

6-25-2019

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Barbara Shousha

University of Nebraska High School, bshousha@nebraska.edu

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Shousha, Barbara, "Women in History: Virginia Roth – Innovative Educator" (2019). *Journal of Women in Educational Leadership*. 216.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel/216>

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Journal of Women in Educational Leadership, 2019

doi: 10.32873/unl.dc.jwel.191

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/jwel/>

ISSN 2379-2191



WOMEN IN HISTORY

Virginia Roth – Innovative Educator

Barbara Shousha

University of Nebraska High School

bshousha@nebraska.edu

“There has to be a better way.” In 1964, Virginia Roth, then known as Sr. Pacis principal at Ryan High School in Omaha, Nebraska, set out to devise a new system of education. Her goal, as expressed in her essay, “A Model for an Alternate High School” was to, “realize those objectives we defined as essential for education.”¹ The “we” referred to the School Sisters of St. Francis, the religious order to which she belonged at that time. Roth described the period from 1964 to 1966 as a “two year experimentation program of brainstorming, trying new methods, committee work for the whole staff, and some brainwashing to define a school organization.”² The resulting system of modular scheduling, individual advising, and independent study continued for two decades before the school closed. Over time, the innovations lost favor with the community and the Catholic hierarchy in Omaha. Roth left Ryan, but remained committed to the ideals and the practice of

progressive education. Additionally, she left Ryan and her religious order in 1973 and took her ideas to work for twelve years at another successful, progressive high school in Omaha.

She was recognized as an educational expert in progressive education, and at the peak of her activity, spent a considerable amount of time traveling to conferences, teaching education courses and writing about education. In 1972, she was estimated, by *Omaha World Herald* reporter, Robert McMorris, to have traveled 30,000 miles to-and-from workshops in a six-month period. At conferences, she presented Ryan's program to school administrators from across the country. The article noted, "Sister Roth's proposals were for a school that would put into practice a proposition to which educators have always given lip service: students should be treated as individuals."³ Roth's vision for education was bold and progressive; and her ability to translate her ideas into operational practice was ahead of its time.

Early Life

Virginia Roth was born on February 20, 1925 to Samuel and Helen (Wagner) Roth. She was the second of three daughters. With her sisters Thelma and Janette, she grew up in Aurora, Illinois, a rapidly growing community. In the year of Roth's birth, Aurora schools were busy. The community added four classrooms to St. Joseph Elementary School, and Madonna High School was built, both staffed by the School Sisters of St. Francis who served the expanding Catholic community.

The *Encyclopedia of Chicago History* describes Aurora as "inclusive and tolerant, welcoming a variety of European immigrants" and "progressive in its attitude toward education, religion, welfare, and women."⁴ This community ethic was a good match for the School Sisters who came to the United States with a mission to serve the needs of the church in working with immigrants. It was also a good setting for Virginia whose upbringing was less structured and less conventional due to the death of her mother when Roth was ten years old.

Roth was exceedingly intelligent as a child, entering first grade able to read at an eighth grade reading level. At that time, the only option for her was to be placed in a fast reading group. In a 1972 News interview with Robert McMorris of the *Omaha World Herald*, she recounted feeling bored and unhappy in school. "At the start of each year I would ask myself what the school would make me do that year. They would always think of

something.”⁵ This experience of being passively made to do things and feeling unchallenged planted the seeds for her progressive educational ideas.

The School Sisters of St. Francis

After high school, Roth continued her education, entering the School Sisters of St. Francis on September 1, 1944. She was invested in the order the following year and professed vows on June 21, 1947. The next year she graduated from Alverno College, a private women’s college in Milwaukee operated by the School Sisters. She then embarked on her teaching career. By her own account, Roth’s educational years with the School Sisters were pleasant.

Alverno was chartered in 1887 as St. Joseph’s Normal School and became Alverno Teachers College in 1936. It adopted its current name, Alverno College, in 1946. At the time Roth attended Alverno, it had a traditional teacher preparation program and a focus on the arts. Alverno remains in operation in 2019, having transitioned in the 1960s to the School Sister’s unique educational program, which is an ability-based curriculum. There are no letter grades and students develop a skill set through ongoing assessment and feedback.

