BOOK REVIEW

The ed School's Troubles. Reflections upon reading David Labaree's *The Trouble with ed Schools*.

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You must remember that there is a basic continuity
between a good professional school and good barber college.

Gustave Weigel (1961)¹

Weigel was speaking to a group of young graduate students at a time when the North American University had not yet inaugurated its headlong flight into professional programs of every description and at every level of instruction. If memory serves this reviewer correctly, his argument was that the university was properly the place of intellectual endeavour that was prepared to re-examine the first principles of the various disciplines. Professional schools, on the other hand, existed to provide agreed-upon intellectual resources in order to function in practical settings. In very important ways, therefore, professional schools provided an induction into the *status quo*. Their graduates must understand “how the world works” in their chosen field in order to survive and eventually thrive in that world. To do less, or something else, would be to do a grave disservice to future practitioners: thus the continuity between a good professional school and a good barber college.

There were at the time faculties of law, nursing, education, and theology, to name a few, some inherited from the mediaeval university, others from the incipient modern university. These were intended to prepare the future leaders of the profession: those who, indeed, were prepared to re-examine its first principles. Others in the field would receive their training in a different setting: hospitals, normal schools, seminaries—the name and the setting varied with the profession, and their setting was inevitably on or outside the confines of the university.

We now know that Weigel was attempting to stem the tide of the wholesale professionalization of the university. Not only have the traditional professions joined the ranks of the university offerings since then; others have scurried to join the ranks of the professions and semi-professions as formed by the university. Even the humanities attempt to sell themselves in an increasingly consumerized environment by claiming to provide “practical” (presumably as opposed to “useless”) knowledge.

Weigel was speaking towards the end of what Tribe (2004) has called the “modern” university (ca 1850–ca 1950 in the UK)—an institution that was prepared, in Weigel’s felicitous terms, to re-examine the first principles of the disciplines. Since then

the “postmodern” university (the term is purely episodic for Tribe) has veered off into a direction that emphasizes the accumulation of usable knowledge in practical settings. Indeed, Tribe reminds us that the increase of university enrolments since 1980 is entirely due to the increase of enrolments in professional programs.

What about the status of professional schools within the university, and of “ed schools” (university schools of education) among them? At first glance it would appear that the ed school is well positioned to profit from this “practical turn” as a model of a “learning community” for the rest of the university. The present reading is suggested by David Labaree’s (2004) attempts to address this issue, with particular emphasis on the College of Education in a research-intensive university. His perspective is that of historical sociology with equal emphasis on both disciplines.

The historical perspective leads the author to an overview of the history of the teacher preparation institution in the U.S. It ranges from a normal school embedded in local communities providing higher education in a *de facto* community college for students who could not attend State universities, to Colleges of Education at the origin of a regional university, soon to be marginalized both literally and figuratively within the burgeoning university. Labaree argues that the low status of the present-day ed school is directly related (he is careful to say correlated) to its historical origins in the normal school.

The early history of normal schools forced ed schools into a factory model of teacher production that took in vast numbers of low status candidates (a.k.a. weak students) to supply the needs of an expanding school system requiring continual replenishment as teachers appeared and disappeared even as the number of students increased exponentially. Moreover, this needed to be accomplished as cheaply as possible. (Even today, universities are reluctant to dispense with ed schools because of the revenue that they generate, even though they are despised within the academy.)

The sociological perspective leads Labaree to examine the ed school not from the standpoint of the quality of performance in carrying out professional education, but from that of “the status of teacher education in the social and educational hierarchy” (2004, p. 18). The status perspective draws the author to two sets of overriding concepts that appear time and again in his analysis of various features of the ed school.

The first is “the market” which the author defines as a social arena in which individual and organizational actors competitively pursue private gain through the exchange of commodities.... The value of these commodities... is established by the relationship between supply and demand rather than by any intrinsic qualities in the goods and services themselves. (p.18)

Thus, the knowledge acquired in a teacher education program might be relevant to the task of teaching, but it “may well be irrelevant to the social position occupied by teachers (or teacher educators)” (Labaree, 2004, p. 19). The issue, then, at this level of analysis, is not whether the acquired knowledge is useful or not; rather, it is the status of teachers (and their own teachers) that determines the status of whatever it is that they learn.

