

Investing in Trial and Error: A Reimagining of Teacher Education

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Table of Contents.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Background .....	6
Methods/ Case study rationale.....	10
Research and Recommendations.....	11
Conclusion.....	26
Works Cited.....	28

## I. Abstract

With our education system in shambles and our teacher preparation programs under heavy fire, the climate in academic circles around education are tense. Policy is trending in an unsettling direction, including giving private school vouchers to get kids out of bad school districts and putting untrained college graduates into communities with greater and greater need. We are so stuck on fixing symptoms of education's meltdown that we are overlooking greater issues and ignoring larger scale questions. This essay aims to answer the question "what can we do to fix teacher education?" I provide three very distinct models for improving Oxy's teacher education program that can easily be applied to other schools of education nationwide or combined, reduced or scrapped entirely in the hopes of creating a system that works. What can we do? Try new things without giving up hope.

## II. Introduction

Education has been one of the leading issues of American politics predating World War II. Excluding two, every president of the United States has had a college degree since 1869 and even founding father George Washington thought it was important enough that he donated money and stock to three different institutions<sup>1</sup>. Education is a central tenet of the American Dream and a rite of passage for adolescents everywhere. With all of the money, effort and airtime that go into the American public school system, a significant amount of energy is focused on the teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> "George Washington's Mount Vernon - Facts & Falsehoods about George Washington." Web.

Teachers have become the martyrs, the poster children and the scapegoats of the educational system. Praised for their selflessness, chastised for their shortcomings, exemplified for their will power and exiled from the professional world, teachers occupy a paradoxical and liminal space in the American psyche. It has become taboo to criticize teachers beyond the incidental accusations of bad teaching, and politicians nationwide know far better than to get on a teachers' union's bad side. Teachers as a group wield an incredible amount of power, while individual teachers carry almost no clout over any realm outside of their classrooms.

But in spite of—or possibly because of—all of these factors, there has been a vast amount of research done on what defines a good teacher and good teaching. Equally as abundant are studies done on the subject of teacher education and neither topic tends to fare well in academia's regards. David Labaree explains it best, saying, "For academics and the general public alike, ed school bashing has long been a pleasant pastime. It is so much a part of ordinary conversation that, like talking about the weather, you can bring it up anywhere without fear that you will offend anyone."<sup>2</sup> Governor of Colorado Richard Lamm berates educators further, saying, "Never before in the nation's history has the caliber of those entering the teaching profession been as low as it is today."<sup>3</sup>

If the problem in American education lies with the teachers and the institutions that make them, the solution must also lie with them. Never will it be said that there aren't superstar teachers, to whom teaching is a calling, a passion and a true art form.

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<sup>2</sup> Labaree, David F, and ebrary, Inc. *The Trouble with Ed Schools*. p. 3

<sup>3</sup> Lucas, Christopher J. *Teacher Education in America: Reform Agendas for the Twenty-First Century*. p.

Across the country we hear accounts of teachers who take a motley group of randomly assorted children and create vibrant, inquisitive communities of learners, acting as a polar opposite to the disillusioning, uninspiring stories of the teachers far past their prime collecting checks and throwing on a video before reading the newspaper. From this dichotomy we can see clearly both the problem and its solution, but what is not clear is how to create a successful system devoid of the problematic melancholy, where only the promising and truly transformative pedagogues remain.

But for every lackluster teacher there is a set of lackluster circumstances that lead there. While for some the circumstance is simply a long career riddled with shortcuts that eventually breeds educational entropy, for others there is a teacher education program that allows for an unqualified teacher to be given the reins in a classroom that needs a stronger leader than it receives. What this tells us is that while there are lukewarm teacher education schools that perpetuate mediocrity, they are by no means at fault for the embarrassing debacle that is public education, but if we are to fix it, we have to take a serious look at reforming, reworking and reimagining our teacher preparation programs.

This essay, through careful analysis of established research on teacher preparation programs as well as interviews with professors of education at Occidental College is geared towards the ideation of new models of educating our educators. I will be fleshing out ideas that have been mumbled and murmured, but never given full attention, solutions that have been hinted at, but never realized. I hope, with this composition, to give those responsible for the hefty task of preparing teachers for the perfect unpredictability of school a couple of new ideas for their courses, perhaps a new direction in which to take their department or maybe just food for self reflective thought.

