

# INTRODUCTION

## Getting it wrong

Becoming a scholar is not easy under the best of circumstances, and we may make it even harder by trying to imbue emerging scholars with a dedication for getting things right.<sup>1</sup> In doctoral programs and tenure reviews, we stress the importance of rigorous research methods and study design, scrupulous attribution of ideas, methodical accumulation of data, and cautious validation of claims. Being careful to stand on firm ground methodologically in itself is not a bad thing for scholars, but trying to be right all the time can easily make us overly cautious, encouraging us to keep so close to our data and so far from controversy that we end up saying nothing that's really interesting. A close look at how scholars actually carry out their craft reveals that they generally thrive on frustration. Or at least that has been my experience. When I look back at my own work over the years, I find that the most consistent element is a tendency for getting it wrong. Time after time I have had to admit failure in the pursuit of my intended goal, abandon an idea that I had once warmly embraced, or backtrack to correct a major error. In the short run these missteps were disturbing, but in the long run they have proven useful.

Maybe I'm just rationalizing, but it seems that getting it wrong is an integral part of scholarship. For one thing, it's central to the process of writing. Academics write for a variety of reasons—promotion and tenure, fame and fortune, the pleasure of playing with language, the urge to get out the word—but one key reason is that writing is the only effective way to figure out if an idea has legs.<sup>2</sup> Ideas often sound good in our heads and resonate nicely in the classroom, but the real test is whether they work on paper. Only there can we figure out the details of the argument, assess the quality of the logic, and weigh the salience of the evidence. And whenever we try to translate a promising idea into a written text, we inevitably encounter problems that weren't apparent when we were happily playing with the idea over lunch. Maybe point A doesn't lead to point B the way it was supposed to; or the evidence for the point looks thin when we spell it out on the page; or the issue we were pursuing, the one that seemed really intriguing, looks trivial when we examine it closely. Writing thus becomes a process of problem solving. This is part of what makes it so scary and so exciting: It's a high wire act, in which failure threatens us with every step forward. Can we get past each of these apparently insuperable problems, improvise solutions on the fly, rescue some parts of our original argument at the expense of others, and keep the paper moving toward a modestly successful if unintended conclusion? We won't be able to say yes with any confidence until we get to the end.

This means that if there's little risk in writing a paper there's also little potential reward. If all we're doing is putting a fully developed idea down on paper, then this

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isn't writing; it's transcribing. Scholarly writing is most productive when authors are learning from the process, and this happens only if the writing helps us figure out something we didn't really know (or only sensed), helps us solve an intellectual problem we weren't sure was solvable, or makes us turn a corner we didn't know was there. Learning is one of the main things that makes the actual process of writing (as opposed to the final published product) worthwhile for the writer. This process takes us someplace intellectually that we wouldn't have reached without it. Whatever the reader gets from it later, we're getting from it on the spot. Conversely, if we aren't learning something from our own writing, then there's little reason to think that future readers will learn from it either. But these kinds of learning can only occur if a successful outcome for a paper is not obvious at the outset, which means that the possibility of failure is critically important to the pursuit of scholarship.

Getting it wrong is also functional for scholarship because it can force us to give up a cherished idea in the face of the kinds of compelling arguments and evidence that accumulate when writing about our research. Like everyone else, scholars are prone to confirmation bias. We look for evidence to support the analysis we prefer and overlook evidence that supports other interpretations. So when we collide with something in our research or writing that deflects us from the path toward our preferred destination, we tend to experience this deflection as failure. However, although these experiences are not pleasant, they can be quite productive for our scholarship. Not only do they prompt us to learn things we don't want to know, but they can also introduce arguments into the literature that people don't want to hear. A colleague at the University of Michigan, David Angus, had both of these benefits in mind when he used to pose the following challenge to every candidate for a faculty position in the School of Education: "Tell me about some point when your research forced you to give up an idea you really cared about."

I have experienced all of these forms of getting it wrong. Papers, and especially books, never worked out the way they were supposed to, because of changes forced on me by the need to come up with remedies for ailing arguments. The analysis often turned in a direction that meant giving up something I wanted to keep and embracing something I preferred to avoid. And nothing ever stayed finished. Just when I thought I had a good analytical hammer and started using it to pound everything in sight, it would shatter into pieces and I would be forced to start over from scratch.

In this introduction to a volume of selected works, I want to tell a story of frustrated ambitions. I think this story may be useful in several ways. For one thing, it can serve as an example of how ideas get worked out, for better and for worse, in the practice of scholarship. Too often we talk about scholarship as a product rather than a process, suggesting that ideas somehow emerge by virgin birth, and in the absence of proper framing this book could easily reinforce that misperception. So I thought it might be helpful to provide a little insight into the process by which ideas evolve: how they arise through non-immaculate conception, undergo haphazard and contingent development over time, then periodically became frozen in print, later to be thawed out, rearranged, and refrozen in another printed form. In my case, the process was quite messy, with a lot of dead-ends and dropped-stitches and jury-rigs and never-minds along the way—and with numerous lifelines thrown to me by colleagues at critical points. But following along may be instructive for emerging scholars, by exposing the wrong turns, misunderstandings, and large debts that can arise from the doing of research.

