

Frances Buss and Edward Thring: Teachers, Professionalism and Organisation

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ABSTRACT

The question of why teaching has not wholly been recognised as having professional standing has long been contested, as teachers have fought to gain independence of action and public standing. By exploring the life histories of Frances Buss, founder of the Association of Headmistresses, and Edward Thring, founder of the Headmasters' Conference, this article aims to provide a historical perspective on the personal, professional and occupational identity of educators. Taking a biographical approach, this article argues that it is the differences in 'types' of teachers and the lack of a cohesive 'teacher identity' that have hindered the formation of a unified occupational group so necessary for professional recognition.

INTRODUCTION

"Teaching should cease to be a mere trade – so many hours grudgingly given for so much pay... it should take its place as foremost among the learned professions in which the excellence of work, and not the work's reward is the object of ambition." (Buss, in De Bellaigue, 2001 p.979)

Writing at a time of considerable educational change, here Frances Buss articulates the aspiration of many teachers to a professional occupational identity; the history of teaching since the early nineteenth century having been punctuated by attempts to gain entry to the category of 'profession'. Doctors, lawyers and the clergy have gained the status of profession with relative ease but the same cannot be said of teaching. This paper will focus around the argument that the major obstacle to teaching, as an occupation, gaining professional recognition has been teachers' lack of identification with one another and therefore lack of the cohesion necessary to organise together. There has been a history of resistance to the formation of a united body and instead teaching has traditionally seen teachers organising into smaller groupings.

In order to examine this, a conceptual framework of 'social identity theory' will be used as an explanatory device; the concepts of 'auto/biography' and of 'social identity' examined; the historical location of the professions discussed and the creation of various professional bodies described. The focus will then turn to the lives of Frances Buss and Edward Thring, educators who both realised the power of professional organisation, as examples of how different were the 'kinds' of teachers operating in the mid nineteenth century. The discussion will then concentrate at examining how individual lives can shed light on the varied backgrounds and motivations of teachers and how these have been an important factor in the formation of several, rather than a single overarching, teachers' organisations.

CONCEPTS

The use of auto/biography to help understand social movements is part of a long tradition, from conventional biography to the more recent feminist canon that seeks to bring to prominence neglected female educational and political activists and to a greater extent comprehend educational history and the workings of gender therein (Martin, 2007). There is a growing “recognition that personal and private lives have political meanings” (Martin, 2007, p.516). Auto/biography can be used as a method that assimilates wider historical themes with a “network of meanings emerging from the work-life histories” (Martin, 2007, p.521) and provides a way of more critically viewing the ambiguities involved in social trends. Here the emphasis will be on the life histories of Edward Thring and Frances Buss, to bring a richer understanding of the lack of a ‘united teacher identity’.

There has been discussion around the use of the term auto/biography, rather than autobiography and biography which imply a distinct separation (Stanley, 1992). The interpretation that seems most compelling is one that suggests all human action as a form of auto/biography- all action as a reduction and representation of what has come before, be it the personal, the social, the political. Just as the biography “is a narrative influenced by the cultural conventions of telling the story” (Bruner, 1984, p.7), so peoples’ actions and responses are a narrative set within the boundaries of cultural convention, and even when these boundaries are traduced they are still acknowledged, as boundaries to be breached, by the narrative. The theme of conscious self-representation is particularly pertinent when looking at why people choose to join networks and form organisations. If, as discussed above, people are constantly in the process of self-representation through their every action and thus continuously engaging in the process of auto/biography in the representation of themselves, then the joining of special interest groups could be seen as the one of the most self-conscious attempts at self representation. By identifying with a group or movement one explicitly advertises how one wishes to be perceived by others. Here the idea of people having a ‘social identity’ (Tajfel, 1982), a popular concept among sociologists and social psychologists, lends a useful theoretical framework in which to discuss teachers’ identification, or lack thereof, with other teachers and is complementary to the idea that personal and therefore political action is representative of the many faceted ‘self’.

