

“Uplift This Downtrodden Multitude”: Lizzie Black Kander and the Purpose of the Milwaukee School of Trades for Girls

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Abstract

In 1909 the Milwaukee School of Trades for Girls opened its doors becoming the first public vocational high school for girls in the United States. While education historians have given treatment to vocational education, most examples and analysis has focused on males or the “boy problem” in education. There are few sources that examine the “girl problem” or even acknowledge that there may have been one. The reform of girls’ education to focus on house and home aligns with the Progressive Era movements to eliminate poverty. Using the words of of Elizabeth Black Kander, the main activist for the school, this paper explores the intentions she had in founding a public vocational high school for girls, Women’s vocational training at the Milwaukee School of Trades for Girls went beyond shaping citizens and workers in the middle-class image; it was about fashioning the future wives and mothers in the middle-class ideal.

Progressive Era school boards began to recognize that one curriculum would not fit every student’s needs. With the creation of the School of Trades for Girls (MSTG), the Milwaukee Public School Board institutionalized a belief that public schools should do more than educate the population. Institutions such as MSTG were places where women would not only learn job-ready skills, but also skills that would prepare them to run their homes according to the middle-class standards of cleanliness that were

to be taught at the school. MSTG’s pedagogical intentions masqueraded as job training, but were a method of social control to impart middle-class values on the home and future generations. Emphasis was placed on the girls’ ultimate vocations as wives and mothers, not on the type of skills these women needed to earn a living. The original curriculum developed for the school was not based on the needs of the marketplace; rather it was off a sense of woman’s duties to home and family based on middle-class principles. Women’s vocational training at the Milwaukee School of Trades for Girls went beyond shaping citizens and workers in the middle-class image; for its founder, Elizabeth Black Kander it was about fashioning the future wives and mothers in the middle-class ideal.

Schooling has always been a way for the preeminent class to assert power and influence and indoctrinate students into the prevailing cultural norms of that dominant class. Female vocational education took this training one step further. By the late 1800s Milwaukee had begun to develop a bureaucratic public schooling system that had become well ensconced in the prescriptive nature of contemporary educational models. For the school board, traditionally, school was supposed to improve the standard of citizenship and create useful citizens; vocational education presented the student with a new vision of success that it attainable.¹ The results of this change in education were a shift from subtle to overt enculturation; the college-bound curriculum talked about issues, the vocational demonstrated them.

Pressure for the school board to create the girls’ vocational school came from a very vocal former board member, Elizabeth Black Kander. Often called the Jane Adams of Milwaukee, Kander was involved with various philanthropic societies throughout the city, most of which were concerned with immigrants and education. She believed that her work was to “uplift this downtrodden multitude, to make it possible for them to educate their children to enlighten them.”² This enlightenment needed to be about opening the eyes of the working class and immigrants to middle-class ideals. Kander believed the “downtrodden multitude” would not acclimate on their own, rather they had to be coerced into accepting these standards. Her methods consisted of “‘intelligent and systematic friendly visiting’” or, eventually, through mandatory education.³ Her “Keep Milwaukee Clean Mission” was the start of what would become her crusade to have vocational training for women added to the curricular offerings of the Milwaukee Public Schools. This philanthropic society was comprised of middle-class women who

would hold free afternoon sessions that would instruct women and children on various domestic tasks and educate them on the middle-class standards of cleanliness, etiquette, and expectations on fitting in to middle-class American society.⁴ These classes would develop into manual training classes at schools in Kander's ward. The popularity of these courses among the students and the faculty urged Kander forward in pushing for more of these classes throughout the city, and eventually to develop an all girls high school dedicated to her groups' ideal training for women.⁵ Kander's society lead the way in developing the curriculum for vocational training for girls and were able to fashion it in their image and likeness.

Elizabeth Kander explained her intentions for the Milwaukee School of Trades for Girls in the commencement address she gave at the first graduation ceremony held by the school in 1913. She was moved to action by the conditions in which the working class lived and – more importantly – raised their children. “The real problem was how to properly care for the children and the household, while the parents who unable to understand our language and entirely out of tune with existence or conditions in this country were both out all day struggling to earn enough to keep their family together.”⁶ Clearly demonstrating Kander's belief that the working classes need help adhere to the middle-class standards, and her disdain for those immigrants and poor who were not upholding those ideals she held so dear. She continues in her commencement address:

I saw how one class of children after another pass out of their school life at or before the tender age of 14 years, ready to take up the burden of life's duties often to the detriment of their mental, moral and physical well-being. Some found employment in the down town department stores some in the various factories and shops; some took short courses in typewriting and stenography. Very few sought work that would prepare them for their life's work as mothers, home makers and housekeepers.⁷

Preparation for work was not enough it was more about the ideal. The working-class home was not focused on the lives of these future wives and mothers, and this was an oversight that the MSTG would help overcome. Kander recognizes not only the practical vocational perspective, but more important the relevant intangible characteristics that are important in creating the essence of good families.

Kander did recognize that the school board was overlooking its obligation to educate the young women of Milwaukee.

Our girls were not given a square deal. Every one of our high schools is elaborately equipped with manual training outfits worth thousands of dollars and so few boys awarded themselves of the opportunities. Nothing in this time for our girls. There was no opportunity for a girl to receive any sort of training that would set her for any vocation outside of teaching and stenography.⁸

While Kander notes the shortcomings of the school board she also asserts that training young women to be teachers and typists was not enough. These women needed to be more than just a worker.