As well as serving as a cautionary tale, this introduction can provide an overview of the main themes that run through my work. In it I want to explore how these themes

developed over time in relation to a variety of educational settings and issues, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes undermining each other, frequently provoking new studies and usually prompting the reexamination of old ideas. With any luck, this review of themes will show how individual papers in this volume fit into a larger pattern. So let me begin with a look at these themes.

## **How stratification, formalism, and markets undercut education as a public good**

My work focuses on the historical sociology of American education. What I have found most intriguing about the American educational system is the thick vein of irony that runs through it.

American education has long presented itself as a model of equal opportunity and open accessibility, and there is a lot of evidence to support these claims. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the common school movement opened up primary public education to the entire (white) citizenry, and the system kept expanding educational opportunity upward: to the grammar school after the Civil War, the high school at the turn of the twentieth century, and the college after the Second World War. In comparison with Europe, this upward expansion of access to education came earlier, moved faster, and extended to more people. Today, virtually anyone can go to some form of postsecondary education in the US, and more than two-thirds do. But what students find when they enter the educational system at any level is that they are gaining equal access to a sharply unequal array of educational experiences. Why? Because the system balances open accessibility with radical *stratification*. Everyone can go to high school, but the differences in quality of education and chances for social mobility vary radically among schools. Almost everyone can go to college; but the institutions that are most accessible (community colleges) provide the smallest boost to a student's life chances, whereas the ones that offer the surest entrée into the best jobs (major research universities) are highly selective. This extreme mixture of equality and inequality, of accessibility and stratification, is a striking and fascinating characteristic of American education, which I have explored in some form or another in all my work.

Another prominent irony in the story of American education is that this system, which was set up to instill learning, actually undercuts learning because of a strong tendency toward *formalism*. This pattern is closely related to the other one, because it arises in part from the perverse incentives that are built into the stratified structure of schooling. Educational consumers (students and their parents) quickly learn that the greatest rewards of the system go to those who attain its highest levels (measured by years of schooling, academic track, and institutional prestige), where credentials are the most scarce and thus the most valuable. This vertically skewed incentive structure strongly encourages consumers to game the system by seeking to accumulate the largest number of tokens of attainment—grades and credits and degrees—in the most prestigious programs at the most selective schools. However, nothing in this reward structure encourages learning, since the payoff comes from the scarcity of the tokens and not the volume of knowledge accumulated in the process of acquiring these tokens. At best, learning is a side effect of this kind of credential-driven system. At worst, it is a casualty of the system, since the structure fosters consumerism among students, who naturally seek to gain the most credentials for the least investment in time and effort. Thus the logic of the used-car lot takes hold in the halls of learning.

In exploring these two issues of stratification and formalism, I tend to focus on one particular mechanism that helps explain both kinds of educational consequences,

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and that is the *market*. Education in the US, I argue, has increasingly become a commodity, which is offered and purchased through market processes in much the same way as other consumer goods. Educational institutions have to be sensitive to consumers, by providing the mix of educational products that the various sectors of the market demand. This promotes stratification in education, because consumers want educational credentials that will distinguish them from the pack in their pursuit of social advantage. It also promotes formalism in education, because markets operate based on the exchange value of a commodity (what it can be exchanged for) rather than its use value (what it can be used for). Markets have a natural connection to social phenomena whose outcomes are ironic because markets themselves are grounded in unintended consequences. In neoclassical economic theory, markets are driven by the self-interested behavior of the individual participants, but market outcomes are seen as providing remarkable collective benefits to society, not through the intent of any of the actors but through the invisible hand of the market itself. From this perspective, pursuit of the private good promotes the public good, creating greater efficiency, higher productivity, falling prices, and rising incomes.

In my work, however, I argue that things have not worked out this way in education. The unintended consequences of market behavior in education have not been benign but often highly destructive for both academic learning and social equity. Such consumerism preserves and increases social inequality, undermines knowledge acquisition, and promotes the dysfunctional overinvestment of public and private resources in an endless race for degrees of advantage. The result is that education comes to be seen primarily as a private good, whose benefits accrue only to the owner of the educational credential, rather than a *public good*, whose benefits are shared by all members of the community even if they don't have a degree or a child in school. When the common school movement first placed public education front and center in the national consciousness in the early nineteenth century, its *raison d'être* was to provide capable and public-spirited citizens rather than to promote invidious distinctions; but in recent years it is the latter rationale that has become ascendant. In many ways, the aim of my work has been to figure out why we experienced this shift from public to private and to remind us about the continuing social sources of support for education as a public good.