### III. Background

It is no secret that our nation is facing an educational crisis and has been for the better part of the last century. It has been the subject of both fictional and non fiction films, the center of countless reform movements and a cornerstone of every president's run at the white house since Ronald Reagan. Easily topping the list of the Supreme Court of the United States' most important and influential cases is the 1954 decision to desegregate schools with *Brown v. Board*, which also defined dominant public discourse and debate for another two decades.

Jonathan Kozol, one of the premier writers on the subject of educational failure, has written several expose-like accounts, citing case study after case study of not only unproductive, but also unsafe and unsanitary conditions of public schools across the nation, notably *Death at an Early Age* (1967), *Savage Inequalities* (1991) and *Shame of a Nation* (2005). Kozol shatters our misconception that most public schools are safe places with environments conducive to learning no matter where you go, replacing them with the harsh realities of impoverished urban, inner city schools. Kozol's work is widely considered some of the most prominent and conspicuous criticisms of our public schools.

*Death at an Early Age* tells the story of Kozol's experience in a Boston public elementary school where he quickly grows to see systematic racial and class based discrimination all around him. This eye opening book is a sobering narrative that not only indicts the individuals involved in the "destruction of the hearts and minds" of the African American student population in the Boston school system, but also the system

itself, not unlike many others across the nation, that lets the inequality of miseducated have-nots go unheard.<sup>4</sup>

In *Savage Inequalities* Kozol takes his inquiry a step further, examining school conditions in St. Louis, Washington D.C., New Jersey and Chicago, once again exposing disparities in the taxpayer funded public schools. Here Kozol delves deeper, showing the negligence of specific teachers in apathetic districts where sub par is the norm, as well as the standout paragons of equity and the education that every child is promised by law.<sup>5</sup> Teachers who defy expectations, common sense and the idea of limitations in a classroom are the lone voices of hope in this thoroughly chilling description of the problematic conditions of urban education that is arguably doing more harm than good for these children. We are in a state of educational emergency and have been for far too long.

Many theorists and forward thinking philosophers have recognized the trials our youth are facing in schools and have studied, examined and dissected every aspect of the classroom, the school and the system as a whole, starting with John Dewey, commonly known as the father of progressive education. Dewey introduced readers to the now common practices of engaging students' prior knowledge, moderating teacher talk in exchange for student interaction and community based learning. Dewey's work in the field of education paved the way for a century of educational reformers and progressives.

While a lot of the research has, like Dewey's, focused on the classroom—as it is a logical place to start—some of the gaze has shifted to the schools of education. In his exploration of teacher education schools, *The Trouble With Ed Schools* (2004), historian of education David Labaree contends that too many schools of education are failing in

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<sup>4</sup> Kozol, Jonathan. *Death at an Early Age; the Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools*. p. 1

<sup>5</sup> Kozol, Jonathan. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*.

their duties to prepare consistently outstanding teachers because they tend to fall into one of two categories, the disconnected bastion of progressivism with no roots in the community or profession of teaching, and the liberal, feel good school that tries to help its students see the positives in education without ever preparing them for the intense emotional and professional space that they are getting ready to occupy.<sup>6</sup>

On one side of the imbalanced scale, lies the school of education in the ivory tower. Its professors are strong researchers and have a vast understanding of the theories of education. This school and its professors are actually very far removed from the subject and real work of education. These schools are the ones that offer higher degrees in education, not actually focusing on teacher education and preparation, but on masters or doctoral candidates and publication of research. These schools are four to five times more uncommon than schools of education that do not offer advanced degrees, but they occupy a higher status role. Because of their propensity for research and publication, which promotes greater visibility, notoriety and respect, these schools are higher profile and benefit from better pay. These schools, however, are no longer in touch with the most important part of education—the kids and the classrooms—and are not creating the model teachers we need involved in the communities.

Most of the schools that fall into this category are the prestigious schools, Harvard, Berkeley and the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education to name a few. Because of their focus on educational research—which is in itself removed from the act and practice of teaching—these schools are making little headway into improving the quality of real teachers in real classrooms. Furthermore, as well known,

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<sup>6</sup> Labaree, David F, and ebrary, Inc. *The Trouble with Ed Schools*. p. 109-121

respected institutions, they fall victim to their own status. Because of the esteem associated with achieving a masters or a PhD, far fewer of these students go into the lowly, almost menial profession of school teaching. More often than not, Labaree elaborates, these people find themselves teaching in universities or colleges of education or doing more education research. This puts further distance between the important research and the group who is ironically most often forgotten in conversations about education—the children.