This leads to another distinction that the author uses to characterize the kind of knowledge acquired in professional schools, namely, its use-value and its exchange-

value. A university education can provide credentials that can be exchanged for something that is valuable for the students, typically “a good job and a nice standard of living” (Labaree, 2004, p.19). On the other hand, a university education might actually prove useful in carrying out their roles in later life.

The one is not necessarily related to the other. Programs and degrees that provide high exchange value do not necessarily provide any knowledge of intrinsic value; programs that provide knowledge of value (to the student at least) do not necessarily provide high exchange value. But this is a shifting conceptual distinction that the author does not explore. To low status students, a low-status degree might indeed provide high exchange value, that is, it can be “traded in” for a relatively higher social promotion.

Labaree relates the low status of the ed school within the university to a number of factors, but four stand out. First of all, ed schools deal with teachers and would-be teachers of the young and the less young, an affliction that does not burden professional schools that induct students into the sacred mysteries of finance, say, or of jurisprudence. The care of the young has historically been associated with low-status occupations, especially given the preponderance of females in the profession, although this was not always the case. Second-ly, there is the history of the ed school, embedded in its origins as the poor man’s leg-up into social respectability. Students who could not afford to go away to college could at least enrol in the local normal school *cum* teachers’ college, even if they had no intention of teaching. (Both Richard Nixon and Lyndon B. Johnson were graduates of colleges of education.) Thirdly, everyone has spent a number of years observing various teachers over extended periods of time, therefore creating the universal perception of expertise on how to teach and how to prepare teachers. Finally, there is the type of knowledge espoused by the ed school: “soft,” qualitative research as opposed to the “hard,” quantitative research so much admired by the rest of the university. (If there are numbers, it must be real, whatever the “it” is.)¹

So what *is* the trouble with ed schools? In Labaree’s view, while the ed school has been accused of many faults, the ed school is not guilty, because it was not strong enough to impose its vision on the educational system.

The good news about ed schools is that they are not powerful enough to do much harm to American education, despite all the heinous crimes that are often attributed to them. But the bad news is that they are also not powerful enough to do much good for a system of schooling that could really use their help. (Labaree, 2004, p. 194)

This sounds like damning with very faint praise indeed. At the heart of this admitted ambivalence is the author’s claim that while the ed school has been preaching the child-centred curriculum *à la* John Dewey, the educational system as a whole has followed the dictates of Edward Thorndike, another educational Progressive who was much more concerned with social efficiency and the development of tools for the educational sorting of individuals into socially useful groupings through the use of grades, marks, streaming, testing, etc. Labaree quotes the much-repeated statement of Ellen Lagemann (1989, p. 185) to the effect that “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.” This is probably still news for a good number of teacher educators, as Labaree goes on to point out.

Labaree makes a useful distinction, following Kliebard (1988), between pedagogical Progressives and administrative Progressives. The former subscribe to a certain number of tenets that Labaree, borrowing from Jeanne Chall (2000, p. 29), contrasts with “traditional” teaching according to a certain number of low-inference indicators that have become *loci communi* in ed schools: teacher as leader vs. teacher as facilitator; use of single commercial textbooks vs. access to a rich variety of materials; small range of activities vs. a wide range; whole class grouping vs. small groups; restricted interactions among students vs. free movement to facilitate cooperative ventures; students progressing as a group vs. student progressing at own rate, etc. The author provides a list of some ten binary distinctions (as opposed to binary oppositions)² that distinguish between traditional teaching and the brand that is advocated in the ed schools. Both defenders and opponents of one or the other of these polarities assume a univocal relationship between the physical activities in the classroom and the mental activities in a student’s head. But Labaree is not into that particular debate; rather, he is preoccupied with trying to defend the ed school while taking seriously the observations from its conservative critics.

This general orientation to pedagogy, which Dewey would probably have rejected at a certain number of points, has become the “official ideology” of the ed school, according to Labaree, preventing it from having any serious impact on the practice of learning in real settings because it has little impact on the practice of schooling in educational systems.