‘Social identity theory’ has been used to some effect to try and understand why people affiliate with particular groups as it underscores the ‘embeddedness’ of people within social groupings and the impact of inter-group relations on their actions (Frege, 1996). One can explain the possession of a social identity as a person’s identification with, and sense of belonging to, a particular perceived social group (Frege, 1996). I do not think that this theory of a social identity precludes people being in possession of more than one ‘social identity’, or that many social identities may be interwoven but rather that people have a need to reduce their experience into something more psychologically manageable for example, into some form of social identity which is often translated into political allegiance, as something that can articulate and encapsulate a particular set of world-views. This social identification can be manifest in many different ways be it gender, political, class or occupational. Within this theoretical framework there are two basic principles, the first is that the more strongly a person identifies with those in a ‘group’ the stronger the feeling of ‘intergroup’ identification (Frege, 1996). Strong group identification is therefore associated

with strong feelings of 'us' and 'them'. The stronger the sense of 'other' the more likely it is that there will be an increased willingness to engage in collective action, in this case organising into a formal group. The second principle is that strong identification with one's social group encourages participation in collective action by encouraging "shared perceptions" relating to the need for and prospects of social change (Frege, 1996, p.387).

In examining the two lives, I have chosen four auto/biographical sources on which to focus in particular, firstly an article that examines Edward Thring's personal and occupational history within a framework of his interest in 'moral education' (Tozer, 1987), a history of the AHM which includes extracts of the minutes and a biography of Frances Buss (Glenday and Price, 1974), a 'traditional' biography of Frances Buss (Burstall, 1938), and a journal article on the history of the Headmasters' Conference that includes excerpts from the minutes and a biography of Edward Thring (Baron, 1955). There are potential issues and pitfalls inherent in undertaking any research. Most of these sources are relatively celebratory and uncritical of Edward Thring's and Frances Buss' lives, and there is with each, as with any source, a certain level of selection bias. All four sources however contain a mixture of traditional biography and first person writing that has enabled a far richer understanding than that would have been realised by a reliance on either a single primary or secondary source.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROFESSIONS

Before discussing the life histories and motivations of Frances Buss and Edward Thring within the context of organisation and professionalisation we need to examine what is meant when we speak of a 'profession'. As with many words that we use to seek to classify, what we are trying to classify does not remain constant but varies according to time and person. The term 'professionalism' is not static, Christina De Bellaigue has, for example, argued that "the development of teaching as a profession for England has often been written using an anachronistic and gendered conception of the term professionalism" (De Bellaigue, 2001, p.963). When one considers what is meant by the idea of the 'professional' the dominant understanding, to which De Bellaigue refers is that which came into usage during the nineteenth century in Western Europe and America. The 'learned' professions of law, medicine and the clergy saw an increase in prestige and social status in the eighteenth century with a move from a society which relied on systems of patronage to a society with more 'meritocratic' ideals. The advances in science and the industrialisation of society and growing specialisation required the mastery of a more "inaccessible body of knowledge, the sense of mystery that surrounded these occupations contributed to their growing prestige" (De Bellaigue, 2001, p.964). The nineteenth century also saw the veneration of a sense of vocation in occupation rather than just fiscal reward, and medicine, the law and the clergy were seen to be occupations that embodied these ideals (De Bellaigue, 2001). Regulatory bodies were created from within the professions, and there was an emphasis on training and certification (Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990). With this increasing professionalisation came an increasing independence and at a basic level the prestige and power of the professions were an attractive prospect. At a fundamental level the professions engaged in the rhetoric of an ethos of service with any differences felt to be outweighed by their common interests (Corfield, 1995).

One of the signifiers and strengths of the traditional professions has been the creation and continuation of single, unifying special interest groups that act for both lobbying and self-regulatory purposes, the General Medical Council in the case of doctors and the Law Society in the case of lawyers. The power to grant regulation and limit access to a profession, meant that “expertise became more potent when its possession was confined within specified boundaries” (Corfield, 1995 p.147). The Clergy is more complex, but it has been argued that the Church itself (the Anglican Church) acts as a regulatory body of sorts (Corfield, 1995). The Law Society, the regulatory and lobbying body for solicitors, has very early origins; in 1740 a small number of London solicitors formed the ‘Society of Gentlemen Practicers in the Courts of Law and Equity’. The formation of the General Medical Council in 1848 was encouraged by the government to provide a within profession regulatory body a move that was welcomed by most medical practitioners (Corfield, 1995). These organisations have made powerful drivers for the professional regard of lawyers and doctors and have often acted as lobbying groups for the interests of their members.