The other type of school that Labaree’s survey of educational research is critical of is the low status education school that directly engages potential educators. The problem facing these schools is threefold. First, is the derogatory tone that is usually used in describing those students going into education programs. They are often portrayed as mediocre students with lackluster ambitions, having turned to the age old adage “well, there’s always teaching.” Labaree attributes this low status of the students to the low esteem for the profession of teaching as a whole. Medical students and law students enjoy high status because of the status of the profession, education students suffer from low status because of the status of teachers.

The second issue with the school directly involved with teacher preparation is the professoriate. In these schools that are less research driven, the faculty are often perceived as lazy or uninspired. Labaree cites significant data that shows how little research is done on the whole by professors in this context, which undercuts their already low status as well as the authenticity of the learning environments these educators create. Labaree describes these professors as being thought of as intellectually weak and as having no academic community towards which to turn, discuss or consult. They are also

viewed largely as purveyors of soft, applied knowledge, whereas most of academia looks for concrete, provable, objective data. This has far more to do with the profession of teaching, which is incredibly complex and by its nature, applied. Without hard content knowledge these professors give their students subjective—therefore unsound—understandings of their craft, not by any fault of their own.

The nature of teaching as a profession, skill or even art, poses the third problem to the school of education. Teaching, as any teacher, student or administrator will assert, is a tremendously complex combination of understanding individual students, classroom dynamics, how to organize material for best understanding, in addition to being engaging, motivational and culturally aware. Because of its astronomical complexity as well as incredibly unpredictability due to the balance created by twenty to forty unique students in one classroom no one set of ideas, strategies or lessons will work every time. Blanket statements do not apply to educational settings simply because every classroom, every group of students, every grade level or subject matter is very different. There are commonalities that are important to understand and harness for the students' benefit, but the cookie cutter approach of fitting every class to the same standard approach is both foolish and ineffectual, which calls into question exactly what can be learned from schools of education.

#### IV. Methods/Case study

In discussion of the faults and shortcomings of teacher education and preparation, I naturally became curious as to what the solution within the study of education could be. Labaree's discussion of the peculiar nature of teaching and teaching preparation, as well

as several interviews with professors within Oxy's own school of education generated the spark for several ideas for new models of teacher education. Pragmatically, however, there was no application for my theories, which would simply make this project another set of academic musings as opposed to a collection of ideas based in reality and practice that could potentially create meaningful progress. Being an Oxy student and credential candidate, Oxy seems to be the perfect springboard for my investigation into new models of teacher education. If I am to use Oxy's Education Department as a base for my conceptualizations, first, I have to address and understand the strengths and weaknesses of this program. My understandings of Oxy's program will inform my recommendations on new ideas for schools of education, allowing me to create adaptable, flexible models.

My evaluation of the Oxy education department will take a three-fold approach. I will first analyze the department using the criticism and criteria that Labaree included in *The Trouble With Ed Schools* as well as some other articles that enumerate what teacher education should encompass. Following that I will discuss my findings from interviews that I conducted with several of the faculty in the hopes of better understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the department. Lastly I will add my evaluation of the department as a student passing through, with additional commentary from peers and other students in the department.

## V. Research and Recommendations

### Occidental College School of Education

Oxy's school of education has actually done a very good job straddling the line that Labaree draws between failing models of education schools. Its professors have, first

and foremost, taught in a public school setting for a minimum of 5 years, giving them all a deep understanding of the needs of children and the intricacies of that experience. Furthermore a majority of the professors are active researchers, some of whom have been published extensively. Oxy's education department, however, grants 2 to 3 times as many credentials as it does master's degrees, which coupled with the aforementioned factors really puts its school of education squarely in the middle of the two categories that Labaree describes. It seems, however, that rather than being prone to the ills of both institutions, Oxy's school of education has managed to circumvent the pitfalls of both types of education school.

One of the biggest strengths that I was able to surmise from my interviews with faculty as well as personal experience in the department is a commitment and passion for the students that come through the program. By staying with up to date relevant research on the subject of teacher preparation, the faculty is giving each of the students in the department a very intentional and well thought out experience. Using strategies such as reinforcing content area pedagogy skills and incorporating aspects of self-reflection into the curriculum, are just a couple ways in which they do that.

