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**REVIEW**

Lagemann, Ellen Condliffe (2000) *An Elusive Science – The Troubling History of Education Research*. University of Chicago Press.

Brutish and bloody ethnic slaughter across the globe. Dangerous environmental degradation. Stifling cultural ennui within rampant turbo-consumerism. Menacing saber rattling from Gaza to the Taiwan Strait. Narrow problematics in education research.

A senior official of the U.S. Office of Education once lamented the tepid appeal of education research, its relative "lack of drama," and the resulting difficult sell in Congressional funding battles. "No congressman's daughter," claimed Francis A.J. Ianni, "has ever died of a split infinitive."<sup>1</sup> A tribute to Lagemann's well-deserved reputation as a leading and engaging historian, *An Elusive Science* establishes a compelling case for greater attention to the "hows and whys" of education research over the last century, and develops an incisive "argument from history about current problems associated with educational scholarship." In the end, she tells of an "ongoing story about larger constellations of social values and views that have often found their clearest manifestations in debates about education." If we want to improve education, claims Lagemann, we need to improve what passes as education research; in order to do that, we must understand and address the historical conditions that have constrained its development. This is a book you will want within arm's reach, essential deep context to the flash and flurry of educational issues that flicker upon your computer screen.

"Intentionally shaped to be more interpretative than comprehensive," Lagemann's account argues that "the most powerful forces [that] have shaped educational scholarship over the last century have tended to push the field in unfortunate directions – away from close interactions with policy and practice and toward excessive quantification and scientism." This history has left education research hobbled as a low status field, isolated from mainstream intellectual ferment, narrowly defining its agenda, diffusely structured and weakly self-regulated for rigor and quality. The "considerable jeopardy" in which the whole field of educa-



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tional research finds itself may finally stimulated the needed reform impulses, and thus the telling of this troubling educational history might serve a meliorative role. 'Tis a mighty modest optimism with which we are left!

In making her case – a “discipline history” of what is arguably not a discipline – Lagemann provides a judicious and courageous synthesis of much recent literature in education, and sets out a large framework for understanding much of education this century. While other scholars are sure to dispute details, choice of examples, overlooked threads, and theoretical perspective, Lagemann’s extended essay sketches out fresh perimeters of provocative terrain. How does education educate itself, and what has shaped the key approaches and institutions? Can there be a more fundamental concern for the profession? Such a choice of thesis also throws down a gauntlet to would-be reformers. In addition to the challenge to historians and policy makers, Lagemann’s approach would demand of reformers an explicit understanding of the research tradition(s) that informs them, and how that tradition(s) advances beyond a largely troubled history.

As in her previous work on the Carnegie Corporation and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of teaching, Lagemann bounds her study – here by “discipline,” there by institution – not to chronicle events but to frame an investigation into key underlying issues their republic faces in regards to its own paideia. What, for instance, is the nature of any science of education? When is empiricism not reductivist, and how does one reconcile interactional/relational approaches with those positing a legitimate expertise worth disseminating? Who belongs to the “community of practice,” and how does the practitioner relate to the researcher? When does a claim to pristine scientific status betray hostility to the messy realities of practice? When does a claim to quantitative precision obscure a lack of significance, and when does a claim for qualitative sensitivity obscure a subjective lack of rigor? Is it possible to re-claim and re-assess models of scientific engagement that do not arise from natural science envy, and yet require equally empirical, equally sophisticated approaches? What would that community of practice look like, and can history provide us with alternative models, “opportunities missed along the way,” broadening our imagination in order to re-organize the enterprise more effectively?<sup>2</sup>

Here in fact is one of the chief contributions of *an Elusive Science*: a reminder of the powerful utility of historical investigation, its capacity to transport us beyond the strictures of current frameworks. If educational research is to move beyond the perception – often warranted, often not – of expensive endeavors to prove common sense, then its community

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of reflective practice must understand where the field has arrived, how, and what implications that has for method and structures within that community. One can only be stunned by the degree to which the serious-minded appear to repeat educational discussions of the same issues with nearly the same terms one generation after another. For the conversation to advance, develop iteratively even, we must build from an awareness of where we have arrived. Such is the potent, practical contribution historical work can provide, without needing to prostitute itself to presentism. Without such memory, we will continue to lose public traction with our research results, and continue to wonder why the world does not marvel when we exclaim, again and with renewed passion, that research shows kids learn better in interactive settings.

