Chapter 5: Teaching as Women’s Work

DEE ANN SPENCER
Arizona State University

Feminists are almost as unwelcome as divorcees, because their unorthodoxy on women’s place in the world arouses criticism and is likely to be accompanied by an agitating spirit in other matters. Besides, men do not like feminists, and most administrators are men. (Beale, 1936, p. 497)

Women teachers were a transient group, withdrawing after a few years of service to be married. This reduced their political effectiveness, slowed up educational reforms, and impeded the improvement of professional welfare. Men were more active in the work of teachers’ associations and their more intimate knowledge of civic affairs made them better strategists in dealing with state legislatures and boards of education. (Elsbree, 1939, p. 207)

Despite the fact that most teachers have been women in the United States for well over 100 years, this fact has been viewed with criticism, surprise, and even alarm. As seen in the above two quotes from the 1930s, one of the authors criticizes women teachers for being too politically active, and the other blames women teachers’ lack of political effectiveness on their ‘transient’ work patterns. Why did some believe that the predominance of women in teaching was alarming? Why were such strict and rigid rules and policies implemented to control the growth of women in teaching as well as to control the behaviors of those who taught? What have been the long-term effects of these attitudes on the profession of teaching? This chapter will explore answers to these questions.

Schmuck (1987a) wrote that the social history of the United States ‘reveals persistently equivocal attitudes about the status of education. From the earliest days of our republic, teachers have been the source of ridicule, condescension, or pity’ (Shulman & Sykes, cited in Schmuck, 1987a, p. 92). Schmuck added that the image of teachers as ‘deficient’ has been a reflection of the public’s negative view and low regard for teachers. Her view has been reiterated by others.

Has the public image of the teacher changed? Many would insist that it has slipped from a place next to motherhood, love, and religion down
the scale to a spot close to mothers-in-law, income tax, and measles. (Huffman, 1970, p. 223)

In an historical overview of the effects of gender on teaching, Clifford (1989) described how both men and women teachers have suffered from negative images. The goofy male schoolmaster, as personified by Washington Irving’s Ichabod Crane, created a lasting image in the public mind, as did the image of women teachers as persnickety, unidimensional, sexless spinsters. It was believed that male teachers who had talent and intelligence left teaching for better jobs, and female teachers left teaching who had the feminine wiles to catch a man and the natural ‘instinct’ for bearing children. Clifford’s work illustrated how these stereotypical images have had long-term effects on teaching as a profession.

A recent volume edited by Joseph and Burnaford (1994), entitled Images of Schoolteachers in Twentieth-Century America: Paragons, Polarities, Complexities, looked closely at the images of teachers depicted in American culture in this century. It included images found in the media, television, films, and song lyrics, images found in children’s textbooks, textbooks written for teachers, in adult fiction, and in children’s literature, as well as those found in metaphors used by teachers and students in contemporary society. As seen in the title of their book, the authors classified the images of teachers into three categories: as paragons (the euphoric ideal stereotype of the self-sacrificing, moral, and patient person), in polarities (teacher as hero versus teacher as villain), and as complexities (the complex range of views teachers have of themselves as intertwined with those held in society). The common theme found across sources was negative; that of the ‘terrible teacher’ or the teacher as an ‘obnoxious caricature.’

These caricatures or stereotypes are numerous and differ from one another, but all are negative and all reduce the teacher to an object of scorn, disrespect, and sometimes fear. Teacher as buffoon and bumbler, as rigid authoritarian, and as terrifying witch — with uncontrolled and irrational flights of anger and punishment — all pervade the material studied by the contributors. (1994, p. 15)

Based on the work in Joseph and Burnaford’s volume, teachers have not been seen in the public’s eye, the media, nor in the literature, as valued members of society. These sources of information, for the most part, are targeted toward children and shape their images of teachers in an exaggerated negative direction. An overriding fact that cross-cuts these negative themes is that because most teachers are women, the negative images of teachers translate into negative images of women.
Until recent times, the fact that most teachers are women has not been included in research or scholarly work as a factor influencing the nature of teaching. For example, of the vast literature on teachers, two of the most often quoted in contemporary times are Dreeben (1970) and Lortie (1975). Although Casey and Apple (1989) referred to Dreeben and Lortie as classic works on teaching as a profession, they also pointed out that these seminal works regarded women teachers as deficient as well as uncommitted to their work because of family obligations.

A third classic work by Willard Waller (1932) not only mentioned gender as a factor in understanding teachers, but also reflected near contempt towards women teachers throughout the work. In an analysis of Waller’s book, Hansot (1989) concluded that Waller described a depressing picture of ‘unrelieved pessimism’ toward teachers and viewed them as ‘seriously flawed human beings.’ She found that Waller’s writing was similar to that of a Greek tragedy through his creation of a bleak moral landscape with teachers as victims of communities. Waller’s pessimism about teachers in general is seen in the following:

Concerning the low social standing of teachers much has been written. The teacher in our culture has always been among the persons of little importance, and his place has not changed for the better the last few decades. Fifty years or more ago it used to be argued that teachers had no standing in the community because they whipped little children, and this was undoubtedly an argument that contained some elements of truth. But flogging, and all the grosser forms of corporal punishment, have largely disappeared from the modern school, and as yet there is little indication that the social standing of the profession has been elevated. (Waller, 1932, p. 58)

But when writing specifically about women teachers, Waller’s judgments were much more severe, particularly regarding single women.