This analysis enables Labaree to save the ed school from its conservative critics who claim that the ed school is the source of much that is wrong with the American educational system. On the other hand, it leaves him in an awkward position: he must observe a strange silence regarding the long term effects of this disconnect on teacher education programs. If it is true that there is a important gap between what is taught in the ed school and what is practiced in the schools, then what are the long term prospects for a transformation of this situation? The “official ideology” of the pedagogical Progressives is so entrenched in the ed school, according to Labaree, that this would appear to leave a permanent state of dystopia. He is obliged, by his very analysis, to set aside any possibility of the reform of teacher education. If pedagogical progressivism were such a pervasive ideology within ed schools, it would take something akin to a neutron bomb to clear out the dross within ed schools and begin anew. But this is not likely to happen. Colleges of education will continue to replenish the stock of pedagogical Progressives, who will continue to denounce the aberrations of the legislator rather than the erstwhile administrative Progressives, secure in the knowledge that they possess the Truth about schooling while others wallow in the depths of Ignorance if not Vice.

Labaree uses the concepts of use-value and exchange value to analyze the relationship between the ed school and the rest of the university. Although this is his constant preoccupation throughout the book, the chapters dealing with *The particular problems of doing educational research* and *The status dilemmas of education*

professors appear to confront the issue more directly than others. On the one hand, the author makes the case that the ed school is disadvantaged because it deals in “soft” qualitative and practical research that is incapable of producing “hard”, reproducible and generalizable knowledge in matters of any import. But this is hardly the monopoly of the ed school. The author does mention in passing schools of social work as having some of the same problems but there is no mention of other professional schools or of the humanities in the pecking order of the university. He goes on to make the case for understanding the low status of education professors within academe and even within the ed school itself. According to the author, the low status of education professors is correlated with the low level of educational research in the field, with the ed professor’s degree of activity in teacher education (the less the better), and with the field’s late arrival in the structure of higher education in the U.S. at a time when the reward structure of academe had already been set up to reflect the interests of those disciplines that were already represented.

In passing, Labaree does a hatchet job on the recommendations of the Holmes Group, a reform organization made up of the deans of the small group of American research-intensive colleges of education. Now disbanded, the group has nonetheless provided important intellectual resources for many an administrator of the ed school, secured in the conviction that increased activity in educational research will necessarily lead to reforms in teacher education. According to Labaree, the recommendations of the Holmes Group do more to promote the status of education professors than to promote the reform of teacher education.

These two chapters (on educational research and the status of education professors) exhibit nonetheless a disturbing ambivalence. On the one hand Labaree appears to be arguing for the pertinence and importance of qualitative research vis-à-vis the more traditional (in North America) quantitative types of research, thus reflecting, as he mentions, the debates taking place in various forums provided by the American Educational Research Association. On the other hand, he does not find much research of quality in the ed school, even within the now-dominant paradigm of qualitative research. Yet there is no evidence provided that the rest of academe is particularly interested in the distinction between good qualitative research and bad qualitative research and whether the ed school practises the one or the other. So, the argument seems to go, the poor status of the ed school is linked to the type of research conducted by it, but if anyone cared to ask, it is of very poor quality anyway.

Does this analysis have any relevance for Canadian colleges of education? At first glance it would appear not. It would seem that Labaree’s attempt to reconcile both the defenders and the critics of ed schools, particularly in the context of the cultural wars opposing “liberals” and “conservatives,” is unique to the American scene. Yet the situation of the marginalized college of education within the university is hardly unique to the American scene. And his description of the evolution of the normal school into college of education at the origins of the regional university, first at its centre and then onto its periphery, is eerily similar to the Canadian scene, albeit in a different time frame. More particularly, his characterization of the professional education of teachers as fraught by the tension between pedagogical Progressives and administrative

Progressives and the low status of the ed school within the university is most relevant to the Canadian scene.

