

Book Review**The Trouble with Ed Schools**

By David F. Labaree

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Professors of education, when gathered at faculty meetings or professional conferences, often strongly agree on issues such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (it's bad), authentic assessment (it's good), fast-track alternative certification (it's iffy), and numerous other topics related to the profession. Indeed, the consensus of opinion among education professors is generally so strong that it comes as a shock to many that the world "outside"—federal agencies, state boards of education, local school boards, our next-door neighbor, perhaps even our spouse—may not agree with us. At a recent national conference of education professors, there was much talk about doing a better job of getting our message "out there." Curiously, however, there was no consideration given to the possibility that we have gotten our message out there, and the world outside simply disagrees.

In *The Trouble with Ed Schools*, educational historian and sociologist David F. Labaree presents a sobering analysis of the American school of education and offers several reasons why professors of education may not get respect outside the corridors of the ed school. Although Labaree is generally supportive of the mission of the ed school, many education faculty will find his thesis unsettling. Labaree admittedly follows earlier critiques by James Koerner, Rita Kramer, Thomas Sowell, E. D. Hirsch, and the Holmes Group (representing deans of education at over 100

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universities) that faulted the quality of education students, faculty, and curriculum. But Labaree's intent is not to lambaste the ed school; rather, he presents an "interpretive analysis" of the economic, historical, functional, and philosophical bases of the ed school's "chronic status problems."

According to Labaree, all three roles of the ed school (teacher preparation, educational research, and the preparation of future educational researchers) have contributed to its denigrated reputation, but of these "teacher education, it turns out, is at the heart of the trouble with ed schools" (p. 17). Teacher education is tainted by its involvement with professional practice. Unlike medical and law schools, ed schools do not benefit from the elevated status of the profession it prepares. Thus, ed schools are more akin to their counterparts in nursing and social work than those in medicine and law. Labaree argues that teaching is a far more complex task than it appears, requiring teachers to work with a compulsory and often unwilling clientele. The public, which does not respect the demands of teaching, is unimpressed by a professional preparation program that, in the public's view, can bungle something presumably so simple.

Teacher education acquired its low status early on when it chose monopoly over selectivity. The accelerated growth of American public education, coupled with the high turnover of a predominantly female teaching force, required normal schools to produce an increasing number of teachers, at the lowest possible unit cost. If normal schools made teacher education programs too selective, or too difficult, the supply would not meet the demand, and school districts would find alternative routes for qualifying prospective teachers.

At the same time, normal schools began responding to market demands for liberal arts courses by non-education majors. Normal schools eventually transformed into regional, general-purpose universities, resulting in the marginalization of departments or schools of education within the very institutions that were intended to bolster the professional status of teachers.

Labaree also places blame for the ed school's low status on the research it produces. Educational research lacks academic stature because it is both "soft"—it is extremely difficult to establish that findings are definitive and cumulative—and "applied"—it is used to solve contextualized problems, not develop universal theories. Educational researchers do not enjoy the theory-driven foundations of other soft fields or the strong quantitative analyses of other applied fields. Due to the diffusion of educational problems and the inability to make causal claims, educational research appears to gain little ground, so "at the end of long and distinguished careers, senior educational researchers are likely to

find that they are still working on the same questions that confronted them at the beginning” (p. 77).

Labaree considers it a misperception that doctoral students in education are not as intelligent as other graduate students. He notes that doctoral students at the Top 50 ed schools score 100 points above the mean on the GRE. Nonetheless, Labaree contends that education professors consider their graduate students ill-equipped for doctoral work. Part of the difficulty is the nature of a master’s degree in education, which rarely lays the groundwork for doctoral study. Another obstacle arises when experienced teachers and school administrators returning to graduate school to attain a doctorate are required to transform their cultural orientation from “normative to analytical” (p. 91).

