

## The School Teachers In The Eyes of the Society

IN 1870 Eli T. Tappan, president of Kenyon College, referred with vigorous scorn to those ignorant persons “who do not know that education is a science and that teaching is a learned profession.”<sup>1</sup> The remarkable aspect of this statement is its unreality. In 1870 education was not a science, and teaching was not a profession except in the minds of those who chose to regard it as such. Educators saw the necessity of a profession of teaching and boldly proclaimed its advent nearly a hundred years before its actual arrival.

Consider some of the basic facts about teaching in the period following the Civil War: 40 per cent of the teachers were new each year; the professional expectancy was only about three years; the sessions lasted only three, five, or seven months; the pay was less than \$50 a month; the teacher had to take an examination every year and was engaged for only one session; the majority of teachers were young women who hoped to teach for only a few sessions; and half the teachers were less than twenty-two years of age. How could a profession evolve from such conditions? The answer is clear that it could not, but the educators kept right on talking and thinking and planning for a profession. Eventually, after nearly a hundred years, their hopes were realized to a considerable extent. Who will say that their ideals and dreams were not a factor in achieving this result?

Efforts to achieve professional status involved opposition to the educational pretensions of preachers, lawyers, and other public figures. Even at educational meetings these presumptuous laymen occupied the center of the stage and crowded the principal or superintendent into the background.

One discouraged speaker declared that law, medicine, and divinity conferred gratuitous importance upon their members, but that a teacher had no sight draft to recognition. Some teachers gained high places, not because they were teachers, but in spite of being teachers. Teachers might claim high status, but the claim was not allowed, or if it was it was a favor to the individual and not a recognition of the profession. The speaker went further and declared that the majority of teachers were quacks, because the majority were mechanics, farmers, loafers, and rambles, and not teachers. Charlatanry, he said, predominated, and the empiric drove out the teacher.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the actuality of low status, mean pay, and dim prospects, the teacher was accorded an unctuous recognition in sermons and orations. The idea of the teacher was enshrined with respect, and the idea of education drew adulation and approbation. Only after long years did the public become aware of the discrepancy between sentimental ideals and actual practices. In the meantime teachers did have the recognition that fine words could bestow.

Emma McRae of Muncie reported that some people thought “that any one can teach, especially if he happens to have been so unfortunate as to lose a limb, become blind in one eye, or in some way has become unfit for anything except a teacher. I know of no other business which has seemed to be so dependent on a bodily infirmity. An ailment of some sort has been really a necessity to the typical school teacher.”<sup>7</sup>

She added that teaching was used as a method of reforming wayward sons, of caring for doctors when health prevailed and lawyers when litigation was scarce. Another referred to teaching as a form of charity for Miss Goody Misfortune or Widow Oldtime and as a waiting room for Embryo Blackstone.<sup>8</sup>

A disheartened Illinois teacher reported that the popular idea of a teacher was “somebody that can parse and cipher; has little brains and less money; feeble-minded, unable to grapple with real men and women in the stirring employments of life, but on that account admirably fitted to associate with childish intellects, as being somewhat akin to them . . . a crabbed old bachelor, or despairing old maid.”<sup>9</sup>

Another ignominy that teachers long endured was the taking of examinations, which one sufferer referred to as “annual tortures.” The humiliation was heightened by the fact that the examiner was generally an ignorant layman who asked tricky questions in arithmetic and required the applicant to read tongue-twisting passages. Rarely did the examiner ask a relevant question, and when he did, he did not know how to evaluate the applicant’s answer. According to one sufferer, “It is even

Stories of poor pay, degrading experiences, indignities, and professional humiliations were numerous. In 1867 teachers in a suburb of Boston received \$2.50 a week and Negro cooks \$3.<sup>10</sup> Ten year later a speaker declared that adequate pay would never be achieved “anterior to the millennium” and that any one who became a teacher was deliberately selecting the poorhouse for his old age.<sup>11</sup> As late as 1920 a speaker referred to teachers as “Marms” and “Ichabods,” and another complained that architects and administrators provided no restrooms for teachers or lunchrooms for pupils.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Emma McRae, “Teaching as a Profession,” *Indiana School Journal*, XXV, 167-168, April 1880. The quotation has been slightly abbreviated.

<sup>8</sup> NEA, *Proceedings*, 1882, Part II, 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Illinois Teacher*, X, 289, August 1864.

<sup>10</sup> American Institute of Instruction, *Proceedings*, 1867, 131.

<sup>11</sup> NEA, *Proceedings*, 1876, 31.

<sup>12</sup> NEA, *Proceedings*, 1920, 424, 351.

1847

Horace Mann

In 1847 the battle for higher wages for teachers was still raging in Massachusetts and Horace Mann, in his typical style, pointed out: “We pay best,—1st, those who destroy us,—generals; 2nd, those who cheat us,—politicians and quacks; 3rd, those who amuse us,—singers and dancers; and last of all those who instruct us,—teachers.”