Women in teacher training colleges, 1900–1960: a culture of femininity

Elizabeth Edwards; Routledge, London and New York, 2001, £19.99 Pbk, ISBN 0-415-21476-9

Elizabeth Edwards sets out to restore women to the history of teacher training in England and Wales, but she offers us more than this: a detailed case study of some larger issues. Focusing on three residential institutions – Avery Hill in South London, Bishop Otter in Chichester and Homerton in Cambridge – she explores the rise and fall of women-only teacher-training colleges and the culture they engendered: a 'culture of femininity'. Though the three colleges represented different types of foundation (and were chosen for that reason), they all espoused and perpetuated this culture, which came to an end around 1960 with the expansion and lengthening of teacher training, the imposition of co-education, and changes in student expectation and experience.

By concentrating on a small sample, Edwards – former archivist at Homerton – has been able to piece together her story from in-depth research into the records of the various colleges, answers to written questionnaires sent to alumni, and oral interviews with former students and staff. The result is truly history from the inside, from the point of view of the women who lived through this cultural moment – a pleasant contrast to existing 'institutional' histories of education. An introductory chapter on 'The Historical Context' provides a thorough examination of the national background to the teacher-training movement and a spirited critique of what passed for objective analysis by men. Women dominated the teaching profession in the first half of the 20th century, especially in elementary schools (which were the market for the students discussed here); by the Second World War, three-quarters of training college students were women. Chapter 2 explores the evolution of the ideal which is Edwards's central focus: the 'culture of femininity'. Women's professional training, as Martha Vicinus explained in *Independent Women* (1985), was justified in the late nineteenth century by reference to family values; students passed from their real families into the substitute family of the college, with the principal acting as both mother and father. In this way, women could extend their traditional caring role into the public sphere. Since the training colleges took students from the lower middle classes, in contrast to the universities whose students were mainly well-to-do, an important task for the new 'family' was to inculcate middle-class social ideals and practices. This extended to table manners, dress and entertainment. 'Mother-daughter' mentoring systems were common up to the Second World War, and students' association with men was severely curtailed. Students formed close and often life-long friendships, and for many members of staff the institution was all the family life they had.

The most interesting parts of this book are the central chapters which examine, in turn, the women principals, the staff (though much of this chapter is actually about the curriculum) and sexuality. Edwards shows how the principals

managed the fine balance between their public 'masculine' persona and their private maternal role towards their staff and students. I loved the way she extrapolated personality and approach from the portrait photographs, each thoughtfully placed opposite the relevant text: for example, 'I read this posture as Skillicorn's desire to cling onto and wrap herself round in her academic status' (p. 86).

A fundamental contradiction in training women for careers across the period Edwards discusses was that an increasing majority would be employed for only a few years before marrying and leaving their profession. As the decades passed, tensions arose between the colleges' attempts to preserve respectability by limiting students' opportunities to meet men and the ideological pressure experienced by those students to find a husband. Unmarried staff seemed increasingly out of touch. For the staff, however, and some of the students, 'homoerotic friendships' provided an alternative and (because not seen as 'lesbian') acceptable route to happiness. Edwards examines the domestic partnerships of three college principals which offered them love and support in what could otherwise have been an isolated role.

Finally, Edwards demonstrates how the women's training colleges fell victim to a patriarchal attack on their women-centred ethos in the mid-century era of compulsory heterosexuality. Her account of the muddled thinking of the 1950s advisers on girls' education and women's role (or two roles) is the best I have seen. Edwards shows that the willingness with which the colleges ceded power to men was inevitable: 'Individual enrichment and personal confidence equipped students to take their place in middle-class society. It did not equip them to challenge this society's patriarchal values' (p.171).

The book is well-written and carefully researched. I noted a couple of historical errors – the 1870 Education Act did not require all children between 5 and 13 to receive elementary education (p. 6), and the coronation of 1912 was not that of Edward VII (p.101) – but these are minor when set against the overall achievement. Teacher-training colleges have been a neglected field, less glamorous and less admired than universities – but how important for women! Edwards offers us an analysis of the way patriarchy controls women's destinies, but also how women may negotiate within its restrictions and find positive experiences and personal achievement. Most of the women whose testimonies are quoted here looked back on their college years as among the happiest of their lives.

Rosemary Auchmuty

doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400051