After graduation, Roth worked for twelve years as an English teacher in high schools in Chicago, Milwaukee and Winsted, Minnesota. She was described by a fellow educator, School Sister Mary Margaret Ryan as innovative, and an excellent teacher. “Anybody who had her as an English teacher loved English. I mean, she could inspire. She was that type of person.”⁶ From Holy Trinity High School in Winsted, she moved to a new Omaha school, Archbishop Ryan High School, where she worked for the next 12 years. It was there with the School Sisters that she further developed her educational ideas formally, and put them into practice.

Archbishop Ryan High School

James Hugh Ryan was the Archbishop of the Omaha Archdiocese from 1935 to his death in 1947. The bulk of his estate was left for the building of a Catholic high school in south Omaha. His successor, Archbishop Gerald T. Bergan, invited the School Sisters of St. Francis of Milwaukee, Wisconsin to accept the school. The school opened in September of 1958 as Archbishop Ryan High School serving 290 freshmen. For the first years, it operated as a



Ryan High School, Omaha, NE

Photo with permission of Suzanne Luttig

traditional Catholic high school offering a standard college prep program. It is clear from the documents that the opening of a new Catholic high school was an event of tremendous significance to the community. The dedication booklet was financed by area businesses and contains words of their wishes for the success of the school. The eighty-two page booklet features a documented blessing of Pope John XXIII, and photographs of the bishops, clergy, and faculty.

The Student Handbook from that first year presented “A Message from Father Schad” as the first item. In this writing, the superintendent of Catholic schools defined the “spirit of Ryan High School” as three fold: 1) the spirit of Christ, with school as an instrument to foster “the virtues that make a man a saint.” 2) the spirit of home, as an extension of parents and 3) a new spirit in South Omaha to instill in its students a pride in school and Christian heritage to produce worthy citizens.⁷

The text of the first year dedication booklet was written by the School Sisters in poetry, and is addressed to the school itself. The School Sisters

tone was different and very much in keeping with their commitment to students and to the arts. The final poem looks to the future: "Ryan this is your baby book, grow into a young giant. Face the world and laugh at it. Fly. Courage. Fly it to the stars. Father many children. Send them forth to teach all nations Truth, Laughter, Love."⁸

Two years after the school opened, Roth went to Ryan as Sister Pacis, the chairperson of the English department. Two years later, she was named assistant principal and two years after that she replaced Sister Rita Wermes as principal. Initial changes are seen in Sister Pacis's handwritten edits to the school's Student Handbook. In her copy of the 1963-64 student handbook, changes are inked in to the language focus of certain policies. Whether subtly altering the language surrounding the dress code or directly altering the focus of the cheating policy to offer second chances, Sister Pacis was introducing her new thinking into the school's operation.⁹

Sister Pacis (Roth) would be Ryan's longest serving principal and would bring about tremendous changes to the school's program and curriculum. Under her direction, Ryan would become the first school in Nebraska to adopt the modular system of education, entrance requirements were changed to open the school anyone - not just students scoring above the 50th percentile, a student-centric view took over and as part of that that, assessment and feedback was changed.

In September of 1966, Ryan began modular scheduling after two years of preparation. The first extended discussion of curriculum changes appear in the November 3, 1965 meeting record. In the meeting notes, the cooperation among the School Sisters and the appreciation of their expertise was noted. The Sister referenced in the notes is Sister Pacis.

"...another committee to be formed to investigate a curriculum that will meet the school's needs, the student's needs, the world's needs. Sister stated that it was important that each of the departments study their own curriculum in the light of today's national trends. In addition to this, some thought should be given to how often a class should be taught within a week, how long a class period for each subject, and how much independent study could be fostered."¹⁰

Below this, a list of ten faculty members appeared as volunteers for this committee. This kind of faculty involvement is consistently noted throughout the meetings of this period.

