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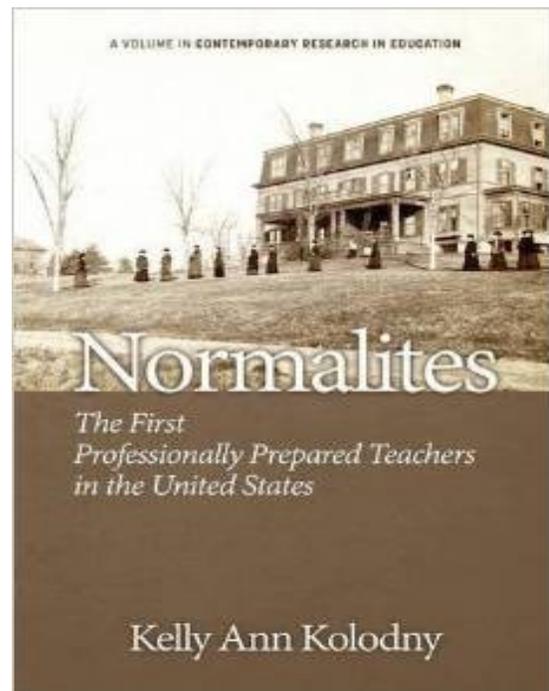
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Reviewed by Cynthia Miller Coffel
ACT, Inc.
United States

Normalites: The First Professionally Prepared Teachers in The United States, by Kelly Ann Kolodny of Framingham University, describes a period in our country that was unusually intellectually lively. The three female teachers—Lydia Stow, Mary Swift, and Louisa Harris—this book follows interacted with some of the most famous people of their period, and with some of the most important educational ideas of their time. By telling us about these women—their experiences in the normal school, their early teaching careers, and later adventures in their communities—Kolodny has added interestingly to available information about the careers of the first professionally educated teachers.

In 1839, Horace Mann, the Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, and one of a group of elite intellectuals living in Boston at the time, started the first normal school, designed at least in part to “promote standardized and regular teacher preparation in order to produce an assemblage of carefully trained educators to meet the needs of the growing number of common schools” (p. x). Modeled after German and French systems of teacher education, the normal school beat out other systems



in the United States: by the early 20th century, Kolodny tells us, there were 180 normal schools throughout the country. In starting normal schools, Mann, perhaps unintentionally, provided many middle class women with more education than they had before.

The principal and sole teacher at the Lexington, Massachusetts Normal School Kolodny describes, Cyrus Pierce, required his students to study “composition, enunciation, bookkeeping, arithmetic, grammar, geography, and moral and natural philosophy. The academic content at the normal school was a mix of disciplines, but often at an elementary level” (p. 20). Students also seem to have discussed aspects of pedagogy, taking in Pierce’s dislike of corporal punishment, his belief in the importance of “order” in schools, and his very conservative ideas about how a teacher should conduct herself. The women wrote journals daily, took exercise, and, because they lived together, became close friends. Some of the women continued to visit each other, and to be important friends, for the rest of their lives.

Still, even though the normal school itself does not sound terrifically intellectually exciting—perhaps not that different from schools of education today—the young women lived in an era and an area destined to provide them with new ideas. They went to hear Ralph Waldo Emerson preach and met Samuel May, (Louisa May Alcott’s uncle and a progressive educator), Henry Barnard (who started his own teacher education school in Rhode Island, and served for decades as the editor of the influential *American Journal of Education*), Samuel Gridley Howe (of Perkins Institute for the Blind), and Bronson Alcott, all of whom came to visit the school. It would be interesting to learn more than this book tells us about what these people thought about Mann and Pierce’s normal school; it would be particularly interesting to hear what Alcott thought, since he had run the progressive Temple School, where he encouraged children to hit him when they were being punished, told parents that their children did have sexual feelings, and was eventually run out of town for teaching black children alongside whites. Kolodny has limited her sphere primarily to telling us what the teachers experienced, and only secondarily about the exciting educational ideas of the times.