This department is not, however, without its faults. It has done very little to encourage students to observe or student teach outside of our North East Los Angeles corridor. While the areas directly surrounding Occidental College are by no means the wealthiest areas of Los Angeles, even the rougher parts of it are not remotely close to the experience found in some of the south central schools. These environments are the ones that need high quality teachers the most, but due to a lack of exposure to those environments, most of our teachers will never even think of working there. Because of

our department's lack of strong relationships with schools and community based organizations, there are very few entryways into communities outside our own part of LA. Rather than stay in parts of Los Angeles and be comfortable with the experiences we have, never pushing ourselves outside that comfort zone, we should encourage or at least make it feasible for students to engage with an environment they've never seen before.

### The Community

John Dewey, one of the first writers on the subject of American educational reform, held that schools are simply an extension of the community. Teachers likewise serve to inculcate students into the ways of thinking, philosophies and values of the community, not to impose their own beliefs onto students. This creates an intrinsic link between the community and the teacher, because the community is the client and ultimately the judge of a teacher's efficacy.

Dewey asserts that for this to be a successful relationship there are several factors that must act in harmony.<sup>7</sup> First, the teachers must accept their role as a de facto extension of the community. A teacher whose beliefs, intentions or values are directly at odds with a community is quite simply doomed to self inflicted strife and unemployment. In order for there to be congruous collaboration between the community and the instructors, the messages they both send to the youth should work together. This is not to say that a teacher cannot disagree with a community, but for the best results in terms of students valuing or understanding an idea, they should be able to interact with it in multiple forums.

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<sup>7</sup> "John Dewey My Pedagogic Creed." Web.

What this means is that, according to Dewey, it is imperative that teachers must not just know about, but become a member of the community that they are serving. In order to fully understand the needs of the community and arguably more importantly, the needs of the students as members of the community, the teacher must not be an outsider. If a teacher is seen as “other” by the students or the community, if a teacher is made out to be an outsider imposing ideas onto the students and the public, there will be far less of a chance to create meaningful relationships, conversations and learning.

One of the largest shortcomings that the Oxy education department has, both from my own assessment, as well as from some of the faculty’s perspective, is a lack of engagement with the communities around us. Oxy students do fieldwork in schools as close as two miles, as far away as twenty, but the support and discussion around the interactions with the community remain the same. Some student teachers are in classrooms that are 90 percent Armenian, others split down the middle between whites and Asians, others still Latino or African American, but the conversations about community never leave the academic realm. Our department and therefore our students’ engagement with the community comes through engagement with students in the classroom, our knowledge of the culture and values simply a product of knowing our students, not vice versa. This creates a contrived sense of belonging and a fragile balance of inclusion. If, for example, Oxy were trying to reach out to community based organizations in South Central Los Angeles, it might be prudent to form a relationship with Tommy the Clown and the Clown Foundation—a non-profit organization in South Central that encourages youth to make positive choices in order to keep them away from the violent influences in the community—in order to interact with adults in the

community trying to keep the youth moving in a positive direction, while also gaining insight into the lives of children and teens in this unforgiving neighborhood.

The first model that would address many of the issues brought up in my assessment of our department as well as academia's concerns with education programs is a program more deeply rooted in the needs of the community. Instead of education schools basing themselves entirely in fieldwork and building an understanding of the classroom with no development of the understanding of the environments that create the children in each class, forming meaningful partnerships with the groups in the community would be very intrinsically valuable. This idea was born from the notion that Oxy's education department does not fully engage our community, nor the communities that we purport to serve.

Education is rooted in the community, so it follows that learning about education should include learning about the community—not through online research or discussions about people in the neighborhood, but through experiences and discussions with people in the neighborhood. Any college student going into a public school environment should be building a sense of belonging or membership within that community as well and the school of education should facilitate this. This means that the education schools need to forge lasting, meaningful relationships with schools in surrounding neighborhoods as well as organizations in those neighborhoods to develop the aspiring educators interaction with the community. Furthermore, the school of education needs to be intentional with the choices it makes when creating and maintaining relationships.

While Oxy's fieldwork structure has the intention of creating agency among students in giving them the opportunity and task of finding their own fieldwork

placement, there is problematically little development of students' participation in the community surrounding their school. What would create far more agency and belonging among undergraduates and their client communities would be a required and intentional interaction with neighborhood members. Students taking courses on "Educating African America" or "Chicano Education" need to be situated in the communities they are discussing with more than a 35-hour requirement of their fieldwork in the public school. If we expect our education students to become real practitioners, advocates and mentors, they will require the support, guidance and wisdom of those in the community. The model that follows is my response to these shortcomings.

