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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Zeitschrift für pädagogische Historiographie**

Band (Jahr): **16 (2010)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **15.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-901775>

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Another take on the failure of school reform, or Are we asking the wrong questions?

• Inés Dussel

David Labaree's essay is a bright and sharp attack on the rhetoric of school reform that has mushroomed in the last century. Focusing on the American mass schooling experience, Labaree gives us a compelling argument about its failure to live up to its promises. He points to the underlying contradictory demands of democratic politics and those of capitalist markets (a line of thought already explored by Herbert Gintis and Samuel Bowles in 1988), which drive three main goals for schooling: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. Given their paradoxical nature, no educational system is able to achieve these three goals at the same time. In fact, Labaree's historical review shows us that schools might actually attain the opposite: instead of democratic equality, they deliver a formalistic citizenship education and promote inequality; far from accommodating to the social efficiency mandates, the school system is mostly inefficient in economic terms; and it has allowed for social mobility only to the extent that it did not challenge the relative advantages of the middle and upper classes, thus curtailing any possibility of real advancement for the lower ones.

While the reasoning is impeccable, the discussion I would like to propose is related to a part of the history of schooling that Labaree might be overlooking, and which has to do with the symbolic power of schooling and its promise of access and integration to the public sphere.

In recent historiographic accounts of the development of school systems, this symbolic aspect of schooling has not always received the attention it deserves.¹ For example, Ian Hunter's discussion on schooling as a contingent technology that combines pastoral power and bureaucratic administration, suggestive and thought-provoking as it is, underestimates the power that mass schooling has had to rally support and to promise individual realization as well as social integration (Hunter 1994). According to Hunter, educational reasoning as well as people's common sense have perceived that schools were cathedrals, while they were simply parish churches. But one might ask, has the imagination of a cathedral or a temple for knowledge played a small part in the production of institutional arrangements, social allegiances, and discourses about truth, power, or subjects in the life of schools? Any good historian of the development of school systems in the 19th century would have trouble saying that these grandiloquent dreams had no impact

on school architecture, curriculum design, or school identities.

The symbolic power of schooling, and particularly of the rhetoric of school reform, was something that caught my attention several years ago. While doing research on the history of a failed attempt at establishing technical schools (called workers' schools) in Argentina in the mid-20th century, I found – and enjoyed – Herbert Kliebard's discussion of vocational schools in the U.S. (Kliebard 1990). What stroke me the most was that he analyzed vocationalism as a marginal trend in the U.S. – contrary to the opinion held by Latin American educators who saw American schools as deeply vocational and anti-intellectual. But he stated something else, very valuable for my own study of Argentinean workers' schools: the triumph or failure of educational reforms are not only to be measured by their practical or instrumental results, but also by their symbolic power to organize our beliefs, configure allegiances, and confer status. In that respect, Kliebard warned us that vocationalism might have succeeded in installing a common belief about schooling: that it has to serve the purposes of social efficiency and provide the training needed for economic growth.² In fact, David Labaree's recognition of social efficiency as one of the three goals of American schools can be read as another offspring of the same historical reasoning that Kliebard dated in the early 20th century.³

The symbolic leverage of the rhetoric of school reform is also evident in the other two goals that Labaree points out, and I will now turn to the present to provide other arguments. The promises of social mobility and of democratic equality are still important impulses for the growth of students' enrollment in secondary schools in many Latin American countries, in spite of the lack of concrete achievements on both counts⁴. But this is not only exclusive for Latin American countries. French scholars Christian Baudelot and François Leclercq (2008), in a thorough review of studies on the effects of schooling in developed countries, begin their analysis with the effects that schooled education has on socialization and the acquisition of cognitive, moral, and logical frames of mind. This «intangible capital» constitutes probably the most significant effect that school has in social and individual lives, and is a close relative of the symbolic power I am pointing to.⁵ Baudelot and Leclercq continue their review with more traditional studies on the impact

of schooling on salaries, economic growth, social hierarchies, family organization, and political behavior, but always include the cultural changes and symbolic frames that configure actions. Their study concludes that, elusive and complicated to measure as these effects may be, there is nonetheless an important body of literature that supports the argument that modern school systems have transformed our societies and ourselves in irreversible ways in the last 150 years.

I am pretty sure that Labaree would agree with this line of argument: schools are not necessarily doing what arrogant reformers say they are doing, but this doesn't mean that they are not doing many other things that are worth discussing. The point is that, in Labaree's essay, we just get the criticism of educational optimism, and have less discussion on what it is that makes schools work, even if we may not like how they work.

And, worried as he is about its failure in doing what it was supposed to do, the author might end up underestimating the role that schooling has had in the last century to provide a common language, references, and aspirations to the masses, which might be, in the long run, its major success and the reason for its endurance. The question of what schools can't do, then, could be turned around into an interrogation on what it is that they actually do that enables them to survive to an increasing criticism and opposition.⁶

I would like to suggest that, if we want to understand the symbolic efficacy of schooling, we might have to look in the direction of those who study the symbolic life of societies and the effects of imaginaries on people's behaviors. «It was Pascal who pointed out that people do not treat a certain person as a king because he is a king – it is rather that this certain person appears as a king because people treat him as one,» says psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek to discuss the power of belief (Žižek 2001, p. 16). Žižek argues that the disenchantment of social life brought about by the social sciences might have caused us to be blind to the symbolic density of social behavior.

While I highly respect David Labaree's work, I think that this provoking essay falls short of acknowledging that promises have an important social function, and that, while immaterial, they still have tangible effects. May be keeping the promises alive has been a good-enough result for a social institution such as schooling. And I am not saying this as a way of compromise with the least-bad result:

promises and aspirations might be more important historical forces than what we usually consider them to be. I know this is not all we want schools to be doing, but I suggest that this accomplishment should not be taken for granted, or easily dispatched.

Footnotes

- 1 Among the exceptions, Antonio Viñao's thoughtful work on the role of school cultures in school reforms (2002) provides a good example of the links between imaginaries, pedagogical discourses, and political and social positions that shape how educational reforms are played out in school systems.
- 2 This, at least partially, explains the Latin American perception about U.S. schooling as being pro-vocationalism.
- 3 Baudelot/Leclercq (2008) revise the French Republican definition of the goals of schooling, and they mention another triad: citizenship, equality, economic growth. The phrasing relates to significantly divergent political traditions in each case.
- 4 In a recent survey in Argentina, students valued schooling as a pathway «to be somebody in life» and to get a better job (Dussel/Brito/Núñez 2007), despite empirical evidence that it does not guarantee employment or social mobility.
- 5 Another take on this «intangible capital,» highly recommended for those interested in these topics, is provided by McLeod/Yates (2006), who explore the nuances and subtleties of the construction of meaning and subjectivity in and through the school years.
- 6 Let me provide another example. In a study on children's software, which generally appears as exactly the opposite of schooling, anthropologist Mimi Ito finds that school-based content, achievement concerns, and a culture of competition have a significant weight in some genres of this type of software that are privately bought and consumed in leisure time. Schooling has been successful in promoting particular beliefs and reasoning about learning and knowledge that permeate other spheres (Ito 2009, p. 83ff.).

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