A final source of the status problems of ed schools explored by Labaree is its prolonged and almost universal adherence to Deweyan pedagogical progressivism, whose mantra of process over product, child over content, and feelings over knowledge places it at odds with many outside of the ed school. Labaree notes the ed school’s love affair with pedagogical progressivism has had little lasting effect on public schools, where the social-efficiency model (termed “administrative progressivism”) has trumped pedagogical progressivism. Labaree agrees with Ellen Lagemann’s (1989) assessment that Thorndike won and Dewey lost. Thorndike’s notion of differentiation of learning opportunities based on differences in ability led to school curricula that focus on teaching narrow skills and particular knowledge to prepare students for specific roles in a social order. Labaree holds the social-efficiency model responsible for tracking, ability testing, a vocational orientation to schooling, and a “dumbing down” of the K-12 curriculum.

Fortunately, says Labaree, ed schools are too weak to inflict any real harm on public schools with their romantic vision of pedagogical progressivism. Furthermore, ed schools are not successful at convincing their graduates to implement a child-centered curriculum. Pedagogical progressivism has taken over ed school rhetoric but not school practice. Ironically, ed school faculty may “talk the talk” of pedagogical progressivism, but they don’t “walk the walk.” Educational research remains essentially instrumentalist, studying teaching effects on student achievement, and teacher preparation remains essentially knowledge-based and teacher-centered.

Much of Labaree’s thesis is built upon a contrast between the high “use value” of teaching, teacher preparation, and educational research and their low “exchange value.” Exchange value deals with the commoditization of a product or service: what it can be exchanged for in terms of money, prestige, or social standing. According to Labaree, teaching

lacks exchange value mostly because it is a difficult job that appears easy. Exchange value is also diminished because teachers are overrepresented by stigmatized populations (women, working class) who serve another stigmatized population (children).

Labaree's explanations are surely part of an answer, but we also might need to consider how the commitment to universal public education in the United States also contributes to the status of ed schools. In societies in which completing or even attending school is reserved for the select few, the entire enterprise of schooling assumes an element of prestige. In contrast, in the U.S. we hold as a core value that high school graduation is a worthy goal for all students (and with that goal comes the necessary adjustment of completion criteria). To the extent full school completion is not achieved, we feel that our educational charge is unfulfilled. Education professors, with their frequent calls for school reform, may unwittingly contribute to the very status problem they may wish to eliminate.

In addition, Labaree's explanation that educational research holds low exchange value because of its soft/applied nature does not address why "soft" and "applied" research is held in low esteem. Surely it might be argued that research intended to solve here-and-now, every-day problems is more important to society than research intended to establish or verify abstract theories. To fully understand how hard/pure research gained status, we would need to explore a history of Western philosophy, a topic surely outside the scope of Labaree's book, but nonetheless implicated by his assertions.

Although Labaree discusses the status plight of all education professors, he appears more sympathetic to non-teacher education faculty at research universities (of which he is one), whose reputations are sullied through association with the 35 percent of all ed school faculty who work in teacher education, mostly at non-doctoral institutions. He questions whether ed schools at the most prestigious universities should move closer to or further away from a focus on practice at the K-12 level, but decides that neither approach is satisfactory. He notes that, unable to resolve the conundrum of low status, several prominent universities, including Yale, Johns Hopkins, Duke, and Chicago, have disbanded their ed schools.

The Trouble with Ed Schools is both provocative and insightful. It probes the ed school's status from a scholarly perspective that is nonetheless inviting and accessible. Labaree is careful not to join the chorus of ed school critics; indeed, he often assumes the role of advocate. His stance alternates between admiration for the ed school faculty who must fulfill difficult and conflicting roles and ridicule for the "ninety-seven-pound weaklings of American higher education."

Although prescription is beyond Labaree's stated purpose, the reader is left to ponder how to address status issues that clearly affect whether the education professorate can influence educational policy and practice. Labaree's ultimate message may be that the status problem is an unresolvable dilemma. If education professors gravitate further toward theory-driven "ivory towers," they may gain respect within the general community that drives educational policy, but lose it among the school personnel who must execute it. Furthermore, if they move away from the "ivory tower" toward more active and direct involvement with K-12 education, they may become even more ostracized by the academic community that disdains such a proletarian endeavor.

The Trouble with Ed Schools is an excellent overview of the status issues facing schools of education, putting into perspective many of the frustrations education faculty encounter when interacting with faculty from other disciplines and constituencies outside the university.

Reference

- Lagemann, E. C. (1989). The plural worlds of educational research. *History of Education Quarterly*, 29(2), 185-214.