With that in mind, if the Oxy education department wishes for its students to truly become grounded in the communities they are observing, they should take the following steps.

- Creating a relationship with Schools
  - Identify five to ten elementary and secondary public schools in the Los Angeles area that meet the descriptions of the schools we want our students to experience and engage—include a variety of types of schools, schools in Eagle Rock, Downtown, Echo Park, Glendale, etc.
  - Contact these schools with the proposal of a mutually beneficial collaboration.
  - This relationship will entail the following from Occidental
    - We will send intrinsically (personally) and extrinsically (grade related) motivated students to act as support in the classroom

- Our students will be supported by our faculty, as well as by each other, requiring little extra work on the part of the classroom teacher or the administrators.
- We will incentivize our students to engage with these schools by recommending or even requiring students to choose from this list, creating an expectation and culture of ownership of this relationship between Oxy and the aforementioned schools
- Encourage or require students to carpool and collaborate, even with students in other classes in order to make this experience less strenuous on the already confused and bewildered undergraduates.
- This relationship will require the following from collaborating schools
  - Allow and encourage Oxy students to observe in classrooms
  - Create opportunities for Oxy student teaching to occur in this school.
  - Hold the Occidental College Department of Education accountable for the conduct and performance of its students
- Creating a relationship with the Community
  - Identify as many as three community based organizations with vested interest in the students in local schools.
  - Contact these schools with the proposal of a mutually beneficial collaboration.
  - This relationship will entail the following from Occidental

- We will send intrinsically (personally) and extrinsically (grade related) motivated students to act as temporary members of the organization, participating and learning from the members
- We will incentivize our students to engage with these organizations by recommending or even requiring students to choose from this list, creating an expectation and culture of ownership of this relationship between Oxy and the aforementioned community groups
- Encourage or require students to carpool and collaborate, even with students in other classes in order to make this experience less strenuous on the already confused and bewildered undergraduates
- This relationship will require the following from collaborating organizations
  - Allow and encourage Oxy students to observe and partake in normal membership responsibilities and meetings
  - Treat Oxy students as new members and help them feel part of the community, safely.
  - Hold the Occidental College Department of Education accountable for the conduct, performance and engagement of its students
- Connecting the School experience and the Community experience

- Include in any class that involves fieldwork as well as student teaching an expectation or assignment of community involvement with one of the chosen community based organizations.
- Include in any class that involves fieldwork as well as student teaching an assignment asking students to relate their learning about the community to trends, needs or topics they see in their fieldwork or student teaching

### The Charter School

Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire describes *praxis* as the process of learning, trying and reflecting for growth.<sup>8</sup> This notion of theory informing experiences and experiences informing self-criticism and growth is a powerful—albeit complex one—that drives the ideas behind the next model. Praxis is the link between theory and practice and it is all too easy for students of one to ignore the other, leaving them in a place of potential ignorance. Without theory, practice can become meaningless, unintentional action, while without practice, theory is simply a conversation without a measurable end and neither can exist functionally as a real process of growth without reflection to inform the end result.

In education, however, students are asked to understand theories of learning processes and inequality in classrooms or schools in the context of their classes and then understand, recognize and act upon them in a fieldwork placement miles away with no support in sight. Sometimes these connections are easily made—the theory plays itself out clearly, day by day—but such is not always the case. There is little accounting for the

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<sup>8</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogía Del Oprimido*. p. 195

different experiences that students have in their fieldwork. This begs the question “Are we asking tasks of our students that they are not all equipped to handle?” to which the answer is a resounding “maybe.”

The problem is that with any outside observation experience, there is very little control over the connections and the learning that takes place outside the thought out, intentional environment of the education school. There are too many outliers and unknown factors to have a controlled and consistent environment. Furthermore, Oxy’s school of education has had to, on occasion, compromise between the quality of the school setting and the quality of the teacher in the classroom for fieldwork observation or student teaching, which forces the department to make a sacrifice. What if, however, there was a way to have both an ideal school and superstar teachers in the classroom, without the difficulty of students traveling for miles to find those classrooms?

A different approach on a teacher education model is to follow the tenets of most scientific experiments and establish a control setting, in this case, the learning environment. By establishing a charter school with the specific goals of putting the department’s philosophy into action as well as having a place for observers and student teachers to put their skills into action in a more controlled, more intentional environment, we can achieve several of the department’s missions simultaneously. This idea has seen several iterations put into action, however, for the purposes of understanding new ideas on teacher education, I will describe it for its benefits to teacher education.