TEACHERS AND PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION

Teachers have been a more fragmented group, often organising into different organisations according to shared experience and aspirations. Unlike the case of doctors there was no state inducement to a General Teaching Council on a par with the General Medical Council. A compelling argument for the lack of a single unifying body is the lack of will to unite among teachers themselves, most probably as they have constituted a less homogeneous body than the clergy, doctors or lawyers which has led to the formation of different interest groups with different political foci and thus a lack of a common social identity. Historically there have existed a wide range of arenas across which educators have operated, from the small dame school of the eighteenth century to the large comprehensive of the twentieth. Although access to the services of lawyers and medics has been limited by pecuniary concerns, those in such occupations have, in the most part, operated across the social and gender boundaries. Educational establishments have been sectioned along lines of class, wealth and gender both in the types of pupils and parents they served and in the backgrounds of teachers who worked within them, with many years of disenfranchisement of certain sections of society. Those who have entered the medical, law and clerical professions have been of similar socio-economic backgrounds (Corfield, 1995). Teachers however have constituted a more varied demographic. One of the most immediately striking examples of difference is that of gender. The 1851 Census of England and Wales shows 15980 men having the stated occupation of ‘lawyer’, 13586 men as physicians or surgeons/apothecaries (although there are large numbers of women nurses and midwives-nursing being another occupation that has sought to claim a professional identity with limited success), of those who stated their occupation as ‘teachers’ the difference is striking with 28304 men and 67551 women (1851 Census, vol. 88/1 in Corfield, 1995).

Frances Buss and Edward Thring may well have been entered under the occupation grouping of ‘teacher’ in the 1851 census. They were contemporaries, educators who made a lasting impression on British middle class education but who inhabited different, yet overlapping, spheres. Their life-histories make for particularly interesting studies in the mid-Victorian move towards professionalisation, especially when looking at their creation

of formalised networks of educators. Both were driven by their interest in education but also by their differing experiences. Frances Buss was involved in the campaign for women's suffrage and was located within a network of female educators and activists who had an interest in furthering the educational opportunities of women, Edward Thring was of a group of 'elite' educators who identified themselves as professionals, apart from other teachers, and who engaged with a particular moralising Christian rhetoric.

EDWARD THRING AND THE HEADMASTERS' CONFERENCE

Edward Thring was born in 1821. His father was a clergyman, as were his two brothers. Edward's was a traditional elite education, his early schooling was at Eton and he later studied theology at Kings College Cambridge, graduating in 1846 (Tozer, 1987). After being ordained into the Anglican Church he spent several years as a priest in the "slums" of Gloucestershire (Tozer, 1987, p.134). His clerical background left a particular marker upon him. He was predominantly preoccupied with the provision of a 'moral education', in sympathy with many of his peers from the upper classes who were in possession of a particular Victorian sensibility. This period saw a preoccupation with the responsibility of the wealthy to engage in a particular kind of philanthropic behaviour to those less well off that was framed in a Christian paternalistic rhetoric, "the rich boys must learn to help the poor boys" (Thring, 1864 in Tozer, 1987 p.134). In 1853 he became headmaster of Uppingham School, a small endowed grammar school with 25 pupils which by the time he died had become one of the larger English public schools with an intake of 330 boys (Tozer, 1987). Uppingham was one of a number of schools that provided secondary education and were funded in the main by charitable endowments, often meant for the education of poor children, although by the nineteenth century most of the endowed schools served the middle and upper classes.

Edward Thring became particularly interested in the power of professional organisation after the independence of the endowed schools was threatened in the late 1860s. The Endowed Schools Commission was set up following the Taunton Report of 1868 (Gordon, 1966) on the state of secondary education in Britain, with the aim of reforming the allocation and spending of charitable endowments. The Endowed Schools Act of 1869 set out the creation of a council that would examine students and also set up exams in order to register teaching staff of the schools in receipt of endowments (Gordon, 1966). This move would have removed much of the power of the headmasters of such schools to choose their own staff and set their own exams. This part of the bill was erased after the vociferous objections from the headmasters of endowed schools who felt aggrieved at the preferential treatment extended to schools listed under the 'Public Schools Act' which awarded protected status to nine named schools (the 'great' British public schools such as Eton and Harrow) but not to the majority of endowed schools of which Uppingham was one (Baron, 1955). Although the Bill was amended in favour of the endowed schools and confirmed their continued impendence, many headmasters were concerned that the government would attempt a similar diminution of their powers again in the future.