One need only look to the *Programme of Studies for grades I to VI of the Public and Separate Schools* (Ontario, 1937) for confirmation of Cremin's judgment that by 1950, Progressivism had become the "cant," the "peculiar jargon of the pedagogues" (Cremin, 1961, p. 328 quoted by Labaree, 2004, p. 133). The Preface to the Ontario document (the famous Little Grey Book long admired by Ontario educators) reveals that the influence had reached well into Canada before the Second World War, although the authors had attempted to disguise that influence by referencing only British Progressives,³ and replacing the "project method" so well known to American Progressives by "the enterprise method," the terminology preferred by British Progressives. Nowhere, not even in the famous (or infamous, depending on one's perspective) Hall-Dennis Report (Ontario, 1968) could one find the following:

The elementary school has no business with uniform standards of *attain-ment*. Its business is to see that children grow in body and mind at their natural rate, neither faster nor slower, and if it performs its business properly there will be as much variety of attainment as there is of intellectual ability. The only uniformity at which the elementary school should aim is that every child at the end of the course should have acquired the power to attack new work and feel a zest in doing so. (Ontario, 1937, p. iii)

But one has only to read the syllabus portion of this early policy document to realize that even at the time, there was a significant gap between the discourse of Progressive pedagogy as proclaimed in the Preface and the practice of teaching and learning as laid out in the syllabus. The following 100 pages lay out, in much detail, what it is that would be taught at each level of the elementary school program in Ontario. This unfortunate observer, who began school in 1941 and has been involved in schooling ever since, can give witness to the fact that while historians of education can find the odd trace of Progressive practices in individual schools (e.g. Stamp, 1982, chap. 8), the practice of schooling in Ontario was largely innocent of any knowledge of Dewey and his ilk, if only because the classrooms were jammed to the gills with pupils.

The pedagogical Progressives had another go at it following the Hall-Dennis report. *The Formative Years* (P¹J¹) had no sooner appeared in 1975 than Thomas Wells, the Ontario Minister of Education, rose in the legislative assembly to decry the tendency toward "cafeteria-style programs" (code in those days for Progressive-type programs) and vowed a return to "a more demanding curriculum." *The Intermediate Years* (I¹I²), following upon P¹J¹, had been wending its way through the Ministry of Education and was promptly stifled, never to appear officially.⁴ There followed a 25-year period of cyclical curriculum policy development, all centred on the attempt to produce more and more specific goals for student achievement, which goals had different names at different times: (behavioural) objectives, outcomes, expectations, benchmarks, etc. And of course the more the goals were specific, the more the range of teacher improvisation was limited.

This preoccupation with goal statements in the various iterations of curriculum policy was no longer the work of the administrative Progressives of the pre-war era as described by Labaree. Rather, there was a new generation of experts in evaluation allied with the group of educators who wanted (or needed) to demonstrate the success of the educational enterprise. And that success was to be measured by student achievement. As time went on parents, politicians, and opinion-makers joined them. The result was today's emphasis on student achievement, particularly as measured by high-stakes testing regimes.

As for the status of the ed school within the university, there is no evidence to show that the ed school has increased its patina of respectability within the university, even as the latter increases its offerings in professional programs. Ed schools in recent years have made massive efforts to increase the amount and quality of the research emanating from them, yet the status of the ed school seems to have budged not one iota. At the same time the ed school, even in research-intensive universities, has set aside previous program offerings dealing with education in extra-school settings in order to concentrate its offerings on teacher preparation programs, thus eliminating all those fields that could conceivably be of help to the rest of the professionalized university. No longer, for example, does one specialize in program evaluation in a faculty of education. That function has now devolved to business programs, or accounting (or the reading of entrails). A quarter century ago, the more prestigious ed schools were at the forefront of disciplined inquiry regarding the evaluation of social programs. Nowadays, the field of evaluation, in the ed school, is restricted to ever-intensive efforts to mine the results of student achievement in schools.

Similarly, other fields that could be of intense interest to the university such as adult education, distance education, curriculum studies for higher education, comparative education, etc. are fast being sloughed off by the ed school as it concentrates on its primary task of teacher preparation.