### **Doing research as a process of trying to get it less wrong**

In retrospect, this is the story—how stratification, formalism, and markets have undermined education as a public good—that I have been telling in my work from the very beginning. But that conclusion only emerges with the perspective of hindsight. This was not the story I had wanted to tell, and the story itself only evolved through a series of analytical errors, ramifying contingencies, and outside interventions. So let me start at the beginning and try to explain how I got from there to here, retelling the story as a sequence of mistakes and my efforts to correct them.

### **Marx gives way to Weber**

My dissertation topic fell into my lap one day during my last year of doctoral coursework in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, when I mentioned to Michael Katz that I had done a brief study of Philadelphia's Central High School for an earlier class. He had a new grant for studying the history of education in Philadelphia, and Central was the lead school. He needed someone to study the school, and I needed

a topic, advisor, and funding; by happy accident, it all came together in 15 minutes. I had first become interested in education as an object of study as an undergraduate at Harvard in the late 1960s, where I majored in Students for a Democratic Society and minored in sociology. In my last year or two there, I worked on a Marxist analysis of Harvard as an institution of social privilege (is there a better case?), which whet my appetite for educational research.

For the dissertation, I wanted to apply the same kind of Marxist approach to Central High School, which seemed to beg for it. Founded in 1838, it was the first high school in the city and one of the first in the county, and it later developed into the elite academic high school for boys in the city. It looked like the Harvard of public high schools. I had a model for this kind of analysis, Katz's study of Beverly High School (from *The Irony of School Reform*), in which he explained how this high school, shortly after its founding, came to be seen by many citizens as an institution that primarily served the upper classes, thus prompting the town meeting to abolish the school in 1861. I was planning to do this kind of study about Central, and there seemed to be plenty of evidence to support such an interpretation, including its heavily upper-middle-class student body, its aristocratic reputation in the press, and its later history as the city's elite high school.

That was the intent, but my plan quickly ran into two big problems in the data I was gathering. First, a statistical analysis of student attainment and achievement at the school over its first 80 years showed a consistent pattern: only one-quarter of the students managed to graduate, which meant it was highly selective; but grades and not class determined who made it and who didn't, which meant it was—surprise—highly meritocratic. Attrition in modern high schools is strongly correlated with class, but this was not true in the early years at Central. Middle class students were more likely to enroll in the first place, but they were no more likely to succeed than working class students. The second problem was that the high school's role in the Philadelphia school system didn't fit the nice Marxist story of top-down control that I was trying to tell. In the first 50 years of the high school, there was a total absence of bureaucratic authority over the Philadelphia school system: no superintendent, ward-level school boards controlling local schools, and the city-wide board controlling only Central High. But I discovered that control of this school was enough to give the city board functional command of the whole system. The high school was an attractive good in the local educational market, offering elevated education in a grand building at a collegiate level (it had the right to offer college degrees) and at no cost. Grammar school students competed for access to this commodity by passing an entrance exam, whose standards were set by the city board; and grammar school masters competed to get the most students into Central (the reward was employment as a high school professor), which they did by teaching to the test. The power that the high school exerted over the system was considerable but informal, arising from consumer demand from below rather than bureaucratic dictate from above.

Thus my plans to tell a story of class privilege and social control fell apart at the very outset of my dissertation; in its place, I found a story about markets and stratification: Marx gives way to Weber. The establishment of Central High school in the nation's second largest city created a desirable commodity with instant scarcity, and this consumer-based market power not only gave the high school control over the school system but also gave it enough autonomy to establish a working meritocracy. The high school promoted inequality: it served a largely middle class constituency, taught bourgeois values, and established an extreme form of educational stratification. But it imposed a tough meritocratic regime equally on the children of the middle class and working class, with both groups failing most of the time. (The first two chapters in this

volume are papers that explore some of these issues from the dissertation, written in the mid 1980s while I was turning the dissertation into a book.)<sup>3</sup>

## Markets give ground to politics

Once I completed the dissertation, I gradually settled into being a Weberian, a process that took a while because of the disdain that Marxists hold for Weber.<sup>4</sup> I finally decided I had a good story to tell about markets and schools, even if it wasn't the one I had wanted to tell, so I used this story in rewriting the dissertation as a book. When I had what I thought was a final draft ready to send to the publisher, I showed it to my colleague at Michigan State, David Cohen, who had generously offered to give it a reading. His comments were extraordinarily helpful and quite devastating. In the book, he said, I was interpreting the evolution of the high school and the school system as a result of the impact of the market, but the story I was really telling was about an ongoing tension for control of schools between markets and politics.<sup>5</sup> The latter element was there in the text, but I had failed to recognize it and make it explicit in the analysis. In short, he explained to me the point of my own book. He was right, of course, so I had to rewrite the entire manuscript in order to bring out this implicit argument.

