Perspectives on Education

American Teachers. Histories of a Profession at Work. DONALD WARREN. Ed. Macmillan, New York, 1989. xvi, 472 pp., illus. $34.95.

When economic and industrial crises loom on the American horizon, our nation's schools invariably become the front line of public debate. Most recently, the 1980s brought a flurry of books, commission reports, and popular commentary that linked a perceived decline in U.S. education to the erosion of American competitiveness abroad. To reverse this trend, they warned, America needed top teachers and innovative kids.

American Teachers tells us who taught America's children in the past and reveals a complex history of efforts to reform the teaching profession. Policy-makers mapping their strategies for the 1990s should stop first to study the historical problems addressed by the 15 contributors to this American Educational Research Association publication, ably edited by Donald Warren. What incentives and rewards have functioned to attract teachers in the past? How have gender ideologies and race and sex discrimination shaped the profession? How have current models of teacher education evolved? Why do reforms aimed at improving teaching keep resurfacing? Why have teachers as a group been accorded so little status by our society, which in turn places such heavy burdens upon them?

A number of the histories in this collection shed light on issues of immediate concern to today's educators. Linda Perkins's singularly important study, "The history of blacks in teaching: growth and decline within the profession," provides a missing chapter in the history of American education and should be considered "required reading." Black children and other minority youth, Perkins predicts, will continue to be shortchanged by a lack of role models in the classroom. In 1986 fewer than 7 percent of American teachers were black—a deficit that is sure to be compounded by the recent sharp decline in the number of blacks attending four-year colleges. This is a chilling reversal, Perkins warns, of the historic commitment to education and teaching in the black community. Even the most ambitious new proposals to recruit black teachers (loan forgiveness and teacher retention programs, for example), she maintains, will fail to increase the black teaching force significantly. Young people aspiring to become teachers must be brought up through the ranks, Perkins argues, and this will not happen until the schooling of blacks and other minorities is improved. This history suggests, however, that past efforts in the black community, particularly in private education, may hold partial answers that have been overlooked.

Michael Sedlak's analysis of the market impact of teacher hiring policies over the past two centuries brings a new perspective to the problem of recruiting talented teachers. Responses to teacher shortages in the 1920s, during World War II, and in the 1950s and 1960s reveal that improving workplace conditions, raising salaries, and enhancing the professional requirements and stature of teaching may serve to attract new groups of qualified candidates to teaching. The raising of standards, contrary to fears expressed by some observers today, did not in the past exacerbate teacher shortages, but rather served as part of the remedy. Sedlak warns, however, that current projected shortages present a more complex problem. Previously, schools could draw upon a "hidden subsidy" of educated women with few other professional options to fill the teaching ranks. It is unclear, he maintains, how a more open labor market will respond to new needs and new reforms.

One of the liveliest chapters is Larry Cuban's "The persistence of reform in American schools." Cuban provides a framework for defining current policy options that should be useful to anyone grappling with the problem of evaluating or implementing change. His analysis also highlights the multiple contexts in which reform originates, and his discussion of the political and economic cycles of reform is particularly intriguing. Looking at the impact of political and ideological shifts on schooling over the past century, Cuban finds that schools tended to stress high academic standards, efficiency, and productivity during periods of relative political conservatism (the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s). Similarly, machine technologies became increasingly popular when private interests dominated. In more liberal decades (the early 1900s, 1930s, and 1960s), reforms focused on issues of equity, community responsibility, and the needs of students from outsider groups. At the same time, school reforms emerged as "symbolic solutions to national crises" (economic competition with Germany in the late 1800s; Sputnik in the late 1950s; trade deficits with Japan in the 1980s). This discussion points to the matrix of social ideas and organizational imperatives that must be taken into account in any current policy formulations.

American Teachers also addresses historians and represents something of an intellectual turning point in the field: it is the first large-scale project to focus on teachers and teaching since William Elsbree's *The American Teacher: Evolution of a Profession in a Democracy* was published in 1939. This new volume builds upon the work of recent pioneers such as Geraldine Clifford and David Tyack (who also contribute important new research) and includes studies—most notably Perkins's work on black teachers and Barbara Beatty's history of the kindergarten movement—on several topics that have been virtually ignored in previous accounts. Other chapters, including an excellent essay on 20th-century teacher training by William Johnson, point to gaps in the literature and suggest directions for future research. One of the most compelling of this genre is David Cohen's essay on the history of instruction—what teachers and students actually *do* in classrooms. On this point historians have little to offer, and research is sorely needed—not only in the service of history, but also as a contribution to current debates about classroom practice.

As a vehicle for the presentation of high-quality research (including major new work by Susan Carter, James Fraser, Wayne Fuller, Jurgen Herbst, David Labaree, John Rury, and Wayne Urban), this book is a clear success. As a resource for contemporary analysts it should prove both iconoclastic and germane. As a guide through the labyrinthine history of teachers and teaching, however, it is still somewhat tentative and incomplete. This is more a measure of how much territory remains to be explored than a criticism. *American Teachers*, it is to be hoped, will prompt further investigation and elicit the serious attention on the part of the public that American teachers deserve.

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