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BECOMING A HISTORIAN

Educational Choices, Sponsored Mobility, and Institutional Challenges

My interest in history of education did not emerge until I was well into adulthood. Yet it was singularly shaped by a broad range of educational experiences, in my family and the schools and colleges I attended, and as a teacher, working with infants through high schoolers and then as a teaching assistant with graduate students prior to receiving the interdisciplinary Ph.D. in history and education. I knew little about academic life, though, and did not have the kind of competitive ambition I had seen among some of my fellow students in graduate school. For that reason, sponsored mobility by mentors and colleagues became a critical means of better understanding the profession and the field. By sponsored mobility, I mean casual mentoring and networks among peers that grew into strong friendships.

Growing up, I attended six elementary schools, one junior high school and five high schools, and then two colleges to complete undergraduate education. My father was a successful engineer, who, with a growing family of six children, two with a chronic disease, decided to use his training and skills to pursue a career in sales of engineering equipment, which was more lucrative than design in the 1950s, and required frequent family moves. After being in so many schools, the idea of the academic life held little appeal for me when I finished college. I had switched from science to education after one year in college and a two-year hiatus, during which time I’d begun to run a day care center in my rural community. More importantly for my interest in education, I read John Dewey in an educational philosophy class I audited. Encountering Democracy and Education and School and Society in this class, along with a number of arguments for alternative schooling in the early 1970s, was a revelation. I understood then that education wasn’t entirely shaped by institutions, that individual agency plays a key role in what is learned and how it is learned, and that institutions that nurture growth and more growth as Dewey argued, would have greater or, perhaps, more direct impact on students than most of the schools I had attended.

In my experience as a middle-class, white, successful student, I had become disenchanted with the ways schools seemed to be institutionalizing students—to strive for the grades, credit hours, test scores, and other measurable outcomes of the schooling experience in the United States. Costs of these measures included intellectual disengagement, institutional cynicism, and, occasionally, a sense of entitlement, particularly for those successful at gaming the system. To counter these effects, I had become interested in existential philosophy in high school and
tried to focus on the learning, rather than the grades. In the end, I was simply tired of school by the time I got to college. My favorite classes had been those that presented serious intellectual challenges, high expectations, and the support to meet them. Madame Martin in French, where I encountered Sartre and Camus for the first time; Ms. Dawson and Father Rowley in English composition, grammar, and literature; Sister Jean-Patrice in math; and Bill MacLenathen in American history and government were my favorite teachers. Moving from school to school was not easy. But my parents chose each location for the quality of its public schools, with the exception of one town in rural New York, where they had no choice, given the location of my father’s most recent promotion. There, I begged to go to the local Catholic high school after one semester at the regional public; they acceded because they were feeling a little guilty about the last move—from a school I loved.

I remember at each new school going through a period of difficult adjustment, not only socially, but also in dealing with a whole new set of expectations, depending on the school district. My mother, a southern woman who understood life through stories and had volumes to tell, had a particular formula she used when she was encouraging me to give each new school, teacher, and subject my best. It went something like this: “Mary Ann, you have got to understand how important education is to our family. Your Dido [paternal grandfather] left the Carpatho-Rusyn Mountains and his village—his family farm and land and gave up his inheritance—to come to this country so his children and grandchildren could obtain an education. [I found out later that he actually left, in part, to avoid conscription in the Austro-Hungarian army.] Your Baba left her mother and sisters to join him so that their children—your father and aunts—would have better opportunities. And look: all three of your aunts finished college. Your Dido would not pay for your father to go to college—only the girls, so your father worked his way through the first two years, and then finished on the G.I. Bill after he’d served in the Navy during the war. You can do anything, anything you want to do with an education. Don’t let this math/chemistry/French class hold you back. If you work hard enough, you can learn it and get a good grade.” If that didn’t work, then she told me her own story of growing up in Tennessee and Georgia, about how her father refused to help pay for her college education. With the encouragement of her high school principal, who told her she was too smart to stop her schooling, she took out a loan and enrolled in the local college, but had to drop...