Framing this case in the history of American education as a tension between politics and markets allowed me to tap into the larger pattern of tensions that always exist in a liberal democracy. On the one hand, there is the democratic urge to promote equality of power and access and outcomes; on the other hand, there is the liberal urge to preserve individual liberty, promote free markets, and tolerate all the inequalities of wealth and power that arise from these freedoms. The story of Central High School spoke to both these elements. It showed a system that provided equal opportunity and unequal outcomes. Democratic politics pressed for expanding access to high school for all citizens, even though this meant undercutting Central's exclusivity by opening new high schools and undercutting its meritocracy by lowering admission standards. Markets pressed for restricting access to high school credentials, initially through meritocratic admissions and high attrition and later through stratified academic tracks, in order to preserve the exclusiveness that allowed these credentials to offer social advantage. Central saw-sawed back and forth between these poles, finally settling on the grand compromise that has come to characterize American education ever since: open access to a stratified school. Using both politics and markets in the analysis also introduced in a vivid way the problem of formalism, since the political goals for education (preparing competent citizens) support learning, whereas the market goals (education for social advantage) do not. The former sees education as having use value, the latter as having exchange value.

## Disaggregating markets

The book came out in 1988 with the title, *The Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838–1939*. With politics and markets as my new hammer, everything looked like a nail. So I wrote a series of papers in which I applied the idea to a wide variety of educational institutions and reform efforts: the evolution of high school teaching as work; the role of the Carnegie foundations in shaping American education; the history of social promotion in the schools; the evolution of the community college; the roots of the teacher professionalization movement within the status order of the research-oriented education school; the rhetorics of doing good and doing science in educational

reform; and the evolution of the education school. (Chapters 3, 4, and 5 come from this period in the late 1980s and early 1990s.)

Midway through this flurry of papers, however, I ran into another big problem. I sent a draft of my community college paper to David Hogan, a former colleague from Penn, and his critique stopped me cold. He pointed out that I was using the idea of educational markets to refer to two things that were quite different, both in concept and in practice. One was the actions of educational consumers, the students who want education to provide the credentials they needed in order to get ahead; the other was the actions of educational providers, the taxpayers and employers who want education to produce the human capital that society needs in order to function. The consumer saw education's exchange value, providing selective benefits for the individual who owns the credential; the producer saw education's use value, providing collective benefits to everyone in society, even those not in school.

This forced me to reconstruct the argument from the ground up, abandoning the politics and markets angle and constructing in its place a tension among three goals that competed for primacy in shaping the history of American education. "Democratic equality" referred to the goal of using education to prepare capable citizens; "social efficiency" referred to the goal of using education to prepare productive workers; and "social mobility" referred to the goal of using education to enable individuals to get ahead in society. The first was a stand-in for educational politics, the second and third were a disaggregation of educational markets.

## **Abandoning the good, the bad, and the ugly**

Once formulated, the idea of the three goals became a mainstay in my teaching, and for a while it framed everything I wrote. I finished out the string of papers I mentioned earlier, energized by the analytical possibilities inherent in the new tool. But by the mid 1990s, I began to be afraid that its magic power would start to fade on me soon, as had happened with earlier enthusiasms like Marxism and politics-and-markets. Most ideas have a relatively short shelf life, and this one was about to expire. This problem is endemic in intellectual work, where metaphors quickly reach their limits and big ideas start to shrink after close examination. That doesn't mean these images and concepts are worthless, only that they are bounded, both conceptually and temporally. If we wait too long, their limits will loom larger than their possibilities, and we'll have to move on to something else. Which is a shame, since, whatever its limits, an idea can still shed light on some issues in ways that are productive for a particular time and place, and that is often as much as we can hope for as scholars. Michael Katz once made this point to me with the Delphic advice, "Write your first book first." In other words, if you have an idea worth injecting into the conversation, you should do so now, since it will eventually evolve into another idea, leaving the first one unexpressed. And this is a loss, because both ideas are potential contributions. Since the evolution of an idea is never finished, holding off publication until the idea is done is a formula for never publishing.

So it seemed like the right time to put together a collection of my three-goals papers into a book, and I had to act quickly before they started to curdle. With a contract for the book and a sabbatical providing time to put it together, I now had to face the problem of framing the opening chapter. I had been using the idea of competing goals for years in relation to a variety of issues, but I had never succeeded in formulating a coherent account of where these goals came from, how they related to each other, how they shaped American educational history, and what their implications were. I had tried to write such a paper repeatedly over the preceding

six or eight years, but all I had to show for it was an incomplete and unsatisfying draft, which I kept revisiting and abandoning every year or so. In early 1996, however, I finally completed a draft and submitted it to *American Educational Research Journal*.

