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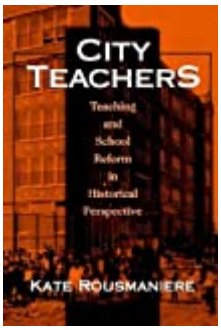
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kate Rousmaniere. *City Teachers: Teaching and School Reform in Historical Perspective.* New York: Teachers College Press, 1997. viii + 179 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8077-3588-6; $44.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8077-3589-3.

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The More Things Change....

Here is a wonderful, compact book on what teachers are like and what they have been like in the big American city school systems. It is about teachers who worked in the New York City public-school system in the 1920s, based largely on interviews with them. It is compact and delightfully written; and it keeps the faith that teaching is a good profession that serves the public and makes a life worth while. It will also make any city teacher weep to discover that after almost seventy years almost nothing has changed.

Did you know about the new "Social Efficiency" curriculum that promoted "democratic" social cohesion and "social hygiene" by mandating the teaching of compulsory phys. ed. and clean manners in an effort to whiten and sanitize the slums (pp. 56-57)? You did? Ah, but did you know it was the hot new education idea in the 1920s? And had you ever heard of the idiot administrator who wanted each kid in the school to be given a ten-word spelling quiz each and every day? You have? Yes, this one, too, is documented in the 1920s (p. 66); and so is the constant interrupting of classes with administrative trivia, when the public-address system was only a gleam in an inventor's eye (pp. 69-70). How about the law that requires all teachers and students to salute the flag, intended to flush out disloyal teachers? Yep, that and the other "Lusk" laws of New York State, passed in the wake of the great Red Scare of 1919 (pp. 73-74). Had you heard that teachers were known to complain of inadequate books and materials in the 1920s and to buy those classroom necessities with their own salaries rather than waste time bucking the "efficiencies" of central purchasing? (pp. 71-72). Would it surprise you to find a recurring fashion for more and better tests in the 20s? (pp. 64-67). And how long would you guess teachers have been trying to get reform of the system? Would it surprise you to find out that in the 1920s, when no new school had been built in burgeoning Harlem since the 1880s, teachers called the big new school buildings being erected in whiter neighborhoods "factories" and inefficient replacements for their crumbling but often correctly scaled nineteenth-century workplaces. Would it surprise you to find out that they tried to get class size cut to below 25; or organized a union protest to roll back their schedule of seven classroom hours a day? (p. 73). It wouldn't? If not, you probably also know that they

failed.

Oh well. Some things really are new under the sun. One of them, a side effect of the "health curriculum" imposed over liberal arts in the 1920s, was the invention of the school nurse (p. 60). Another was the first homeroom (pp. 63-64). Simple ideas, like most of the ones that work for teachers, and very good ones. They aren't all that "efficient," but, in fact, as has long been proven by the independent schools and more recently by the charters, efficiency as commonly defined in industry is not the least bit efficient in schools. The job of teachers is to know what each of their students needs to learn and to care that each one learns it. Their product is attention, highly educated and informed attention to be sure, but attention that must be paid. The learning, and even the scores, will go up once that attention is paid. As a consequence, 30 is not an efficient class size, nor are four or five such classes an efficient "load" for any but the most superhuman teacher.

Moreover teachers know this. Columbia Teachers College professor Nicholas Engelhardt argued in the 1920s, when some teachers taught two hundred students a week, "that if old teachers did not proselytize to young teachers about the benefits of small classes, then the newer teaching staffs would not continue to hold to the outmoded faith in small class sizes." As Rousmaniere, also a professor of Education, puts it, "What he clearly failed to appreciate was that teachers' continued faith in small classes was rooted in a common body of knowledge based on experience" (p. 86).

What it's really like to teach, that "common body of knowledge based on experience," is found in too few books, and the majority of our fellow citizens, who must make the rules for public education, do not know enough about what things are like for faculty in urban schools. This book fills the gap, in spite the fact that it is set three generations ago–or maybe because of it. There is no shortage of anecdotes from veterans of these crucial stages in the long battle for decent, democratic public education. Some, like the spitball challenge (p. 121), are funny; and some, like the daily nickel paid to the student kapo (p. 122) are unsettling. Then there are the Jewish teachers, Catholic teachers, female teachers, and "colored" teachers who benefited from the first employment anti-discrimination laws and who, in spite of those laws, stood up to the most stunning of disparagements and the most petty of indignities. Every teacher quoted makes it clear that they did their job in return for steady work, a living wage, and the peculiar reward of having performed a public service, having reached a kid or two, and possibly having given a fillip to the status of both the kids and the teacher. As one of them wrote of her students:

Oh little, grumbling clowns, you will Never guess, from day to day, The secret, chuckling dancing thrill That comes, when thus I draw my pay! (p. 129)

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