In that year, 1965, Sister Pacis (Roth) attended a workshop in Jackson, Mississippi, of 35 nationwide educators. She attended at the invitation of her friend, Dr. J. Lloyd Trump, then executive secretary of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). During this time, she worked with Reverend A. Koob, executive secretary of the National Catholic Educators Association. In a 1970 newspaper article, reflecting on the implementation of modular scheduling, Sister Pacis (Roth) recounted the influence of these men. "I met with people whose full-time jobs were to stimulate," she said. "I then met the Rev. A. Koob, executive secretary of the National Catholic Educators Association." Through association with these people, Sister explained, "I got quite gutsy."¹¹

While Sister Pacis (Roth) was focused on Ryan, the *South Omaha Sun* primarily focused on Roth herself. The article, entitled "'Traditional School' Does Turnabout," asked, "Who dares to be different? When it comes to administering a school, Sister Mary Pacis, OSF, of Ryan High does. It's no secret that Ryan High differs markedly from other Omaha schools – both nonpublic and public and the primary cause for the difference has been its principal, Sister Pacis."¹²

The implementation of modular scheduling also appeared in the *Educational Leadership* journal. A 1967 article, "An Approach to Leadership," by Creighton University Professor Arnold Moore detailed the planning and operational details that went into supporting the change to modular scheduling. He also wrote of the plans for evaluation that would be carried out among the Ryan Staff, Creighton University, and the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory. He concluded the article with a section entitled, "Promising Outcomes." Here he referenced the attention generated by these changes, "339 administrators and teachers from six states visited the school during the first semester. Some individuals have returned four times, with one school basing its decision to adopt modular scheduling on the visits."¹³

One of the early visitors to Ryan to study modular scheduling was Sister Immolata Reida of the Seirei Junior Women's College of Japan. She wrote of the experience, "The program was so liquid that it was possible that no two students any particular year would have exactly the same schedule. Students made up their own program and presented it to an advisor for final approval."¹⁴ The individualized nature of the modular system that Reida described was an important aspect of Roth's model.

Locally, the changes Sister Pacis (Roth) introduced at Ryan High School continued to be covered in local Omaha news. Coverage was initially positive



Virginia Roth

Photo with permission of the *Omaha World Herald*

as in an article from *True Voice* in 1967, in which Sister Pacis (Roth) was praised as “an excellent example of progressive thinking on the part of the administration in Catholic schools”¹⁵ Catholic thinking was becoming more progressive in those years as Vatican II aimed to renew the Catholic Church and modernize its institutions.

In the same year as this article, the Archdiocese laid the cornerstone for Gross High School in August 10, 1967 in South Omaha, two and a half miles away from Ryan. According to an *Omaha World-Herald* article on that day, seven hundred students applied to Ryan each year and only two hundred were accepted.¹⁶ The new school competed for students with Ryan because of its location. Also at this time, there was a population shift in Omaha from the south side to the west side of the city. In order to ensure enrollment for this new school, the Archdiocese instituted a districting policy. Omaha area Catholic families could choose the Catholic school of their choice; however, parents in South Omaha now faced restrictions. Students from certain parishes could not be accepted at Ryan or St. Joseph’s, the other Catholic schools on the South Side, unless the Gross classes were filled. Other parishes were allocated for Ryan and St. Joseph.

This forced enrollment choice was an issue because of the differences in the schools. Ryan was offering modular scheduling and moving to individualized advising. Sister Margaret Mary was a Ryan teacher during those years and felt that enrollment redistricting and Ryan's move away from the diocese was the start of difficulties for the school. In reflecting on the diocesan districting and enrollment curtailment, she said,

They did that for no other Catholic school in the entire city. And Sister Pacis was just very upset. She was angry. She was so angry about that situation that she herself dropped out of, with Ryan, dropped out of the Catholic archdiocesan system. And that was the beginning of the end. She didn't realize it. And I'm certain the community never gave their OK, that just was done and then it was done. And now if you were a pastor, and this school, even though you knew good things about it and you knew people who had graduated from it, but if it was no longer in the archdiocesan system, would you encourage your parishioners to go there? So that was part of the beginning of the end.¹⁷

Archival documents such as board meeting minutes refer to the need to communicate the change in status, and the structure of the new governance, but existing documents do not reflect any specific decision point or an overall process for making the move to operate independently.