The reviews knocked me back on my heels. They were supportive but highly critical. One in particular, which I later found out was written by Norton Grubb, forced me to rethink the entire scheme of competing goals. He pointed out something I had completely missed in my enthusiasm for the tool-of-the-moment. In practice my analytical scheme with three goals turned into a normative scheme with two: a Manichean vision of light and darkness, with "Democratic Equality" as the good, and with "Social Mobility" and "Social Efficiency" as the bad and the ugly. This ideologically colored representation didn't hold up under close scrutiny. Grubb pointed out that social efficiency is not as ugly as I was suggesting. Like democratic equality and unlike social mobility, it promotes learning, since it has a stake in the skills of the workforce. Also, like democratic equality, it views education as a public good, whose benefits accrue to everyone and not just (as is the case with social mobility) to the credential holder.

This trenchant critique forced me to start over, putting a different spin on the whole idea of competing goals. I finally came to abandon the binary vision of good and evil, and reluctantly embraced the idea of balance. This meant getting rid of the last vestige of my original bumper-sticker Marxism. As I reconstructed the argument, I put forward the idea that all three of these goals emerge naturally from the nature of a liberal democracy, and that all three are necessary. There is no solution to the tension among educational goals, just as there is no resolution to the problem of being both liberal and democratic. We need an educational system that makes capable citizens and productive workers while also enabling individuals to pursue their own aspirations. And we all act out our support for each of these goals according to which social role is most salient to us at the moment. As citizens, we want graduates who can vote intelligently; as taxpayers and employers, we want graduates who will increase the productivity of the economy; and as parents, we want an educational system that gives our children the best possibilities for social success. The problem the current mix of goals poses for education is not that bad goals are winning over good goals but that we might lose the kind of balance among goals that is critical for education in a liberal democracy. In particular, I argued that the growing primacy of social mobility over the other two goals has skewed both school and society toward a vision that privileges private over public interests, stratification over equality, and credentials over learning. (The final version of the goals paper is Chapter 6 in this volume; Chapters 7, 8, and 13 draw on this reconstructed vision of the tension among goals.)

### **Turning to examine life at the bottom of the ladder**

With this reconstruction of the story, I was able to finish my second book (*How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education*, published in 1997) and get it out the door before any other major problems could threaten its viability. One such problem was already coming into view.

In comments on my *AERJ* goals paper, John Rury (the editor) pointed out that my analysis of the educational system applied more to higher education than elementary and secondary schools, and applied more to the top curriculum tracks and to the most elite institutions than to the less prestigious domains of education where the largest number of students were found. Unfortunately, he was right. The argument relied on a status competition model of social organization—students fighting for



scarce credentials in order to move up or stay up—that did not really apply to the lower levels of the system. Students in the lower-middle and working classes, in the middle and lower reading groups in elementary school, in the general and vocational tracks in high school, and in the open-access community colleges and regional state universities—all lived in a different world from the one I was talking about. They were affected by the credentials race, but they weren't really in the race themselves. For them, the incentives to compete were minimal, the rewards remote, and the primary imperative was not success but survival.

Fortunately, however, there was one place at the bottom of the educational hierarchy I did know pretty well, and that was the poor beleaguered education school. From 1985 to 2003, while I was teaching in the College of Education at Michigan State University, I received a rich education in the subject. As a sociologist turned historian who had never trained in education and never taught in the schools, this experience was like being a participant-observer in a strange culture. It taught me a lot about schools, teaching, and teacher education, and it also gradually revealed the elitist bias that pervaded my work. I had already published papers about the role of the ed school in teacher professionalization and educational reform (Chapters 3 and 4 in this volume) and about the evolution of the normal school to regional state university, and I had even sketched out an argument for a book in an article about "the trouble with ed schools" (Chapter 9). But it wasn't until this book was half completed that I realized it was forcing me to rethink my whole thesis about the educational status game. Here was an educational institution that was the antithesis to the Harvards and Central High Schools that I had been writing about in my first two books. Residing at the very bottom of the educational hierarchy, the ed school was disdained by academics, avoided by the best students, ignored by policymakers, and discounted by its own graduates. It was the perfect case to use in answering a question I had been avoiding: What happens to education when credentials carry no exchange value and the status game is already lost?