After one year of schooling, the three women Kolodny follows each started their jobs. Lydia Stow's first position, in South Dedham, involved teaching twenty or so young scholars in a one-room school, but at her next school, there were sixty-three students in her class. Though she wanted to follow Cyrus Pierce's dictum against corporal punishment, she found that the only way she could keep the children in line was occasionally to resort to the rod. Chagrined at this development, Lydia slowly developed her skills, but when a job opened at a private school in the more culturally lively town of Fall River, she took it. There she met Robert Adams, a mill-worker, bookbinder, and abolitionist, whom she would marry at twenty one, leaving her teaching life altogether, as was the custom in those days. Lydia's husband became a conductor on the Underground Railroad and, at least in part because of his influence and the influence of family members—her Aunt Sophia Foord taught both the Alcott and Emerson children—Lydia became involved in the movement for the abolition of slavery, too: She came to know both Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. She also, in 1872, became the first woman on the school board of her town; she later started the Fall River Women's Union, an organization designed to help the many women who worked in the textile mills and factories in her town, providing them with both education and recreation. Unfortunately, Lizzie Borden, of axe-murder fame, was on the board of the Fall River Women's Union, too; fortunately, Ms. Borden only held such a position for a short time. Mary Swift's teaching experiences were of most interest to this reviewer. She worked at the Perkins Institute for the Blind. Some of the methods Mary used to teach her pupils sound very much like those Anne Sullivan later used to teach Helen Keller—spelling a word into her hand and allowing her to experience the object she was naming at the same time. Mary worked most closely with Laura Bridgeman, the most famous deaf, mute, and blind person in the world before Helen Keller grew up. A wealthy and devout Quaker, Mary, who worked with Bridgeman for four years, was uncomfortably thrust into the public eye because of Samuel Gridley Howe's refusal to educate Bridgeman about religion. Howe believed that because she was “sealed off from communication with much of the outside world,”

Bridgeman represented “the innate potential of all children” (p. 67). He thought that not teaching her about God would allow him to learn what moral ideas arose from her innately; he came under intense scrutiny because of this, which forced Mary, who disagreed with her employer, to walk a tricky line when communicating with the curious public. After she married and left Perkins, Mary continued her interest in education, particularly the education of women, founding the Boston Young Women’s Christian Association. After her three children had grown up and her husband died, Mary, who had kept in touch with Bridgeman, wrote *Laura Dewey Bridgeman: The Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Girl*, an important book in the history of the education of the disabled. Louisa Harris, who stayed single, had the most difficult life of the three women. For ten years she taught immigrant children in an overcrowded primary school, in “a miserable, low, crazy” (p. 71) school building; she received very low pay. In 1860, when she was 37 years old, she began teaching at the Somerville Young Ladies’ Seminary and Boarding School, an easier job than teaching immigrants; then she tutored in private families for few not completely pleasant years—she felt that the families treated her like a servant--before returning to work in the common schools; she taught, in all, for thirty years. Her life seems to have been unsettled, but not lonely; economically uncertain, but intellectually rich. She turned down quite a few offers of marriage, and continued to be interested in the lively religious ideas around her, and to read and write poetry, for the rest of her life.

A few criticisms of this book, perhaps particular to this reviewer: I’m not convinced, by this book, of the value of standardized teacher education in general or of its value in its earliest incarnation in particular. It’s unclear how much influence the experience of being students at the first normal school had over these women’s lives—it seems clear, for example, that her parents’ moral principles and her marriage to a man who worked on the Underground Railroad had more influence over Lydia Stow’s life than either her few years of teaching or her experience of the normal school did; it seems clear that the fact that she was lucky enough to work with Laura Bridgeman had more influence over the course of Mary Swift’s life than anything she learned at the

normal school did. It's also clear that each of these women was a lifelong learner, but, again, there's no indication that this admirable tendency can be attributed to the women's normal school educations. There's little indication, either, that the way the women taught was influenced by their normal school educations, except that they tried to avoid corporal punishment.

I also wish the book had been better written. Strange and empty sentences like "There were many facets to Mary; undoubtedly she was a complex person" (p. 15) and odd bits of commentary like "Mary experienced the rapturous love that so many mothers feel, especially with the first child. A baby, particularly a first child, is accompanied by passion of the mother, who wants to provide protection, while simultaneously share her love" (p. 111) jarred this reader needlessly.

Still, it is interesting to see how much has and has not changed in the lives of female teachers. I identified with the teachers as they struggled through their early jobs; understood Lydia Stowe's feelings of being unsupported by the administration when she taught a class of 63—63!—young children; admired Mary Swift as she told her supervisor Howe of her observations; and recalled Jane Eyre, that most famous of all women who taught for a private family, when reading about Louisa Harris's tutoring experiences. Kelly Ann Kolodny has admirably pulled together research on a pioneering group of women. Teachers are an oft-storied group, and Kolodny has here added to the history of teachers in the United States a few more important, interesting, familiar, and not-so-familiar tales.

About the Reviewer

Cynthia Miller Coffel

ACT, Inc.

United States of America

Cynthia Miller Coffel is the author of *Thinking Themselves Free: Research on the Literacy of Teen Mothers*.

She is the co-author, with Rebecca Lukens and Jacquelin Smith, of the ninth edition of *A Critical Handbook of Children's Literature*. Her PhD in literacy education is from the University of Iowa.



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