More than 20 years later, Virginia Roth gave an interview for Ryan High School's final yearbook. In that 1983 interview, she reflected on the decision to become independent of the diocese. She gave two reasons for the change in status, the districting done to accommodate Gross High School and the related enrollment curtailment. "...the curtailment also blocked off the possibility of any Black or Chicano student attending the school. I didn't feel it was fair to the youngsters to be as a group of white children, totally isolated from other cultures that they were going to have to work and live with later in their adult lives."¹⁸

This commitment to diversity and preparing students to live in the larger culture was important to Roth. In 1971, she arranged for Mrs. Myrlie Evers, widow of Medgar Evers to speak to Ryan students at the school. This openness was a part of Roth's nature and in keeping with the 1960s Zeitgeist. Vatican II's formal directive to modernize combined with the 60s cultural and social progressivism, created openness to change that was seen in education.

Spirit of the Times

The history of Ryan unfolded within a particular cultural environment, namely Omaha, Nebraska. Specifically, it was located in South Omaha, which during the time of Ryan's operation was a largely Catholic, socially conservative community. A 1970 report from the Midcontinent Regional Educational Laboratory described the cultural environment of Ryan:

A study of community background revealed that a large portion of the school's enrollment came from highly nationalistic ethnic groups where, in some cases, English was the second language in the homes. As a consequence, remedial reading programs for incoming freshmen were required if the students were not at their expected reading level. Other curriculum changes were also instituted, but none seemed to have the built-in motivational response necessary to improve student achievement. Obviously, the next step was to investigate teaching method, program structure, and personal involvement in learning for the student. The answer was found in modular scheduling.¹⁹

The changes which Sister Pacis (Roth) introduced to the curriculum happened at a time when the Catholic Church was opening up to change through Vatican II and experimentation in education was encouraged. In the fall of 1967, Fr. Andrew Greeley, a sociologist, spoke to 2,400 educators in Omaha about the societal factors that required changes in education. Among the factors he cited, was the "The confusion within the Catholic Church in the wake of the post-council renewal"²⁰ which raised questions about the value of many traditional institutions including parochial schools. He felt the transitional period could be a time of growth, "if the parochial schools are sensitive enough to the signs of the times and creative enough in developing a rationale for their own contributions to American education."²¹

Without question, The School Sisters of St. Francis were sensitive to the times and creative enough to develop a rationale for their philosophy of education. However, their desire for change was sometimes at odds with those who were experiencing the "confusion" Greeley references. Changes were occurring throughout School Sisters of St. Francis institutions, not just Ryan. Sister Margaret Mary Ryan was one of the Sisters for whom change was initially confusing although she understood the value of it. "I was happy with what I was doing, with how things were going. I didn't want any...my

train of thinking was not, “What’s wrong with this?” You know, but some people, thank God, are put together like that. And that’s how progress in certain social areas occurs because there are people who think like that. Well, we had Sisters who thought like that.”²²

Sister Kathy O’Brien was a young sister at Ryan when these changes were new. In an interview, she reflected on the excitement around Vatican II:

I guess the biggest thing that struck me was the sense of John the 23rd opening the windows and letting the Spirit in and the changes in. What permeated everything was that you questioned everything not in a critical way but in a kind of creative way, “What about this makes sense now and what doesn’t?” That was sort of the spirit of everything. What would help people and what doesn’t?²³

Over time, the tolerance for change began to lessen, especially in the conservative climate of South Omaha. O’Brien speculated that, as it related to Ryan, part of this was tied to Sister Pacis’ (Roth) gender. “I would say the feminist movement was a major reason why Pacis wasn’t listened to, because she became, in people’s minds, a kind of feminist they didn’t want to support. ‘What were those women doing down there for heaven’s sake?’ It was a challenge to the authority held by males. I remember more discussions on that in relationship to Pacis than other things, but it’s hard for me to know.”²⁴