In many ways pioneering a new direction, Lagemann hopes to stimulate greater historical attention to educational scholarship, and it is here that her interpretation sets out a compelling invitation, a gauntlet tossed down, a ground floor established for building a historical literature addressing educational research. One can only hope that the challenge is taken up. For example, more needs to be known about the history of education research in specific subject matter disciplines, and the shifting if tenuous relations across that daunting divide between disciplinary and education departments. Historical investigations into research in neighboring fields, and into relevant institutional interstices, where findings may have never made it into the education "discipline" captured here, can also help refine our understanding of the boundaries effectively maintained by education. The history of educational research not carried out by "educators" may further extend our understanding of this history, adding lessons from military preparation, commercial training and other independent research groups.

Lagemann herself suggests or appears to imply several directions worth pursuing. How might the lens of economic history inform our understanding of "the opportunity structures" faced by those managing institutions, those developing research and those demanding it? What role has been played by issues of market scale (the need for so many more practitioners than in other professions), by the largely monopsonistic nature of the K-12 professional market, by competing incentives for professional talent? In what ways has our structuring of these markets and our financing of education reflected and realized our implicit decisions regarding the nature of education, its role in our society, and thereby, the role its own research will play? What externalities has this produced? How does such historical analysis help us set a broader context for current debates and trends surrounding heightened market forces in K-12 and higher education?

Further, might greater attention to the histories of professional networks that develop, disseminate and question “best practices” (such as National Writing Project) or implement specific reform approaches (such as Accelerated Schools) refine our historical understanding of educational research, and extend our conception of systematic “research” that integrates with practice? Might the history of community-centered schooling, in its several variations, re-frame research by re-framing education to include public ends? Does the distinct historical trajectory of the testing industry and related research communities provide revealing insights into relationships between practice, research, policy and commerce? How might further work into the history of the teaching profession, some of which is now being pursued, including who teaches, how they enter teaching, how their work is structured, and how they prepare and develop professionally – how might this inform our understanding of how education educates itself, and how formal research shapes and is shaped by the nature of key professional community? Finally, the intriguing case of educational administration that Lagemann sketches reminds us of the need to understand the history of the many professional positions within education, including central office bureaucrats and school site supervisors, who are often key consumers, suppliers and even shapers of research.

One should also note that the reader will likely enjoy the historical context given to familiar institutions such as Teachers College, Columbia University, and to the common acronyms of the current education landscape, such as the AERA, NAEP, EDC and ETS. The text further provides concise and often fresh interpretations of familiar figures such as Hall, William James, Dewey, Thorndike, Cubberley, Ayres, and Terman.

And so what? Interesting to historians, useful to policy wonks looking for historical perspective, attractive to grad students searching for appetizing thesis topics – where does one locate *this* piece of educational research within the framework Lagemann herself sets out? Where does it leave those of us working to implement improved support to teachers, to administrators, to students and their families?

*An Elusive Science* broadens the agenda for educational research, and thus for educational improvement, by sketching out critical players and choices that have shaped how we learn about learning. Aware of their decisions, and their implications for fundamental choices we make about how we educate today, we must now question how history will judge our decisions. Lagemann finds the vision of the early educationists “mightily flawed,” accepting and perpetuating “the myopias common to their world,” but found the individuals no “more limited than many of their peers.” How

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will our judgment fair? Have we sounded out our own assumptions clearly enough, so as to move beyond their limitations?

In addition to broadening our agenda, and diminishing our intellectual isolation just a bit, this account of the last century reminds us that within the seemingly tepid waters of educational research run the currents of our deepest integrity as professionals. Much of what is central to education may be informed, but can never be decided by research. Even the most complicated research project can pale against the messy, irrational and even virulent vicissitudes of education. Yet at the soul of a profession is its ability to self-assess, reform and advance in the public interest. Speaking to that soul must be the research that can enhance what we do for our kids, our colleagues and our republican paideia – who we become individually, who we are as trusted professionals, and who we wish to be as a people.

And there's a good bit of drama in all that.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lagemann, Ellen, *an Elusive Science – The Troubling History of Education Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000: 169.

<sup>2</sup> Lagemann, p. 246.

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