Book Review

Christina Collins. *"Ethnically Qualified": Race, Merit, and the Selection of Urban Teachers, 1920–1980.* New York: Teachers College Press, 2011. 264 pp. Paperback $43.95.

For historians of education, New York City is a difficult subject, a case study of wider trends in American education while also home to its own brand of political conflicts and labyrinthine bureaucracy. New York educators played key roles in spreading teacher unionism and in the more recent small schools movement across the United States. On the other hand, in crucial respects New York's racial and ethnic battles have diverged from wider American trends, and ideological concerns that have preoccupied New York teachers—the Shachtmanite critique of the Communist Party and the Communist critique of Shachtmanism, for instance—produce blank stares in much of the United States. The ethnic, racial, and bureaucratic politics of teacher selection in New York, as it has mirrored and diverged from wider American patterns, is the subject of Christina Collins' *Ethnically Qualified.*

As Collins argues, an insular and interlocking local system of teacher preparation, hiring, and assignment determined who taught in New York's schools, limiting the number of jobs open to teachers of color far more than was the case in comparable American cities. After attending New York' public high schools, most future teachers were trained in the city's celebrated network of municipal colleges. Staffed by veterans of the city's schools, the preservice programs were tightly focused on the expectations of New York's Board of Examiners, which devised and conducted teacher and administrator certification tests. Successful applicants then navigated school assignment procedures, which, again, favored those possessing familiarity with and connections to the school system. In successive chapters, Collins details the steps in this process and their interconnections, from high school, through City University's teacher education programs, to assignment in one of New York's schools.

While its network of municipal colleges and locally administered teacher examinations differentiated New York from most of the United States, the issues confronted by New Yorkers, Collins suggests, have echoed across the United States. In particular, she focuses on competing claims that teacher selection in New York represented a commitment to meritocracy and that it served to reproduce racism. Questions raised by the invocations of merit and racism of how to define what constitutes a "highly qualified" teacher in urban schools and how to select such

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00392.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

teachers, she notes, have continuing relevancy in the era of No Child Left Behind.

Conflicts about New York's local Board of Examiners epitomized these issues. It did not formally exclude on the basis of race or ethnicity but instead employed oral examinations to ferret out teaching applicants whose accents diverged from what it deemed the standard of "educated people" with good "breeding" (p. 71). In the decades before World War II, the Board focused on the defective accents of Jewish applicants; later, it was preoccupied by "uncultured" speech of Blacks. Although Collins' account of the Board's role will not surprise those familiar with New York's history, she ably documents it.

Moreover, Collins argues convincingly that the biases of the examination system were only one element of the process that resulted in low numbers of minority teachers in New York. Rather, the interaction of the training, hiring, and assignment processes "exponentially magnified" minor instances of discrimination into sustained patterns of racial inequality (p. 5). Illuminating the mechanism by which institutional racism operated, *Ethnically Qualified* thus constitutes something like an application of psychologist Chester Pierce's theory on microaggressions to history. Often perceived by whites as innocent remarks or acts without racial subtext, microaggressions nevertheless communicate racist hostility and thus epitomize mechanisms by which racism is reproduced in the post–Jim Crow era.

Ethnically Qualified powerfully demonstrates that the successive layers of the teacher selection process did indeed amplify the impact of racial bias occurring at any individual step, but given New York's unusually elaborate and interconnected bureaucracy, it is hard to know the degree to which Collins' portrayal illuminates wider American patterns of racial inequality. A contextualization of New York's approach to teacher selection in theories and studies of American racism would have helped assess the implications of this study. Still, *Ethnically Qualified* offers a suggestive model for investigating enduring relations of racial inequality in American schools.

Although the Board of Examiners avoided ascertaining the predictive value of its tests, its defenders argued that at least they discouraged racial and ethnic favoritism. Collins tends to take such claims at face value. Possible racists and victims are often given equal respect. While treating what seem to be racist statements as though they were made in good faith suggests a stance of objectivity in *Ethnically Qualified*, Collins' approach limits her ability to draw conclusions about the nature of racism or what would constitute an appropriate standard of good teaching in a society marked by racism.

And yet, apart from its racial and ethnic biases, Collins suggests New York's teacher selection system possessed a second characteristic.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00392.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Board of Examiners' tests better measured willingness to memorize arcane factoids than the capacity to enact a rich, humane vision of teaching. For instance, applicants for teaching positions were asked to define amice (a vestment worn under the alb by Catholic priests), while aspiring junior high school assistant principals were expected to explain how rubber is vulcanized and to know whether the singer of "I've Got a Little List" in the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *The Mikado* was Nanki-Poo, Pish-Tush, or Pooh-Ba. The Board failed applicant and future novelist Bel Kaufman for what it deemed an erroneous interpretation of an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem, although her reading, Kaufman demonstrated, was one that the poet herself endorsed.

In short, Collins hints, rigorous examinations not only failed to predict good teaching, but by equating learning with the recall of decontextualized trivia, they may have encouraged bad teaching. While Collins suggests that the Board of Examiners' tests herald current attempts to specify what constitutes qualification to teach, she does not explore the relationship of the Board of Examiners' preoccupation with applicants' ability to recall facts to their actual practices in New York's classrooms. Doing so, I suspect, would have added power to her critique of the Board's standard of merit.

Finally, Collins' account generally maintains a tight focus on the New York school system itself, and her brief extensions to wider social relations and ideologies at times lack the nuance with which she discusses school teachers and administrators. Progressive era reformers rescue the schools from the politicization and corruption of ward bosses; the merit system allows Jews to overcome anti-Semitic quotas, and they embrace it.

Although *Ethnically Qualified* promises an examination of relationship of teaching to ethnic succession and urban political power, its institutional focus limits its capacity to address such topics. Moreover, given the centrality of antiblack racism in debates about New York's teacher selection process, the book would have benefitted from extending the analysis of ethnic succession past the 1970s, thus enabling the author to more fully compare the trajectory of blacks to that of Jews and other white groups. Still, *Ethnically Qualified* offers a compelling account of the difficulty of defining and promoting merit in teaching and of the ways such efforts can reproduce, rather than challenge, racial inequality. Historians should welcome its contribution to our understanding of urban schools.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2011.00392.x Published online by Cambridge University Press