On Her Own

Nineteen seventy-three was a watershed year for Virginia Roth as conflict with the Archdiocese and a changing spirit of the times affected her. She changed her employment and her identity as she left Ryan High and withdrew from the School Sisters of St. Francis. This meant more than leaving the name Pacis behind, it meant separating from the community of women to whom she had belonged for more than 20 years. From Ryan, she went to work for Westside High School in District 66 as a curriculum consultant. District 66 is a community school district in Omaha. Westside High School had moved to Modular scheduling and individual advising in 1967. The school continues the use of these methods in 2019. In addition

to her work at District 66, Roth also worked for Education Associates, a consulting firm and continued her speaking engagements. She was featured regularly in the local news as she spoke to various groups on educational innovation.

She remained committed to service to others and put this into action beyond her work in education. She was a member of the Omaha Human Relations Board. There also, she was a controversial figure. She joined the board in 1978 and suggested the formation of a committee on the status of women. One year earlier, Omaha's mayor had disbanded such a committee. In 1979, despite her 100% attendance at meetings during her entire service to the board, she was asked to leave the board as it was noted that she lived just outside of Omaha city limits. Two men, who had poor records for attendance at meetings, were retained.²⁵ Undaunted, she continued to serve the community taking a committee position in 1980 with the Nebraska Committee for Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Abuse.

She also continued to speak in Omaha and other states to civic and education groups such as the American Association of University Women and Pi Lambda Theta. She addressed different topics and spoke about scheduling and student focused learning. Eventually her audience expanded as groups asked for her ideas on the future. In a March 5, 1983 news article, she was featured as a "working futurist" and quoted as saying, "Initially, I talked about the future of schooling. Then I realized you can't talk about any one societal segment alone... There are so many other important, interrelated things to consider. They'll have an influence and an impact in a dynamic, close-fitting way."

Roth did not view futurism as predictions of coming events. Instead, she viewed futurism as a way of seeing how things would come together and believed that futurists could cut down on the lag time between inventions and the use of inventions. This particular news article appeared just as Ryan High School was closing and preparing to graduate its last class. The interviewer asked her about the closure and the differing opinions about the school's program. She acknowledged the controversy and responded with her characteristic confidence saying that she did not doubt her methods. "It worked. I don't know about the politics involved but it in no way can subtract from the good things that were done for so many young people."²⁶

Legacy and Impact

Doing good things for young people was a major motivation for Roth in pursuing educational innovation. In a 1983 interview for Ryan's final year-book, Virginia Roth reflected more closely on her thinking at the time she was contemplating changes for Ryan.

I think besides my own personal disappointment with schooling throughout my lifetime, the most important thing to me was this: in those days, we had an admissions standard at Ryan. We attracted the very brightest kids possible and when we hit the quota, we just didn't take anybody below a given percentile on a test. So we had the cream of the crop in the school who were performing less well than they should have. If we had these bright kids, and if they were not performing the way we thought they should, was it the teacher's fault? I spent a lot of time the first year I was principal watching teachers to see what they were doing wrong. I had an excellent staff; they weren't really doing anything wrong; but, the system worked against people performing closer to their top pitch. So I said, "OK, if it's not the kids, and it's not the staff, it's got to be the system." So that's what we changed.²⁷

Students in Omaha continue to benefit from these innovations through modular scheduling and individual advising that remains in place at West-side High School.