What I found is that life at the bottom has some advantages, but it has greater disadvantages. On the positive side, the education school's low status frees it to focus efforts on learning rather than on credentials, on the use value rather than exchange value of education; in this sense, it is liberated from the race for credentials that consumes the more prestigious realms of higher education. On the negative side, however, the ed school's low status means that it has none of the autonomy that prestigious institutions (like Central High School) generate for themselves, which leaves it vulnerable to kibitzing from the outside (if educationists have no special expertise, then everyone's an expert). This institutional weakness also has made the ed school meekly responsive to its environment, so that over the years it obediently produced large numbers of teachers at low cost and with modest professional preparation, as requested. One other consequence of life at the bottom is that education professors have developed a strong attachment to the educational vision that lost out in the struggle to shape the schools but remains king at education schools: progressivism. This vision gives a romantic cast to our institutional weakness (we're the standard bearers for the lost cause of child-centered education) while at the same time reinforcing this weakness (our advice is easy to disregard since it is so predictable).

When I had completed a draft of the book, I asked for comments from two colleagues at Michigan State, Lynn Fendler and Tom Bird, who promptly pointed out several big problems with the text. One had to do with the argument in the last few chapters, where I was trying to make two contradictory points: that ed schools were very weak, exerting little influence on teaching and learning in schools, but that they were quite effective in promoting progressive ideology, which has become canonical

in the education community. The other problem had to do with the tone and voice of the book: as an insider taking a sharply critical position about ed schools and ed professors, I sounded too much like the kind of unlovely person who tries to enhance his own position by ridiculing colleagues, which was not my intention at all. Fortunately, they were able to show me a way out of both predicaments. On the first issue, they helped me see that ed schools were more committed to progressivism as a rhetorical stance than as a mode of educational practice. In our own work as teacher educators and educational researchers, ed professors are caught in the position where we have to prepare teachers to function within an educational system that is hostile to progressive practices and where we have to carry out research sponsored by agencies that want us to help them make this system work more efficiently. So, like our own graduates, we maintain a connection to progressivism that is more rhetorical than practical. On the second issue, they offered a remarkably simple and effective solution: in talking about education professors, I should shift from the third person to the first person. By announcing clearly both my membership in the community under examination and my participation in the problems I was critiquing, I could shift the tone from accusatory to confessional. With these important changes in place, *The Trouble with Ed Schools* was finally published in 2004. (Chapters 9–12 speak to the issues in this book.)

### **Enabling limitations**

In this introduction I have been telling a story about getting it wrong in my educational research and then working to fix the problems with the help of friends. However, I don't want to leave the impression that I think any of these fixes really resolved the problems. The story has been more about filling potholes than about re-engineering the road. I'm enough of a postmodernist to think that this may be as much as we can aspire to. But consider that this story of getting it wrong has not just been about mistakes corrected, ideas abandoned, and concepts reconstructed. It's also about fundamental limitations in my approach to the historical sociology of American education that have been constant over the years, problems that I have been unwilling and unable to fix since they lie at the core of my way of seeing things. Intellectual frameworks define, shape, and enable the work of scholars. Such frameworks can be helpful by allowing us to cut a slice through the data and reveal interesting patterns that are not apparent from other angles, but they can only do so if they maintain a sharp leading edge. As an analytical instrument, a razor works better than a baseball bat, and a beach ball doesn't work at all. The sharp edge, however, comes at a cost, since it necessarily narrows analytical scope and commits a scholar to one slice through a problem at the expense of others. I'm all too aware of the limitations that arise from my own cut at things.

One problem is that I tend to write a history without actors. Taking a macro-sociological approach to history, I am drawn to explore general patterns and central tendencies in the school–society relationship rather than the peculiarities of individual cases. In the stories I tell, people don't act. Instead, social forces contend, social institutions arise and evolve in response to social pressures, and collective outcomes ensue. My focus is on general processes and structures rather than on the variations within categories. In this kind of analysis, the particular object under study is always a case of something bigger (stratification, market relations, status competition, education as a public and private good), and that something is the real focus rather than the distinctive characteristics of the case itself. What is largely missing from my account of American education is the radical diversity of traits and behaviors that

characterizes individual actors within groups and individual organizations (such as schools) within organizational groupings. I plead guilty to these charges. However, my aim has not been to write a tightly textured history of the particular but to explore some of the broad socially structured patterns that shape the main outlines of American educational life. This is work that operates at the macro level of institutions and archetypes rather than the micro level of individual instantiations and local variation. My sense is that this kind of work serves a useful purpose—especially in a field such as education, whose dominant perspectives have been psychological and presentist rather than sociological and historical; in a sub-field like history of education, which can be prone to the narrow monograph with little attention to the big picture; and in a country like the United States, which is highly individualistic in orientation and tends to discount the significance of the collective and the categorical.