Edward recognised that any defensive action against state intervention would be most successful if the schools joined together in a body that would present a united

‘professional’ front “(there is a) want, not only of a common voice, but of any pronounced opinion from the most important profession in England” (Thring, E. in Baron 1955 pp.223-224). The government had recently supported the formation of a self-regulatory, professional, body for medics and Thring felt that something similar could be achieved by the headmasters of the endowed schools. Thring invited 20 of his fellow headmasters to Uppingham where they held their first meeting of the Headmasters’ Conference in August 1869 (Baron, 1955). He spoke at the first meeting of the previous “isolation of schools” (Thring, E in Baron 1955 p.223). The Association was to be of a defensive nature- “the importance of conference and combined action on the part of schools to watch legislation and to give expression to their voices in these days of public aggression” (Thring, E., 1869 in Baron, 1955 pp.224). The headmasters defined themselves as elite teachers, separate from the common herd, identifying themselves as the professionals amongst teachers. In 1873 the Conference held at Highgate confirmed this identification as ‘professionals apart’ when they agreed to reserve admission to headmasters and assistants from ‘high-grade’ schools (Baron, 1955).

FRANCES BUSS AND THE ASSOCIATION OF HEADMISTRESSES

Frances Buss, as Edward Thring, saw the value of being perceived as professional, and of formal organisation, but to different ends. Born in 1827, (Burstall, 1938) she took the opportunities afforded by the mid-nineteenth century change in the perception, and increased public stature, of women educators to ameliorate women’s access to education. The perceptual change has often been attributed to an increase in the proportion of females to males in the population and public concerns about what would become of such women. There were worries about “redundant women” who would not be able to find themselves a ‘position’ in what had been hitherto the only acceptable female role for middle class women, that of wife and mother (De Bellaigue, 2001). Education was seen as key to giving ‘surplus’ women the opportunity to support themselves, particularly within teaching. There was concern over the provision of secondary education for girls, the Taunton Commission having found that “it is evident that the endowments for the secondary education of girls bear but an infinitesimal proportion to the similar endowments for boys” (the Taunton Report, 1868, in Aldrich, 1983 p.93). This was reflected in the number of schools set up by local committee; by 1894 there were over two hundred endowed and proprietary girls’ schools, the vast majority having been set up after 1870 (Jordan, 1991). There was also a new emphasis on formalised training to ensure that those educating girls were properly equipped. Joyce Pedersen argues that mid-nineteenth century female education was characterised by a wholesale change in the attitudes and aspirations of female educators from the ‘lady amateurs’ of the first half of the early nineteenth century to the ‘professional headmistresses’ of the second. Typically the ‘lady amateurs’ of the first half of the nineteenth century were women who headed small schools, often from their own homes, where, Pedersen argues they operated to prepare girls for their proper arena, that of becoming good “wives and mothers”.

Frances was the only girl, and oldest, of ten children. She was the daughter of an artist and a teacher (Burstall, 1938). She, at first, followed a career trajectory similar to that of Pedersen’s ‘lady amateurs’. Frances’ mother owned her own school, which was known as

the 'Pestalozzian Institute', where Frances taught after attending and teaching at a small private school in Hampstead. "After I reached my fourteenth birthday I began to teach...and never since have I spent my days out of the school room" (Buss in Glenday and Price, 1974 p.8).

Frances later came to embody what Joyce Pedersen (1975) saw as a new breed of professional headteacher, who placed emphasis on training, organisation and modelled themselves on the 'headmasters' "whom they emulated" (Pedersen, 1975 p.161). Christine De Bellaigue (2001) however offers an alternative interpretation and sees this change as embodying the adoption of one form of professionalism over another. In place of Pedersen's 'amateurs' and 'professionals', De Bellaigue suggests an alternative view of a shift from a female tradition of professionalism to one that took on a contemporaneous masculine model. Whilst there is merit in De Bellaigue's discussion of what was lost through the abandonment of a 'female model' of professionalism, Frances Buss and her contemporaries can be seen to have adopted a pragmatic, strategic approach to the amelioration of women's education, understanding the power of the appearance of operating within a socially acceptable masculine model of professionalism (Martin and Goodman, 2003).

