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## ***The Trouble with Ed Schools: A Book Review***

Labaree, David F. (2004). *The Trouble with Ed Schools*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 256 pp. \$29.00 (hardback) ISBN 03001203506.

**Reviewed by: Justin M. Finney**

American schools of education, whose two primary objectives are to prepare highly qualified teachers and to conduct valid and reliable education research, are often decried as “weak institutions” by many in academia and society in general. American schools of education are very often scorned by scholars and academia as intellectually inferior, referred to by teachers in the field as the “ivory tower” and considered to be out of touch and completely unrelated to what really transpires in schools, perceived by political leaders at all levels to be a primary contributing factor to the substandard state of contemporary public education. These are the observations and assertions of David Labaree, a professor in the school of education at Stanford University, who in *The Trouble with Ed Schools* employs critical sociological and historical analyses to analyze and examine the factors that have directly contributed to the lowly status of education schools in general, and the contemporary assumptions and perceptions that perpetuate this lowly status. If we as educators (and a society for that matter) are to achieve excellence in education we must be willing to engage in critical self reflection and analysis about the means by which we prepare teachers and engage in educational research and policy making. *The Trouble with Ed Schools* serves well as an impetus for such reflection and analysis.

In the initial chapters Labaree outlines the main contributing factors to the lowly status of education schools. In chapter two, Labaree outlines the evolution of education schools from their simple origins as vocational type normal schools in the mid-nineteenth century to their current level in the contemporary four year university. Labaree credits this evolution to consumerism and market pressures. That is to say, the increasing demand for teachers beginning in the early twentieth century required teacher preparation programs to essentially become “teacher factories” (p. 20). The tremendous

demand for teachers, and the education school’s attempts to meet these high demands, meant that education schools were now at the mercy of the forces of supply and demand, providing useful credentials to masses of teachers. This mass production of teachers resulted in a loss of selectivity on the part of the education schools, and thus “by becoming socially useful, it has lost social respect” (p. 25). In essence, market forces have forced education schools to provide students an abundance of credentials and knowledge with high use value for teaching in primary and secondary classrooms, rather than knowledge and credentials with high exchange value so richly desired and valued by those in academia to secure status, accolades, funding, and tenure.

In chapter three, Labaree emphasizes another common factor which contributes greatly to the lowly status of education schools. This factor, simply stated, is that most of the public naively perceives teaching as an easy endeavor, and that the skills necessary to teach effectively come naturally to most people. Moreover, teacher preparation is considered by many people to be just as easy. Labaree explains how people mistakenly “berate these [teacher preparation] programs for making a simple induction process unnecessarily complicated” (p. 39). Critics also decry that “only a relentlessly wrong headed institution like an education school could mess up something as easy and natural as learning to teach” (p. 40). Labaree, with great empathy, details how teaching and teacher preparation are in reality complicated, almost beyond comprehension, by such ever-changing factors as client cooperation, compulsory clientele, emotional management, isolation, and chronic uncertainty as to outcomes.

Labaree, in chapters four and five, provides poignant analysis of the inaccurate perception and characterization of education schools as institutions that train and produce poorly trained educational

researchers who subsequently conduct and produce soft-natured research. Educational research is perceived by many in academia to be soft in the sense that it does not produce pure and reproducible knowledge, due to the complex and ever-changing nature of the subjects and concepts being investigated. As stated earlier, educational research produces knowledge with high use value in the field rather than high exchange value. Although the negative perceptions of educational research described by Labaree are solidly entrenched in much of academia, he does chronicle a number of positive consequences associated with educational research. Labaree suggests that seeking to produce useful knowledge, freedom from disciplinary boundaries, and the ability to speak to a wide and general audience are all beneficial consequences of educational research.

In the final chapters of the book Labaree connects the lowly status of the education school to the low status of the education professor. The low status of the education professorate is a direct result of the avenues by which education faculty have ascended into higher education and their romance with progressive educational theory. According to Labaree, many professors of education are held in low regard by others in academe due to their origins within the working class. That education professors are more likely to have attended local and state universities and that they are more likely to have completed their graduate studies on a part time basis while teaching full time in the K-12 school setting, help form the inaccurate perceptions by many scholars in academia that the training of education faculty has been less than rigorous, leaving education faculty ill prepared to function effectively at the highest levels of academic discourse. Labaree emphasizes that this characterization of education professors is grossly unfair, asserting that many in academia are simply attempting to preserve traditional power structures from which they benefit greatly.

Labaree also emphasizes the education professor's romance with progressive educational theory as a contributing factor to the low status of education schools. The progressive educational and

pedagogical theories, put forth in the early twentieth century by scholars such as John Dewey, are problematic for schools of education because they are considered to be outdated and impractical by administrative progressives who have become the dominant influence in the realm of contemporary education reform policy. This leads to the belief on the part of administrative progressives that, because pedagogical progressive theories are outdated, so too must those be who cling to these romantic notions. Labaree, himself, seems somewhat ambivalent about progressive education policies and is somewhat vague about his opposition to progressive theories in the public school setting. Nonetheless, he asserts that education schools, in their fatal allegiance to progressive educational theory as a means to counteract or forestall the centralized and utilitarian policies being implemented by administrative progressives, are losing the debate as to what is best for American education. In defense of this assertion Labaree writes, "In a contest between utility and romance, utility is usually going to win: it promises to give us something we need rather than merely something we might like" (p.153).

Admittedly, all colleges and schools of education do not fit the harsh characterizations put forth by Labaree in this book. However, anyone involved in the processes of teacher preparation and educational policy, education school faculty in particular, will find Labaree's analysis painfully enlightening and thought provoking to say the least. Labaree's critical analysis, unbiased conclusions, and insightful commentary add significantly to the body of knowledge in educational policy and research by offering clarity into the development and functioning of these stigmatized institutions.