Labaree’s Someone Has To Fail: Exposing the Facade of Liberal Democracy

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The title of Labaree’s (2010) book, *Someone Has to Fail,* captivates me. He provides a very interesting mix of pessimism, social critique, and irony. His social commentary culminates in a rather drawn out conclusion; “we,” U.S. inhabitants have a tendency to turn to school reform and education to solve social and individual problems. We do this, even though school reform has a long history of being ineffective in ensuring that all of our social goals materialize. He even refers to this resort to school reform as a syndrome (p. 222). He identifies the root cause of this ineffectiveness as “the contradictions in the liberal democratic mind.” He insists that it is impossible to satisfy the three competing goals of education, simultaneously: social efficiency, social mobility, and democratic equality (p. 17-18). While I do agree with the gravitas of those contradictions, I believe that the underlying source of those contradictions lie in the façade of liberal democracy and a democratic republic. Therefore, the public school milestones and narratives that Labaree highlights represent the reality of the aristocratic nature of the United States.

First and foremost, I will start with the common school’s movement that he proclaims as the one true success story of educational reform. He cites Mann’s Twelfth Annual Report in 1848, concluding that Mann’s primary rationale for public schools was to “create citizens with the knowledge, skills, and public spirit required to maintain a republic and to protect it from the sources of faction, class, and self-interest that pose the primary threat to its existence.” (18) The low hanging fruit, to be colloquial, would be to point to slavery, Jim Crow, disenfranchisement, or a women’s suffrage movement that followed this movement. However, I will refrain from that. Instead, I will point to what I think is the elitist preface of this argument coated in rhetorical appeal: a fundamental belief that a formal education is required in order to enable (selected) people to have the knowledge, sensibilities, and ability to vote responsibly. Rather, how can we not view this as a method and tool to socialize those who would be allowed to vote and govern on behalf of the many into particular modes of thinking about and participating in a democratic republic? If one can assume that citizenship and governance was not for everyone, then one can conclude that schools to produce citizens weren’t for everyone. There have been aristocratic notions about citizenship and education since the inception of public schools and our nation.

It is confusing to follow who, exactly, constitutes the “we” as he discusses what Americans and American reformers expect and want from the public school system. However, the narrative of consumer driven reforms to public school as a tool for social mobility and maintaining social advantages exposes the need for explicit specificity with regard to all of his claims:

For most of the nineteenth century, the high school remained largely a middle- class preserve within the school system. During the same period, working- class enrollments gradually expanded from the lower grades into the grammar school grades. By the 1870s and 1880s, grammar school enrollments were nearing universality in the United States, which led naturally to growing consumer demand for access to the high school. Before the end of the century, the system yielded to this demand and began opening a series of new high schools, which led to a rapid expansion of high school enrollments. Increased access for working- class families, however, undercut the advantage that high school attendance had long brought to middle- class families. How was education supposed to meet both of these consumer demands within the same school system (p. 238)?

Social advantage did not arise because the high school content was useful but because access to these subjects was limited. Thus, in the twentieth century the key issue in the politics of education became this new tension between the open access and the special advantage that schooling could provide individual consumers. The central fights that emerged were over who would get access to high school (and later college) and how families with educational advantage could retain their edge in the face of growing enrollments at one level of the system and then another (p. 75).

As I stated earlier, I believe that social advantage has been a tantamount aspect of education since its inception. After all, voting and governance were intrinsically social advantages when we truly give credence to the history of disenfranchisement in the U.S. Furthermore, I believe that the working class focus on educational access or school as a means for social mobility were direct reactions and responses to the social world around them: a world in which people in middle class and higher class positions used education and prestige to preserve their elite status and advantage.

Because he seemingly accepts that U.S.’s existence as a liberal democracy, his individual analyses of the desegregation movement, the standards movement, and the school choice movement don’t adequately account for the narrative of social advantage that he paints.

For example, he states that the desegregation movement and Brown V. Board of Education argued that “quality education was an important form of property that [Black folks] had been denied, and the remedy was to give them access to it” He insisted that “Brown depicted education as a private good, whose benefits go to the degree holder and not to society as a whole” (p. 30-32). I must admit that I don’t fully understand whether Labaree is implying whether or not the integrationists played a role, discursively, in moving the the goals of education to social mobility or not. I hope I am mistaken, but it sounds like that is the implication.

Perhaps, some Black people’s calls to integrate was a realization of how well the democratic republic that the Founding Fathers created *worked*. Labaree points to the fact that the courts argument was not that granting access to equal education for Blacks would enhance society as a whole; instead, they insisted that it would help Black people and individual Black degree holders. Perhaps, the integrationists and the courts realized that a collective plight of some Black populations was a manifestation of their position as subjects, rather than citizens. How can more access to public, quality education help the nation when someone has to fail? Rather than seeing integrationists as a pivotal moment in changing or creating a goal for public schooling, I view it as a realization of the reality of social advantage’s relationship with (denying others) education. I have a similar pessimism with regard to his analysis of the school choice movement and the consequences of the push for “achievement” and standardized tests. They just polarize high achieving students and low achieving students further than tracking and school selection. How can we view these high stakes tests that act as impediments to students getting into prestigious colleges, graduating high school, or being in higher tracks in high school from a broader narrative and pattern of working class and second-class folks constantly reacting and responding to the attempts of our aristocracy and aristocratic hopefuls to preserve or build upon their social advantages?

With that being said, I think private independent boarding schools in New England are definitely safe havens for the privileged. NMH is a peculiar case. Its founding seemingly contradicts that. Yet, now the founding of the school (although the white man’s burden and problematic missionary aspect of the school’s founding is often ignored) is merely appropriated. The schools’ current financial situation and related institutional self-preservation has made its priorities more closely align with the consumerist needs of full-pay families. There are financial aid opportunities and calls for diversity. Still, I do not think that these campuses open doors for democratic equality because they are a part of larger educational, economic trends of the aristocracy and aristocratic hopefuls. These schools still act as feeder schools to elite colleges and universities. Moreover, extending access to these spaces to a few people from marginalized communities does not dissipate the social advantages of the privileged many. In fact, the communities of those few who are given access remain the same. The schools in their communities are still plagued by tracking, high stakes tests that polarize high achieving students from lower achieving students, loose coupling that fails to improve curriculum, and the illusion of their schools as expressions of the three goals of a liberal democracy.

NMH and independent boarding schools, on the other hand, exemplify this fallacy. It is reified in my daily interactions with teachers, wealthy parents, trustees, etc. For example, I always ask teachers why they remain in such a privileged space, rather than teaching in public schools or in underresourced communities. They most always acknowledge that those communities may seem as though they are the most in need, but they follow up with a similar notion almost every time. They mention the financial benefits and incentives of teaching in this world as well as proclaiming “here I can reach the students who are going to be ruling the country and different parts of the world. These are the students that are inheriting businesses, impacting policy and governing schools and institutions like these in the future.” Some of them also have children that go to school here, hopefully tapping into the social networks and social capital of this placed. If that is not an aristocracy, then what is it?

References

Labaree, David F. (2010). *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.