In the 1960s, Roth was influenced by her friend, J. Lloyd Trump, who forwarded the "Model Schools Project" through the NASSP. In 2005, James W. Keefe and Robert B. Amenta published "Whatever Happened to the Model Schools Project." In this writing, they highlighted Trump saying, "Future historians of American education may well recognize J. Lloyd trump, former Associate Secretary for Research and Development for the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) as the pivotal school reform figure of the second half of the 20th century."²⁸ They placed their review of Model Schools Project in the context of ongoing discussion of school improvement. The idea of educational innovation or reform has never ceased. Keefe and Amenta point out that, "It is interesting to note that, as reform models are proposed and discussed by educators and the general public, the ideas presented four decades ago often reemerge

as viable and worthy of consideration.”²⁹ Here is where Roth’s legacy is important. She was not just about ideas; she was a woman of action with the clarity of mind and conceptual ability to put ideas into operation. Her “A Model for an Alternate High School” written in 1973 is an artifact of the thinking that went into educational innovation in those years and is a testament to ideas that stood the test of time. The clearly detailed ideas in that document read as a blueprint for the education that was still offered in 1983 when I was a Ryan student.

Virginia Roth was more than an idealistic dreamer. She was an outspoken woman with a well-articulated vision for education and the will to implement it. Her conviction came from her own experience of education and from being part of a Religious community that saw a mission to serve God through the recognition of the sacredness of individuals in education. She was also well aware of the forces that impact education. She summarized the threat that Ryan presented in her interview with David Mack when she left Ryan in 1973.

Ryan is threatening to some educators because they’d have to turn everything around. If a school system values the security of the administration and the teachers more than it values the security of the learner, it will not change. It will continue to structure things in such a way that the teachers are not responsible for the learners. All teachers will have to do is get up in front of a classroom and perform, in spite of what happens to the kids. If the public is satisfied with a diploma, rather than what’s happening to their child, taxpayers will blindly pay taxes and support bond issues to maintain brick buildings and the security of the staff.³⁰

She may not have been actively working as a futurist at the time of that statement, but she certainly hit upon a description of education that is recognizable today, even 40 years later. Blunt comments such as these contributed to her image as a “firebrand.” Her outspoken nature was viewed as particularly disruptive in a woman and a religious sister. Sister Kathleen O’Brien reflected upon this, saying, “I think in today’s era, she would not have been looked at as so outspoken, so she had the poor fortune of being in an era when to raise your head and voice wasn’t a good thing.”³¹

It is a very good thing that Virginia Roth raised her head and her voice. From Kindergarten through high school, I attended schools directed and managed by School Sisters of St. Francis. Women educators as leaders were

unremarkable to me; I saw them every day at school. I have long admired Virginia Roth and in my work as Director of an independent study school, I am able to apply much of what I learned from my own education at Ryan High School.

A great deal of documentation exists on Ryan High School and the School Sisters of Saint Francis. Margaret Susan Thompson calls Catholic sisters “probably the most thoroughly documentable women in the world”³² because canon law requires religious congregations to maintain archives. I used data and documents from the archives of the School Sisters of St. Francis in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I also used archived stories from the *Omaha World Herald*. The archived information is extensive, but there is a limit to what static documents can tell us about the school and its philosophy. Interview data from School Sisters who knew Roth was invaluable in gaining insight into the events described in meeting notes and news articles.

In reviewing the news coverage, the shifting perspective on progressive education can be seen. Initially, the reforms were well received but over time, questions arose regarding the amount of freedom and decision-making given to students. Sister Immolata Reida, the early visitor from Japan, visited Ryan again in 1978 and noted many changes. “Much of the former freedom became individually directed study. However, the south Omaha community did not know of these changes, or if they did, they did not understand them. Enrollment continued its downward plunge.”³³

Delving into Roth’s life provided a context for what happened at the school, and adds richness to the story of Ryan. An important lesson learned is that when focusing on a person, and in particular, a controversial person, perceptions color the information. Was Roth a “brilliant educator” or “a firebrand?” Both? Were the innovations and her strength of purpose born of her own disappointment in education? Did they come from her corporate identity as a School Sister of St. Francis and their mission for education as social justice? Did they come from her contact with J. Lloyd Trump and other educators? It is not possible to say definitively. I have chosen to present a variety of perceptions. What is important is that she established innovative educational practices that were long lasting and she left a detailed record of her thinking in “A Model for an Alternate High School.” Perceptions varied as tolerance for innovation and reform changed over time, but her actions and accomplishments stand on their own.

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