Another characteristic of my work is that I tend to stretch arguments well beyond the supporting evidence. As anyone can see from the papers included in this book, I am not in the business of building an edifice of data and planting a cautious empirical generalization on the roof. My orientation is toward exploring ideas rather than amassing evidence. For example, my first book masqueraded as a social history of an early high school, but it was actually an essay on the political and market forces shaping the evolution of American education in general. This was a big leap to make from historical data about a single school that was anything but typical. Likewise in my second book, the speculations about credentialing and consumerism take off like flares rather than rising brick-by-brick from its modest empirical foundation. My third book involves minimal data on education schools and maximal rumination about the nature of “the education school.” In short, validating claims has not been my strong suit. This may be an acceptable limitation. The field of educational research is sufficiently broad and rich that it can afford to have some scholars who focus on constructing credible empirical arguments about education and others who focus on exploring ways of thinking about the subject, some looking at the micro level and others at the macro level.

The moral of this story, therefore, may be that scholarship is less a monologue than a conversation. In education, as in other areas, our field is so expansive that we can’t cover more than a small portion, and it’s so complex that we can’t even gain mastery over our own tiny piece of the terrain. But that’s ok. As participants in the scholarly conversation, our responsibility is not to get things right but to keep things interesting, while we rely on discomfiting interactions with our data and with our colleagues to provide the correctives we need to make our scholarship more durable.

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## An overview of the chapters

Chapter 1: “Academic Excellence in an Early US High School.” (1984). *Social Problems*, 31: 5 (June), 558–67. An analysis of why the early high school had a much easier time in promoting high educational achievement than the contemporary American high school. Using the case of the Central High School of Philadelphia in the nineteenth century, I show how Central’s unique position as the sole high school as the top of a radically stratified system of education allowed it to draw in a group of students and faculty (through processes of selection and self selection) who were in tune with its meritocratic vision.

Chapter 2: “Curriculum, Credentials, and the Middle Class: A Case Study of a Nineteenth Century High School.” (1986). *Sociology of Education*, 59: 1

(January), 42–57. An analysis of the relationship between the early high school and its middle class constituency, drawing on the case of Central High School. The argument is that the high school had as much influence on its middle class constituents as the other way around, and that the market in educational credentials was the mechanism for mediating this relationship.

Chapter 3: “Power, Knowledge, and the Rationalization of Teaching: A Genealogy of the Movement to Professionalize Teaching.” (1992). *Harvard Educational Review*, 62: 2 (Summer), 123–54. Analyzes the Holmes Group’s effort (in its report, *Tomorrow’s Teachers*) to professionalize teaching as a reform that was spurred by the weak position of education schools within research universities. The movement sought to enhance the standing of education professors within the academic community by reinforcing its credibility in carrying out academic research on education, and it sought to use this academic authority to rationalize the practice of teachers in schools.

Chapter 4: “Doing Good, Doing Science: The Holmes Group Reports and the Rhetorics of Educational Reform.” (1992). *Teachers College Record*, 93: 4 (Summer), 628–40. Builds on a comparison of the first two Holmes Group reports (*Tomorrow’s Teachers* and *Tomorrow’s Schools*) to provide a framework for thinking about two influential rhetorics of educational reform, one depicting reform as “doing good” (a political and moral effort by citizens to bring schools in line with central values) and the other depicting it as “doing science” (a technical effort by experts to bring schools in line with scientific rationality).

Chapter 5: “From Comprehensive High School to Community College: Politics, Markets, and the Evolution of Educational Opportunity.” (1990). In Corwin, R. G. (ed.), *Research on Sociology of Education and Socialization*, 9, 203–40, Greenwich, CT: JAI Press. An analysis of the evolution of the community college as a window on the larger history of American education. The community college can be considered the new high school, carrying on that institution’s role as the people’s college, carrying out contradictory purposes of political equality, social mobility, and social efficiency; it can also be seen as the last in a line of lower tier colleges (preceded by the land grant college and the normal school) designed to provide a practical and terminal education but, unlike its predecessors, prevented from rising to the status of a university.

Chapter 6: “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals.” (1997). *American Educational Research Journal*, 34: 1 (Spring), 39–81. Lays out a framework for thinking about the politics of education as a competition among three broad social goals—democratic equality (preparing competent citizens), social efficiency (preparing productive workers), and social mobility (providing individuals with social opportunity)—each pushing education in a different direction, leaving the form and function of education dependent on the relative influence of these goals at a given point in history.

Chapter 7: “The Chronic Failure of Curriculum Reform.” (1999). *Education Week* 16: 36 (May 19), 42–4; part of its “Lessons of a Century” series about education in the twentieth century. Analyzes historically why so many curriculum reforms—and, by implication, so many educational reforms in general—failed in the US in the twentieth century. Reasons include conflicting educational goals, the primacy of credentialing over learning, loose coupling of schools, organizational convenience, and the benefits that the current curriculum provides to middle class families.