The life history of the unmarried teacher seems to follow a pretty definite pattern. There are a number of years in which the hope of finding a mate is not relinquished. There is a critical period when that hope dies. An informant has suggested that hope has died when a woman buys a diamond for herself. The critical period is an incubation period during which spinsterhood ripens. During this critical period many desperate and pathetic things occur. The woman going through this period falls in love very easily, and may come to make the most open advances upon slight or no provocation.... Perhaps this hope of finding a mate always dies hard and slowly, and requires little stimulant to keep it alive after its time. (Waller, 1932, pp. 408-409)
Texts for teachers which specifically discuss women's roles in teaching are important documentary sources because they serve as basic overviews of information considered crucial for teachers to know. They have been widely read by generations of education students when in teacher training in colleges and universities. Good examples were found from the first decades of the twentieth century in Almack and Lang (1925), Elsbree (1928, 1939), Peters (1934), Beale (1936, 1941), and Donovan (1938). Also of interest were works written through the proceeding decades, including Fine's (1952) Opportunities in Teaching, Filbin and Vogel's (1962) So You're Going to be a Teacher, Stinnett's (1962) The Profession of Teaching, Gelinas' (1965) So You Want to be a Teacher, and Brenton's (1970) What's Happened to Teacher? All described the work of teachers and mentioned issues of gender in teaching. This list is by no means exhaustive, but because they are representative of a genre of work, they will be drawn upon in this chapter.

The often unflattering portrait painted of teachers in much of the literature is offset by recent work in the historiography of teaching. Prentice and Theobald (1991) pointed to the development of the historiography of women teachers as important to filling the striking absence of women in the history of teaching. These works have offered views of the world of teaching from the personal perspectives of those who taught and have provided a more realistic view of teaching than the idealized images in the media or the dispassioned discussions in research reports and in texts (e.g., Cuban, 1984; Hoffman, 1981; Kaufman, 1984; Myres, 1982; Rothschild & Hronek, 1992; Warren, 1985, 1989). Such overviews are found in Hoffman (1981), Kaufman (1984), and Altenbaugh (1992), each of whom examined women's personal accounts of their teaching in the United States at the turn of the century, as did Spencer's (1986) accounts of contemporary women teachers. Teachers' accounts in other countries are found in Goodson's (1992) volume of life histories (New Zealand, Canada, the U.S., and the U.K.), as well as Prentice and Theobald (1991) who focused on women teachers in England, Australia, Canada, and the United States, and DeLyon and Migniuolo (1989) and Acker (1989) who looked at British teachers. These historiographical studies have made a significant contribution to a better understanding of women's roles in the history of teaching.

WOMEN IN TEACHING: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Three economic periods have been identified in relation to the transformation of women's place in the labor market: the family-based economy, the family-wage economy, and the family-consumer economy (Anderson, 1983; Tilly & Scott, 1978). These economic periods are roughly parallel to historical time periods used to examine the history of teaching: the Pre-industrial period (the
Colonial period in the United States, the early industrial period (the nineteenth century), and the mature industrial period (the twentieth century) (Parelius & Parelius, 1987). These economic and historical periods will be discussed here with particular focus on their effects on teaching as women's work.

**Family-Based Economy/Preindustrial Period**

During the periods of the family-based economy (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), there were no sharp distinctions between economic and domestic life. The work of family members was interdependent with all family members contributing to household labor. Men, women, and children worked together in the production of goods. Teaching, as a choice of labor outside the home, was taken as temporary work to supplement men's income (Parelius & Parelius, 1987). The view of teaching as temporary work led to the lasting perception of teaching as an 'episodic' occupation (Clifford, 1989).

Although teaching rarely required specific qualifications in the United States during this period, in the New England states there were more rigorous standards where teachers taught in either town schools or Latin Grammar schools. In town schools teachers were not as well-educated and earned about half as much as the Latin Grammar teachers. Teachers in the latter had college degrees and were held in high regard in their communities. All were males who had to be sanctioned by the church.

Beale (1941), in an overview of schooling in Colonial America, wrote that the inadequacies of teachers in this period were linked to the fact that schoolmasters were usually ministers who supplemented their salaries by teaching. Although training in the early colonial period was exceptional because ministers were well-educated in England, by the second and third generations of colonists, ministers were locally trained. As a result, they were less well-educated. In an attempt to improve the quality of teachers, in 1701 an act was passed in Massachusetts which required a full-time teacher in schools. This stipulation disallowed ministers who could not devote full-time work to teaching. Beale thought it kept the best educated people from teaching.

There were high rates of teacher shortages in this period. Beale (1941) cited many examples in Colonial records showing that no suitable teachers could be obtained in communities. At times, because of teacher shortages, colonists purchased indentured servants as teachers. They were willing to take who they could get even if they were redemptioners or convicts.

Elsbree (1939) wrote that the main reason teachers were mostly men during the Colonial Period was that the were the most educated. Women's place was thought to be in the home, not in the classroom. He added that there were other reasons for reliance on men; boys had to be kept under control by being beaten.
International Handbook of Teachers and Teaching
Biddle, B.J.; Good, T.L.; Goodson, I. (Eds.)
1997, XXV, 1474 p. 4 illus. In 2 volumes, not available separately., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-0-7923-3532-0