Leadership University *Reprint*

Reprinted from First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life • June/July 1992 • Number 24

Books in Review

Ed School Follies: The Miseducation Of America's Teachers

The Blackboard Bungle

Ed School Follies: The Miseducation Of America's Teachers. *By RITA KRAMER. Free Press. 228 pp. $22.95.*

Reviewed by Charles L. Glenn

IN HER LIVELY new study based upon fourteen schools of education across the country, Rita Kramer skewers two quite distinct forms of folly.

One form of folly is the attempt by a few of the faculty whose classes she observed to make the classes occasions for political indoctrination so that future teachers will seek social change through influencing children in their classrooms. The superficiality of much of the "radical" teaching is pitiful; as Kramer notes, "These student teachers are being encouraged to 'transform' a world they know almost nothing about, either in the complexity of its present arrangements or the various routes by which it became the way it is."

Her verbatim accounts of classes in which professors seek to elicit radical critiques of American society from their resistant students are grimly amusing; these represent a small minority of the classes described, however. Early notices of Kramer's book suggesting that she focuses primarily on this issue do not do justice to the breadth of issues that she raises. Indeed, Kramer's conclusion that "among teacher-educators today, the goal of schooling is not considered to be instructional, let alone intellectual, but political," is simply not borne out by her own observations, which make it clear that students in the more prestigious schools of education arrive there with the fashionably progressive attitudes that she deplores, while those in the less prestigious schools pay little attention to the efforts of their professors to radicalize them.

The more serious form of folly is what Kramer perceives as a lack of seriousness in the culture of schools of education about the teaching of solid content. She finds evidence of this in faculty presentations and also in the discussions she was able to observe among student teachers, who "talk about things like feeling, warmth, empathy more than they do about skills, training, discipline." Like many critics before her, Kramer deplores the stress of American education upon self-esteem and social adjustment rather than upon "mastery of language, symbol, and abstract thought."

THAT, surely, is a serious charge, if proven. There is nothing wrong with a sense of one's own intrinsic worth, of course, but it is the proper business of schools to help their pupils take a justified pride in their actual accomplishments in relation to their reason for being in school: developing "mastery of language, symbol, and abstract thought." If schools instead promote cotton-candy self-esteem, all sweetness and air, they provide empty calories in place of solid nourishment.

It is to be feared that many schools are doing just that (though not only that), and that they are cheered on by some school of education faculty. But in assuming that the latter are the source of feel-good education, Kramer attributes too much power to institutions that are very much the creatures of their environment, needing to attract student tuitions and public or private funding through offering whatever is in current fashion.

No careful reader of her observations, indeed, could come away with a belief that there is a "school-of-education agenda" being imposed upon American schools. Not only are the institutions that she describes very different in style and goals, but within each she found sharp differences among faculty, including those teaching parallel sections of the same course.

Her study itself provides evidence of deeper problems with American education that will not be solved by "ed school bashing." The blame for low expectations, for "lite learning" in our schools, should not be pinned on schools of education, though they have done too much to give it a patina of intellectual justification. The real underlying condition is that we Americans simply do not expect enough intellectual effort from our children and are complacent about the level of work they do in school, as Chester Finn has argued powerfully in We Must Take Charge. This complacency is the heart of the problem. We want our children to be happy without effort, to be mellow rather than to know the joy of disciplined and well-furnished minds. We want our children's teachers to exhibit "feeling, warmth, empathy" more than we want them to possess advanced degrees in academic subjects.

Schools of education produce the teachers that American schools and parents, in the great majority, call for. This is no excuse; they must find ways to do better, though it will require convincing their own students, as well as the school administrators who will one day employ them, to think about education in more intellectually demanding terms.

Let us stipulate that it would be in the national interest for American schools to become more serious about teaching content-languages, history, sciences-and the mental discipline to make good use of it. Let us also assume that parents can be persuaded to insist upon more demanding schools, and to enforce that insistence through some combination of school choice and the political process. How would the preparation of teachers have to change?