Chapter 8: “Resisting Educational Standards.” (2000). *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82: 1 (September), 28–33. An essay about the historical background for the chronic

American resistance to efforts to impose educational standards. One reason for this resistance is an aversion to interference with local control; another is a predilection toward measuring educational success via seat time rather than academic performance; a third is the strong demand for open access to educational opportunity at all levels.

Chapter 9: "The Trouble with Ed Schools." (1996). *Educational Foundations*, 10: 3 (Summer), 27–45. Explores the political and market pressures that shaped the historical development of the American education school in the last 150 years, and analyzes how this historical legacy, when combined with peculiar elements in the structural position and social functions of this institution, have made it difficult for the education school to gain respect or achieve success.

Chapter 10: "On the Nature of Teaching and Teacher Education: Difficult Practices that Look Easy." (2000). *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51: 3 (May), 228–33. An analysis of the special characteristics of teaching that make it (and the preparation of teachers) so difficult—including its dependence on cooperation from an involuntary clientele, structural isolation, and technical uncertainty—and that also make it seem easy, to both prospective teachers and parents.

Chapter 11: "Educational Researchers: Living with a Lesser Form of Knowledge." (2003). *Educational Researcher*, 27: 8 (November), 4–12. Examines the peculiarities in the kind of knowledge that educational researchers are compelled to pursue (very soft and very applied, in an arena where hard and pure knowledge carries more weight), and the kind of social organization that the pursuit of this knowledge imposes on them (dispersed and chronically focused on rebuilding foundations rather than building on past achievements).

Chapter 12: "Progressivism, Schools, and Schools of Education: An American Romance." (2005). *Paedagogica Historica*, 41: 1 and 2 (February), 275–88. Examines the historical roots of the connection between education schools and the ideology of pedagogical progressivism, arguing that this connection is based on mutual weakness: the inability of education schools to gain respect in the university and the inability of this Deweyan brand of progressivism to have a major impact on teaching and learning in schools, with ed schools needing an elevating mission and pedagogical progressivism needing an institutional home.

Chapter 13: "No Exit: Public Education as an Inescapably Public Good." (2000). In Cuban, L. and Shipps, D. (eds), *Reconstructing the Common Good in Education: Coping with Intractable American Dilemmas* (pp. 110–29). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Analyzes the ways in which education is both a public and private good, arguing that the push for market control of education (via charters, choice, and vouchers) ignores the fact that education is "consumed" by everyone, whether or not they have children in the public schools, and thus can never be treated as a purely private good, whose benefits accrue only to the individual student or graduate.

## Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Lynn Fendler and Tom Bird for comments on an earlier draft of this introduction. As they have done before, they saved me from some embarrassing mistakes. I presented an earlier version of this analysis in a colloquium at the Stanford School of Education in 2002 and in the Division F Mentoring Seminar at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in New Orleans later the same year.
- 2 That doesn't mean it's necessarily the best way to start developing an idea. For me, teaching has always served better as a medium for stimulating creative thought. It's a chance for me to engage with ideas from texts about a particular topic, develop a story about these ideas, and see how it sounds when I tell it in class and listen to student

responses. The classroom has a wonderful mix of traits for these purposes: by forcing discipline and structure on the creative process while allowing space for improvisation and offering the chance to reconstruct everything the next time around. After my first book, most of my writing had its origins in this pedagogical process. But at a certain point I find that I have to test these ideas in print.

- 3 The Marxist legacy in my work is most visible in chapter two, where I try to balance Marxist concepts of social class, social reproduction, and hegemony against Weberian notions of status competition and credentials. I still like the argument in this paper, but I wince at its rhetoric. To save space in reproducing the paper for this book, I eliminated the tables, but I left the original self-consciously theory-laden language. I also retained the choppy sentence structure imposed on the text by an overactive editor, who sought to convert the paper to the house style of the sociology journal that published it by translating all complex constructions into short declarative sentences bereft of qualifying clauses. A more readable version of the paper can be found as chapter four in *How to Succeed in School*. But the paper in its originally published form serves as a useful time capsule, showing the transitional state of my thinking at that point; it also serves as a classic example of journalese, showing how thoroughly journals can eradicate an author's voice.
- 4 Marx's message is rousing and it can fit on a bumper sticker: Workers of the world, unite! But Weber's message is more complicated, pessimistic, and off-putting: The iron cage of rationalization has come to dominate the structure of thought and social action, but we can't stop it or even escape from it.
- 5 He also pointed out, in passing, that my chapter on the attainment system at the high school—which incorporated 17 tables in the book (30 in the dissertation), and which took me two years to develop by collecting, coding, keying, and statistically analyzing data from 2,000 student records—was essentially one big footnote in support of the statement, "Central High School was meritocratic." Depressing but true.