book review

Training Teachers
Is It a Lost Cause?

The Trouble with Ed Schools
By David F. Labaree
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As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Once long ago I noticed the great disparity between what theology and religion students were expected to know to write their theses—Latin, Greek, Hebrew, a few modern languages—and where they ended up: teaching religion, not a very high-prestige subject, for modest rewards, in minor liberal arts colleges. A similar disparity exists between the difficulty of teaching well and doing good education research, on the one hand, and, on the other, the low prestige and modest rewards of teachers and education researchers and the schools of education that prepare them both.

This is David Labaree’s subject in The Trouble with Ed Schools, and he is very good at laying out all the considerations that contribute to the low repute of the ed school within the university, despite the acknowledged importance of the area of practice with which it deals. Presidents, governors, leading corporation executives, and intellectuals worry about the quality of our teachers, our schools, and the education they provide, but this seems to do little to raise the prestige of the institution that is primarily responsible for training teachers, doing research, and raising the quality of education. It is not easy to understand the gross disparities between the significance of various tasks for our lives and the rewards to those engaged in these tasks. Why should a baseball player earn ten times more than the president does? (“Well, I had a better year,” Babe Ruth is said to have responded in 1929, when the disparity between his salary and President Hoover’s was only two to one.)

Labaree is a professor in the School of Education at Stanford (he taught earlier for 18 years at the College of Education of Michigan State). He is concerned with the disparity between what one learns in schools and at college that is usable (“use value”), and the rewards one actually gets from one’s education, which is based on the credential (“exchange value”). He writes as both a historian and a sociologist, though it is not clear that he is either—the various disciplines are not sharply distinguished in a school of education. He analyzes the problem of the low status of the school of education, describing the origins of teacher education in the normal school and its more recent attempt to raise its status to the position of state college. And he ascribes the basic status problems of education to the population with which it deals—children—and the gender and class of those recruited to teach them—generally women, and of working- or lower-middle class status. Further contributing to the low status of the school of education is the quality of the knowledge with which it tries to manage its task—which is soft, uncertain, not based directly on disciplines of high prestige.

All this is laid out very well. Labaree is particularly good at analyzing why teaching, despite its difficulty, is seen as something that anyone can do and for which anyone can prescribe improvement. As he writes: “One reason that teaching is such a difficult profession is that its aim is to change the behavior of the client, and…its success depends on the willingness of the client to cooperate… This effort is complicated by the fact that the client is brought to the classroom under compulsion… A surgeon can fix the ailment of a patient who sleeps through the operation, and a lawyer can successfully defend a client who remains mute during a trial. The student must be willing to learn what the teacher is teaching.” Teaching depends on establishing a relationship; hardly anything can be accomplished without it. Labaree is also very good at describing the peculiar difficulties of education research, where every class, every teacher, and every school is different, and where the effort to reach generalizable conclusions is fraught with complications.

But perhaps the most interesting part of his analysis is his discussion of the role of “progressive education” in affecting the culture of schools of education and contributing to the poor results of American schools. Progressive education, through its influence on schools of education, is seen as a major culprit by many writers, from James Koerner in the 1960s to E. D. Hirsch, Diane Ravitch, and Chester Finn in our own day. But Labaree has a particularly subtle and I believe valid interpretation of history. He points out—following Ellen Condliffe Lagemann and others—that progressive education had at
least two variants, one dealing with curriculum and pedagogy, another dealing with organization for efficiency and social usefulness. As Lagemann wrote, “One cannot understand the history of education in the United States during the twentieth century unless one realizes that Edward L. Thorndike won and John Dewey lost. If Dewey has been revered among some educators…Thorndike’s thought has been most influential within education. It helped to shape public school practice as well as scholarship about education.”

But that is only the beginning of Labaree’s sophisticated analysis. In fact, Dewey’s pedagogical and curricular approach did win in the schools of education: his ideas shape what teachers are taught, what professors of education prefer. It is just that in practice, once teachers are ensconced in schools, they are in an organizational setting that dictates that they will move from child-centered to teacher-centered education, from project-centered to text-centered education, from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation, and the like. They will have to do so because almost all schools emphasize testing for achievement in curricular requirements common to all. They have to. And this was true even before the No Child Left Behind act, though that has accentuated the triumph of Thorndike over Dewey. As Labaree puts it, and he is an excellent phrase maker: “The two wings of the progressive movement in effect divided the territory, with one taking the ground and the other the air. The administrative progressives focused on organization and the pedagogues on rhetoric.” Of course, it is possible for the ed school professors, who will play a role in the tests required by NCLB, to weaken the tests to the point where they arouse no fear, but that does not yet seem to be the situation.

The power of the education consumer was one important reason the administrative progressives won, Labaree argues. The administrative progressives, it is true, watered down classic curricular requirements as they tried to adapt schooling to the varied lives, with varied needs, for which students were headed, from factory and white-collar work to college admission and the amount of learning that is needed to attain a particular level of credential.

As one can see from this analysis, Labaree does not expect anything to happen as a result of changes in the ed school, and he proposes no reforms. He would like “use value”—the usable knowledge one gets from education—to be preferred to “exchange value”—what one gains from the credential. But there is an ambiguity to “use value” as he uses it that he does not clarify in this book. Value for what kind of use? For citizenship? For the fullest human development? One assumes that is what he would like the schools to foster, as against the trap of credentialism, but that is not spelled out. After all, the administrative progressives also were maximizing use value, but use for a stratified society that Labaree does not like. The kind of use value for education that I think he prefers refers to ideas, knowledge, self-development—very different from the kind of “use value” that has made business our largest undergraduate major. One senses from Labaree’s frequent use of the terms use value and exchange value that he would prefer a society in which market values were not so dominant and education for its intrinsic worth was more desired and respected. In such a society presumably the ed school’s status is raised: it is serving a different kind of use. But he is not optimistic about any prospective change in the present situation, in which education for itself, for its own sake, is not the motivating force in the system.

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One reason that teaching is such a difficult profession is that its aim is to change the behavior of the client, and its success depends on the willingness of the client to cooperate professions. In so doing, they “increased inequality by stratifying the curriculum, reduced learning by bargaining down consent, and increased costs by extending the demand for educational credentials well beyond the social requirements for human capital.” But after all, isn’t this what the education consumer wanted? “Like any other consumer, the education consumer has a strong incentive to get the maximum benefit from a commodity while investing the minimum amount of time, effort, and money to obtain it. In school, this translates into strong consumer pressure to lower academic standards, reduce requirements, and minimize the

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