The starting point would be to make again the fundamental distinction between elementary and secondary education that has become blurred in recent decades. Kramer mentions this distinction several times in passing, but her accounts of ed school practice do not make sufficiently clear to which level of schooling her particular observations apply. After all, for the teacher of young children, " 'loving kids' as the motive for choosing a teaching career, the idea that . . . school should provide 'a warm, caring environment,' " is not far off base. It is the application of this assumption "at every level" (the words represented by the ellipsis) that causes problems. American elementary schools are actually pretty good, by international standards; it is our secondary schools that are in profound trouble.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL teachers in the United States as in other nations are typically prepared for their work in undergraduate programs that do not require prior completion of a degree in some other field. Such programs are now under attack from those who would eliminate undergraduate teacher preparation programs altogether-motivated more, perhaps, by a concern with the professional status of teachers than with their competence. The fashionable put-down of courses that develop skills in teaching is unjustified; many of them-as Kramer's observations make clear-are excellent. Among her conclusions, then, is that "there is room for an upgraded undergraduate education major for teachers of primary/elementary grades only."

Secondary education is-or should be-a fundamentally different enterprise, much more focused upon the content that is to be mastered. While teachers in secondary schools should also, presumably, have a real affection for youth and strive to create a supportive climate based on genuine respect, we have a right to expect of them in addition a broad knowledge of some academic discipline, as well as an understanding of how that discipline is learned, which is by no means the same thing.

The first part of the prescription should be satisfied by an undergraduate course of study in liberal arts, though it is not clear that graduates today in history, for example, possess broad historical knowledge and a feel for the discipline; they may have been side-tracked early into some politically fashionable specialization. A year of graduate work with a focus upon the different ways in which adolescents learn, together with supervised practice teaching, would give them the survival skills to be effective teachers. Many schools of education now offer a Master of Arts in Teaching degree that builds upon a liberal arts major; by all accounts, students are highly motivated and receive solid professional training.

Thus far, Kramer's observations are sound (as well as lively and interesting), and her recommendations well within the direction in which teacher preparation is already moving. It is when she ventures beyond what she saw in the schools of education to join in the sport of indicting American education in general that she falls into over-broad generalization that-who knows?-may be the result of too many hours of exposure to teaching that lacked intellectual rigor.

She is offended that a goal of American education is "to make sure everyone gets a passing grade," as though that were in essential opposition to the goal of producing "individuals capable of effort and mastery," and she deplores the current emphasis upon supporting students with various kinds of educational disabilities as though that were to blame for the lack of seriousness about challenging the most academically talented.

It cannot, surely, be an appropriate goal of any education system to fail students, nor would the failure of some indicate that other students were receiving a first-rate education. We are right to seek to make the education of each student a success, for each will be part of our society as burden or blessing for many years. Our mistake has been the failure to develop with sufficient thoughtfulness alternate paths to and measures of success. Most students in American secondary schools take some version of a college-preparatory program, dumbed-down for many to a parody of academic rigor.

GERMAN EDUCATION, by contrast, sorts pupils out after the fourth grade into forms of schooling of greater or lesser academic challenge, but provides a more coherent alternative course of study than we do for those who are not going on to some form of higher education, one that is completed by a well-designed apprenticeship. There are problems with the German model, too, but it shows that schooling can be organized with the goal that every student be successful, though not by the same standards, while maintaining unapologetically high standards for some.

Rita Kramer has written a challenging book, and her verbatim descriptions of classes and conversations in schools of education are well worth reading. Her touch becomes unsure when she attempts, through that limited perspective, to draw conclusions about the ills of American education and then to prescribe fundamental reforms. This is not a book to put beside the important recent studies by Chester Finn, Thomas Toch, or Edward Fiske, but it throws a valuable light on the limitations (and some of the strengths) of teacher preparation.

CHARLES L. GLENN was recently appointed Professor of Administration, Training, and Policy Studies at Boston University School of Education.