In a word, the ed school is isolating itself from the rest of the university even as it proclaims a discourse of ever increasing integration in the university. But there was one arena in which the ed school has been singularly successful, and that is in the form of professional identity as witnessed by the discourses of teachers and teacher educators. In a series of remarkable articles appearing in the 1990s, Hannu Simola (1993a & b; 1998a,b,c,d) demonstrated how a series of curricular and teacher education reforms at the beginning of the 1970s was related to a discursive shift by which teachers saw themselves, and were seen by others, in a new light. While Simola claims to speak only from the Finnish perspective, his description of the reforms *and their time frame* appears to fit the Canadian experience in an uncanny manner, suggesting that the changes described are more than national in scope.

Simola points out that the reforms enacted at that time, notably the closing of the teacher-preparation "seminaries" (i.e. normal schools), the transfer of those programs to greatly expanded faculties of education offering teacher-induction programs at the master's level, the reconfiguration of programs which eschewed the syllabus format for a strong emphasis on goals for learning—all of these reforms ultimately led to a new understanding of the teacher. "...[T]he change between the 'old fashioned' and the modern teacher in Finland could be characterised as the transformation from a

morally devoted, well-educated handyman of civilisation to a goal-conscious, science legitimated expert in didactics" (Simola, 1993a, p. 176 italics in original). No longer does the teacher stand as witness for an agreed-upon body of knowledge that needs be transmitted to the younger generation. Henceforth the teacher is a facilitator, proposing goals for learning and deriving his or her professional standing upon the capacity to articulate and achieve those goals based on his or her knowledge of scientifically legitimated methods.

That discursive shift is also based on the acceptance of a clinical model of professional engagement, even though the vast majority of teachers deal only with students in group settings. The clinical model, which Simola (1993a, p. 179) calls "the family tutor illusion," suggests that teachers should be able to respond to *all* of the needs of *all* of the students *all* of the time. Simola waxes ironic at this situation, asking: "How would a lawyer cope if s/he had to plead for a group consisting of rapists, pick-pockets, drunken drivers and tax dodgers, all at the same time?" The implied answer is "not at all—and everyone immediately recognizes the futility of such an attempt" (p. 179). At the same time this discursive shift, from seeing oneself as forming part of the professoriate engaged in the diffusion of knowledge to seeing oneself as part of the caring professions looking to respond to the needs of all the students all of the time, is the cornerstone for a *permanently failing institution*—not that educators are doing a bad job of it; rather, that the expectations have become so high, so unrealizable, that those same educators can fairly be accused (as they accuse themselves) of failure.

The ed school's success in articulating a new model of professionalism has been accompanied by a concomitant model of research in educational settings. Ever since "personal practical knowledge" has become the sacred ground for educational research in so many ed schools, the field has been overwhelmed by various studies of the personal: life stories, biography, autobiography, all proclaimed under the aegis of narrative inquiry. The ed school even grants doctoral degrees in the name of self-examination. In this the ed school reflects the preoccupations of what Foucault (1978) has characterized as "the confessing society." And he adds:

[The confession]⁵ plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites: one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell.... One confesses—or is forced to confess. (Foucault, 1978 cited in Rouse, 1994, p. 96)

To which one might add the myriad television programs in which individuals *fess up* about real or imagined failings, before real or imaginary judges, psychologists, clergy, aided by the omnipresence of motivational speakers of both religious and a-religious persuasion urging individuals to find the *inner child* or some other source of authenticity, not to mention blogs, YouTube, and numerous other manifestations of individuals *opening up* to the rest of the world. In this the ed school reflects an ongoing search for meaning in an increasingly secular, rationalistic, and fragmented society.

But one can ask if this type of research has any value other than the therapeutic value to its practitioners.⁶ It would be difficult to point to any significant

body of knowledge emanating from this type of research that has had any marked influence upon policy or practice. Yet it continues unabated as its practitioners wallow in the morass of self-referentiality. In this the *personal turn* highlights one of the essential functions of the present-day ed school, no doubt a result of its fatal attraction for psychology. That is quite simply that it exists to teach its students, and their students afterwards, “to seek biographical solutions for systemic contradictions” (Beck, 1992, p. 137). In this the ed school provides crucial underpinnings for a society that sedulously avoids critical self-examination.