The new 'professional headmistresses' headed schools that were for the most part larger, and not run primarily as profit making institutions. New training establishments were founded, notably Queens College in London in 1848 which provided education for girls and for those wishing to teach themselves (Martin and Goodman, 2003). Frances attended Queens College in the evenings and personified the new breed of teachers who wished to have a formal basis for their practice, setting up her own school, the North London Collegiate School, in 1850 (Glenday and Price, 1974). Frances was also much involved in one of the most important political movements of the time and established networks of relationships with many women who were both politically active and concerned with the education of women. Frances had close relationships with other women educators, and was a founder member of the Kensington Society, a women's discussion group that began meeting in 1865, along with Emily Davies (prominent in the campaign for women's access to Higher Education), Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Dorothea Beale (a founding member of the AHM and the head of Cheltenham Ladies' College), Barbara Bodichon and Helen Taylor, and the membership of this group went on to form the London Suffrage Committee (Glenday and Price, 1974). The campaign for suffrage had long been intertwined with women's access to education, following the linkage of franchise for men and education (Aldrich, 1983). There was also growing governmental recognition of Frances and other women educators as voices to be taken seriously. Frances was called to give evidence, along with Emily Davies, to the 1864 Schools Enquiry Commission that was tasked to look into gender inequalities in education provision (Glenday and Price, 1974).

Frances and her contemporaries recognised the power of formal organisation and built upon pre-existing networks of relationships. Frances wrote to a friend in 1873 that she wished "to form an association of Head Mistresses, and hold occasional conferences, in order to know what we ought to assert and ought surrender" (Buss in Glenday and Price, 1974 p.2). The Association of Headmistresses was formed in 1874, comprising of eleven members with expressed intention to "support and protect the status and interests of women in education"

and included members of Frances' pre-existing networks- Dorothea Beale was a founder member (Glenday and Price, 1974). Pedersen (1975) suggests that Frances Buss and the Headmistresses wished to adopt wholesale the model of the Headmasters Association, but this is not reflected by the headmistresses' views on democratic membership of the Association. In contrast to the Headmasters' exclusive and elitist policies, Frances opened membership to the heads of all girls' schools that were not solely private undertakings (Howarth, 1985).

This is not to say that Frances did not engage in a rhetoric of education as a moral force, indeed she did on many an occasion (De Bellaigue, 2001), or that Edward was unaware of the importance of female education and the drawbacks of the Headmasters' isolationist approach. Edward and Frances had much admiration for one another as educators- Edward Thring invited the AHM to hold a conference at Uppingham in 1887. He seemed to have been more than cognisant of the limitations inherent in belonging to a group of teachers who considered themselves apart, after the AHM had attended Uppingham he wrote that the Headmasters' Conference had "given rise to much sympathetic and useful interchange of thought and had broken down some of the ancient isolation of the greater schools. But in the intervening years new and powerful educational forces had come into play. Amongst the most interesting were those directed to the higher education of girls: the high schools and colleges were becoming a power in the land... The leaders of the movement had much indifference and prejudice to combat, but they had no ancient traditions to hinder them from recognising the value of intercourse and co-operation" (Thring in Glenday and Price 1974 p.21).

CONCLUSIONS

"The excellence of work" was indeed what drove Frances Buss and Edward Thring, but it was not the only motivating factor in their professional lives. Both aspired to a professional occupational identity, but they did not share an overarching cohesive teacher identity that overrode all else. Despite holding one another in high regard, they had different foci. Their personal, political and professional experiences were interwoven so that Edward Thring identified with, and represented himself as one of, a group of male educators whose strongest motivation lay in safeguarding the independence of a select group of elite schools whilst Frances Buss identified with a group of women educators and political activists whose main motivations lay in furthering the educational prospects of women. Looking at their lives through the use of an auto/biographical approach has shed light on the strong possibility of the existence of many different motivational forces that came to shape teachers in the mid nineteenth century. Despite being contemporaries their experiences meant that Frances and Edward developed overlapping social identities that were different enough to preclude their having similar aims. Social identity theory is a useful way of framing this, in that their identification with different groupings was stronger than any overarching teacher identity- this being reflected in their creation of separate formal interest groups that engaged in collective action for different ends. This lack of a common social identity, and thus the lack of desire for an overarching organisational and regulatory body, goes some way towards an explanation of the difficulties that teachers have encountered in gaining a professional teacher identity.

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