public school leadership in their recent book, Managers of Virtue: Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980.²⁰ This book, the conclusion of Hoffman's book, and the earlier article by Tyack and Strober all ask burning questions about the role that gender differentiation played in the contemporary feelings about education and about female teachers. Unfortunately, questions of race and class are not part of these seminal works.

In spite of these efforts to include gender as a critical component in the history of education, it is mandatory that one examine questions of race and how popular education and female consciousness mesh with the formal and informal education of black women. Gerda Lerner's pioneering anthology, Black Women in White America, opened the door to new scholarship on race and education. Subsequent works that develop themes initially presented in Lerner's work are: Jacqueline Jones' Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873, which elegantly details the lives and experiences of white female teachers who taught black children in the South during

Reconstruction;²² Linda Perkins' "Black Women and Racial 'Uplift' prior to Emancipation" and "Fanny Jackson Coppin and the Institution: A Model of Nineteenth Century Black Female Educational and Community Leadership, 1837-1902," carefully depict the efforts of black women teachers and their black female students.²³

Just as some recent scholars have begun exploring issues of gender, class, and race in their research and publications, instructors of the History of Education are beginning to introduce the same topics in their courses by using novels. Two novels that are particularly useful in this regard are Agnes Smedley's Daughter of Earth and Anzia Yezierska's The Bread Givers. Smedley's novel is a thinly veiled autobiography which illuminates her painful liberation during her youth when she had an opportunity to be educated formally beyond grade school. For her the chance to study in a normal school in Arizona at least partially mediated the grinding poverty she experienced in the West and Southwest. Normal school offered her the opportunity to confront the locked in mysteries of the world despite the fact that she was constantly humiliated by invidious comparisons to the other students. Although she "learned to feel tremendous shame," she also learned other things in school--remarkable things: in an atmosphere of study

and under the sympathetic interest of/her/teachers, her mind began to work freshly and vigorously."²⁴

Similarly, Sara Smolinsky, the main protagonist in . . . Yezierska's novel, experienced an impoverished childhood. Later she trained to become a teacher; teaching would provide an irreversible escape from the endless squalor of immigrant life on New York's lower East Side and would free her from the oppressive role of her frustrated and bombastic father. The gentility of becoming a teacher and an educated woman would open new avenues of American life.²⁵

These novels suggest how much can be learned about inter-relationships among race, class, gender, and education. Scholars and teachers of educational history must now begin to locate and analyze additional sources which will supplement the information gleaned from works of literature.

Given the early work of the revisionist historians, history of education is a discipline which is able to include comprehensive discussions of gender as a key variable. To discuss gender issues fully, however, class and race must be recognized as indispensable variables in painting a thorough and accurate portrait, one which includes women like Sara Smolinsky and Fanny Coppin, as well as women like Catharine Beecher.

Footnotes

¹ Carl F. Kaestle, The Evolution of An Urban School System (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973); Michael B. Katz, The Irony of Early School Reform (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); and his Class Bureaucracy and Schools (New York: Praeger, 1971); Marvin Lazerson, The Origins of the Urban School (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); David B. Tyack, The One Best System (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

² Joan N. Burstyn, Victorian Education - The Ideal of Womanhood (London: Croom Helm, 1980); Jill Conway, "Perspectives of History of Women's Education in the United States," History of Education Quarterly XIV (Spring 1974): 1-12; Patricia Aljberg Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education," Signs 3 (Summer 1978): 759-773; Elaine Kendall, Peculiar Institutions (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975); Elizabeth Alden (Green), Mary Lyon and Mt. Holyoke - Opening the Gates (New England: University Press of New England, 1979); Patricia Palmieri, "In Adamless Eden," doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1982; Sally Schwager, "Harvard Women," doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1983; Maris A. Vinovskis and Richard M. Bernard, "Female School Teachers in Antebellum Massachusetts," Journal of Social History 10 (March 1977): 332-345.

³ Mary Ryan, Womanhood in America, From Colonial Times to the Present, second edition (New York: New Viewpoints, 1979).

⁴ Carl Degler, At Odds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁵ Linda Kerber, Women of the Republic (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

⁶ Reverend William Alcott, The Young Housekeeper (Boston, 1839), p. 18.

⁷ Sarah Hale, Good Housekeeping, Hints to Help, publisher unknown, pp. 127-8.

⁸ Reverend Joseph S. Buckminster, quoted in Commonwealth of Massachusetts Senate Document No. 156, March 29, 1865. Report of the Joint Special Committee on "The emigration of young women to the West," p. 8.

⁹ Lydia Sigourney, How to Be Happy (Hartford: D. F. Robinson & Co., Hartford, 1833), pp. 5-9.

¹⁰ Catharine Beecher, Letters to Domestic Servants, p. 230, and her Letters to Persons who are Engaged in Domestic Service: (New York: Leavitt & Trow, 1842), p. 230.

¹¹ Emma Willard quoted in Willystine Goodsell, Pioneers of Women's Education in the U.S. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1931), p. 72.

¹² Catharine Beecher quoted in W. Goodsell, ibid, pp. 127, 147, 174-5. Beecher's words were considered of great impact among leading intellectuals of the day. For further illustration of her impact, see the review by S. E. Sewall in The National American Review 30 (1830).

¹³ Mary Lyon, quoted in Goodsell, ibid, pp. 178-80.

¹⁴ Boston School Committee Annual Report, 1867.

¹⁵ See, for example, Barbara M. Brenzel, "Domestication as Reform: The Socialization of Wayward Girls 1856-1905," Harvard Educational Review 50 (Spring 1980): 196-213; and her Daughters of the State: A Social Portrait of the First Reform School for Girls in North America, 1856-1905 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983); Estelle B. Freedman, Their Sisters' Keepers, Women's Prison Reform in America, 1830-1930 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1981); Allen F. Davis, Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); and David Kennedy, Birth Control in America (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1970).

¹⁶ This trend slows in the next decade although it is likely that new occupations opened for women and absorbed some of those women who might formerly have filled the teaching force.

¹⁷The new interest in the teacher as one who is both a child rearer and as one who is a woman struggling to expand her territory has led to new research. One aspect of this research has been investigating the female advocates of early childhood education and the development of kindergartners. See, for example, Barbara R. Beatty, "A Vocation from on High: Preschool Advocacy and Teaching as an Occupation for Women in Nineteenth Century Boston."

¹⁸Myra H. Strober and David Tyack, "Why do Women Teach and Men Manage? A Report on Research on Schools," Signs 5 (1980): 494-503.

¹⁹Nancy Hoffman, Woman's "True" Profession: Voices from the History of Teaching (New York: Feminist Press, 1981).

²⁰David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, Managers of Virtue - Public School Leadership in America, 1820-1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

²¹Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America: A Documentary History (New York: Vintage Press, 1972).

²²Jacqueline Jones, Soldiers of Light and Love, Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1877 (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 1980).

²³Linda Perkins, "Black Women and Racial 'Uplift' Prior to Emancipation," in Filomina Chioma Steady, The Black Woman Cross-Culturally (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1981); Fanny Jackson Coppin and the Institution: A Model of Nineteenth Century Black Female Educational and Community Leadership, 1837-1902, unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1978.

²⁴Agnes Smedley, Daughter of Earth (New York: Feminist Press, 1973), p. 174.

²⁵Anzia Yeziarska, The Bread Givers (New York: Persea Books, 1975).