So what are the long term prospects for the poor graduate of the ed school? Quite likely, graduates will continue to exercise the necessary adjustments between the reality of the classroom and the lessons learned in the ed school.⁷ And they will probably continue to attribute that requirement to the gap between “theory” and “practice.” But the real lasting influence of the ed school, as both Labaree and Simola have shown, is likely to be at the level of discourse, that is, in the way that educators speak about their work. To make this claim is not to belittle the achievement. Discourse is as much a social practice as any other and it is even more important in the sense that it is a primary means of making sense of one’s world. That discourse, as a social practice that cannot be elided, touches upon the very identity of the speakers. While the discourse of professionalism will continue to energize the identity of ed school graduates (that is, of course, the main purpose of discourses of identity), that energy will probably continue to crash upon the shoals of administrative and legislative *fiat*. And educators will continue to criticize those decisions without coming to grips with the social and cultural imperatives propelling them.

But that is only half the question. Labaree’s book also set out to explore the relationship between the ed school and the rest of the university. It is perhaps here that the author’s ambivalence toward the ed school is the most marked. On the one hand, he points out how there is a marked difference between the reputation of the ed school and the rest of the university based on the type of research prized by the one and the other. Here the author appears to be saying that on a practical level, it is a good thing that the rest of the university is not looking too hard.

While this book should be required reading of all those who work in the field of teacher education, if only to understand the impasse in which Faculties of Education find themselves, both in terms of the impact on educational systems and in terms of the role of the faculty of education within the university, one must understand that this is a diagnosis with no prognosis of cure.

End notes

¹ An informal conversation with a group of graduate students in theology held at St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto, during the fall of 1961.

² An earlier study by Labaree (1992) relates the origins of the ed school’s fascination with psychology to the prospect of legitimacy and respectability within the university. Psychology, in the American university, was the one social science that offered the closest approximation to the “real” sciences and therefore the readiest route to respect-a-bility in academe.

³ Binary opposition expresses a three-term relation, whereas a binary distinction asserts a two-term relation. On this crucial logical distinction that would wreak havoc with many a claim to nomothetic status in educational research, see Seung (1982, chap. 1)

⁴ When the document first appeared, the Alberta Minister of Education gloated over the fact that, for the first time, Ontario had copied its programs from Alberta rather than the other way around. He appeared not to have noticed that they had both copied their programs from another source.

⁵ The Preface to the 1937 document, the 1975 documents, as well as other significant Ontario curriculum policy documents, can be found on the writer's web site: <http://homepage.mac.com/normandfr/Home>.

⁶ Foucault uses the word *aveu* rather than the word *confession*. *Aveu* does not have the religious connotations, in French, of *confession*. On the other hand, it adds the connotation of the admission of something difficult to reveal.

⁷ "Stories are like searchlights and spotlights; they brighten up parts of the stage while leaving the rest in darkness. Were they to illuminate the whole of the stage evenly, they would not really be of use. Their task, after all, is to 'cure' the stage, making it ready for the viewers' visual and intellectual consumption; to create a picture one can absorb, comprehend and retain out of the anarchy of blots and stains one can neither take in nor make sense of.

Stories aid the seekers of comprehension by separating the relevant from the irrelevant, actions from their settings, the plot from its background and the heroes or the villains at the centre of the plot from the hosts of supernumeraries and dummies. It is the mission of stories to select, and it is in their nature to include through exclusion and to illuminate through casting shadows. It is a grave misunderstanding, and injustice, to blame stories for favoring one part of the stage while neglecting another. Without selection there would be no story." (Bauman, 2004, p. 17). The issue for educational research, however, is whether the stage is a *private* or *public* one.

⁸ For example, as Marybeth De Rose (2003) has shown, kindergarten, arguably the seed-bed of Progressive pedagogy since the 19th century, is being transformed, in Ontario, by new programs emphasizing learning outcomes and by teacher concerns about the looming grade 3 achievement exams. Teachers have become adept at spotting those pupils who could conceivably pose problems three years later. Thus the effort to isolate, even in kindergarten, those pupils whose results could conceivably "skew" the results of the school later on and thus effect the reputation of the school and its teachers.

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