Kander comprehended that working-class women had to move between a public and private spheres longer than the middle-class ideal intended. “The [e]conomic condition of society had changed to such an extent since the introduction of machinery, that the work that was formerly done by women in the home, is now done out of the home. With this difference, work that requires thought and skill is done by men, while the simple mechanical tasks that require no training, but only physical force is given to women.”⁹ Kander understood the characteristics of modern industry and economy and its needs. She recognized that the current schools were not preparing the young women of Milwaukee for anything, much less their future. Women were to be held to higher standards and the education that was offered them prior to the opening of the Milwaukee School of Trades for Girls failed all of the roles that these women would have to fill. Kander recognized the delicate balance that working-class women had to create in their lives to achieve home and family and work, yet she did not have to live that life.

As the school was formed and classes began this idea of replicating middle-class values in the classroom was evident in the teachers selected.

Miss Alice G. Goold, instructor in domestic science, Girls' Trade school, says the time is already here when girls are finding keeping the house and cooking more enjoyable than office work. Also, young Milwaukee men who contemplate matrimony are beginning to breathe easier. ...Scientific methods of cooking are proving the emancipation of the American housewife. Milwaukee

girls are being trained in the trade schools to use the latest, up to the minute appliances... "This is as it should be, for I think one big cause of divorce has been the illy prepared meals young wives serve their husbands."¹⁰

Goold's statement exemplifies the mindset of the instructors of the school. While the young women were trained on the new scientific methods espoused in the prescriptive literature of the times, the moral is still a happy home is a moral one. The male vocational curriculum never blurred the lines between home and work. Women were to be trained to be ideal wives and mothers who could apply modern techniques of science and industry to their homes and families, not take the lessons of the home and apply it to the public sphere.

Pamphlets advertising school to prospective students and families also walked this fine line between building workers and mothers. The inherent double-speak found in a pamphlet extolling the virtues of the school to prospective students and families reveals the complex intersection of public and private spheres as it applies to women and work.

The Milwaukee Public School of Trades for Girls is maintained for the purpose of preparing all girls who wish to attend, for a life of efficiency through the avenue of a chosen trade. By close application to work, under competent instructors, a girl can, in a good trade school, learn more and in a better way in one-half, and frequently less than one-half, the time necessary in a commercial shop. The school does not claim to turn out experienced workers. Its aim is to instruct its students thoroughly, in as short a time as possible, in all the fundamental principles and in the practice of the trade in question, so that they may upon graduation possess the ability and confidence, be of immediate and practical value to their employers and receive a fair remuneration at once. Speed and efficiency as commercial [employees] should soon follow.¹¹

On the surface the intersection is not clear, however the aim of the academic branch of the school is to "make the girl an intelligent and efficient trade worker."¹² This clearly demonstrated the vocational and practical aspect of the school. Upon closer inspection one can see how this can be applied to the domestic branch as well. Women were instructed in: "order and cleanliness of china and utensil closets, care of refrigerator, ... care and management of coal, and gas ranges, use of fireless cooker, ..."¹³ The school was not focused on the girls acquiring job-

ready skills, rather that they adopt the middle-class ways of going about their lives. That the school would teach that there is one proper way to arrange a utensil closet as opposed the use of the utensils exemplifies the amount of social control the founders of the MSTG had intended the curriculum to have.

Vocational schools such as the Milwaukee School of Trades for Girls were places where society at large could reinforce its middle-class vision of a woman's role in society. Women have always worked. Elizabeth Black Kander's vision for MSTG was about showing the girls of the city that the only true vocation for them is middle-class domesticity. The goal of MSTG was to produce a woman who was a temporary laborer and a future mother, shaping her future home and family into the middle-class mold that was presented for them at the school. With Kander at the helm, MSTG sought to replicate the standards of the middle-class housewife, not the factory. Rather than teach lucrative skills like typing and stenography, they were taught millinery and dressmaking. These were not skills that could uplift these girls into better paying positions; they were techniques that replicated the middle-class ideal. It would take fifteen years for commercial pursuits to be fully added to the curriculum at MGTS. The lack of work-ready skills within the curriculum implies that the school had no intentions of these girls seeking a livable wage or gainful, long-term employment. The goal was to produce a woman who was at once a worker and a future mother, who could shape her home and future children into the middle-class model that was presented for them in the school's courses.

¹ "Annual Report of the Milwaukee School Board, 1908," Milwaukee Public Schools: *Forty-Ninth Annual Report of the Board of School Directors of the City of Milwaukee*, (Milwaukee, WI: Edward Keogh Press, 1908), 17-8.

² Kander, Elizabeth Black, (speech, Ladies Relief Sewing Society, Milwaukee, 2 January 1896). Mrs. Simon Kander (Lizzie Black Kander) Papers, 1875-1960, University of Milwaukee, Urban Archives. From this point forward, this will be referred to as the Kander Papers.

³ Fritz, Angela, "Lizzie Black Kander and Culinary Reform in Milwaukee 1880-1920," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 87, no. 3, (Spring 2004): 41.

⁴ Kander, Elizabeth Black, (commencement address, Milwaukee School of Trades for Girls, Milwaukee, 1913). Kander Papers.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Domestic Science Becomes a Fad and Is Removing One Big Cause of Divorce," *The Milwaukee Journal*, January 7, 1912, 2.

¹¹ Milwaukee Public School of Trades for Girls, *Prospectus*, (Milwaukee: Board of School Directors, 1911-12), 6.

¹² Ibid. 27.

¹³ Ibid. 29.

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