In the Bay Area, a collection of charter schools called the Aspire school system has a teacher residency program similar to this idea. In this program, residents begin with student teaching while taking classes and doing seminars with their residency cohort. The

following two years, the resident teacher is employed by one of the schools and is supported with one on one coaching during the two year “induction” process culminating with residents receiving their teaching credential. Finally during the fourth year, the now full time teachers have a year of employment with Aspire and can go on to explore more employment opportunities with Aspire or with other districts and schools. This model provides a good context for understanding this next model.

While budgetary issues would clearly arise from this model, it acts as an interesting ideal scenario with the possibility of fruition in the future, even though it may not be feasible now. This model up for recommendation takes many tenets from both the Aspire residency program as well as the Occidental Education Department’s credential program.

In order to establish the Oxy Charter School (clearly a working title) what would probably be the most feasible beginning would be to hire one or two full time kindergarten teachers, chosen by the department, and give them their own kindergarten class. In their classroom would be an Oxy student teacher as well as potentially students observing to do their fieldwork. By keeping the experience rooted in Oxy’s philosophies, policies and procedures—lesson plan templates, easier communication, shared goals and expectations—the department can cut down on discrepancies that occur when different parties have different driving factors and goals, as we find in student teaching.

The second year of this school would ideally bring in a new class of kindergarteners as well new master teachers to teach the first grade class. This would double the school’s capacity for student teachers and fieldwork observers. Each year would add a new grade as well as new staff until the school was a fully-fledged K-5, or

even K-8 school. This school could house the current tutoring program in the Community Literacy Center and be a tremendous educational resource for the community.

In order for this model school to be functional, as a branch of the education school at Oxy, there would have to be several very intentional choices made. Firstly, every teacher hired would need to be an outstanding educator, modeling the many strategies and techniques that are discussed so often in the coursework in the department. Secondly, it would have to operate as a charter school for children from the neighborhood, not accepting students from much further away, in order to allow Oxy students to use their knowledge of the community to their advantage and to avoid gentrification or white flight phenomena that often follow good schools.

### Developing Self Understanding

In *The Trouble With Ed Schools* Labaree goes into great detail why it is so difficult to train teachers and what it boils down to is that it is difficult to teach well.<sup>9</sup> Teaching involves so many complex factors coming together into what on the surface appears a simple thing, but what is actually an incredibly hard skill to master. Labaree also delves into what differentiates education from other professional fields that have very successful professional training schools, like those of medicine, business and law. All of those fields have very clearly defined roles, responsibilities, codes of conduct, standards of success and failure as well as practices and procedures. For each of these categories there is a correct and incorrect, an us and a them, a client and a service provided, however with teaching, every line is blurred. There are infinite ways to teach one lesson, unimaginable difference in what is appropriate from one teacher to another

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<sup>9</sup> Labaree, David F, and ebrary, Inc. *The Trouble with Ed Schools*. p. 39-61

and on down the line of factors. The professional world is strict and rigid as are their preparations, but in education there is simply no standard order, which makes educating educators that much more difficult. The following model was not at all laid out in Labaree's text, but is more a response to his assessment of the work and nature of teaching.

The third model has far less to do with how we interact with the rest of the world, and far more to do with how we interact with ourselves. Labaree shows us that no matter how hard you try, there is no controlling, predicting or foreseeing factors in the classroom. What we can control and develop is the individual teacher. Each teacher's greatest strength is his or her own personal strengths. By developing an understanding of individual teachers' own pedagogy, strengths and styles as a teacher, we will be preparing stronger, more versatile teachers. Each group of students will be different as will be the approach that you take to your students. What we can use as an incredible asset is authentic, deep self-understanding. By understanding your own strengths and weaknesses, you can develop strategies that will work best for you and your students. By developing your weaknesses, you can learn to augment your lessons accordingly.

What this model asks of schools of education is that along with developing the skills and strategies needed to be an effective educator, that they also develop the students' understanding of themselves. A student can write a perfectly sound lesson plan when studying how to create units, but without understanding themselves as a person—and therefore as an educator—they will have no idea whether or not this lesson fits their own style. Knowing one's self and the limitations inherent in our own strengths and weaknesses is the best way to grow. Encouraging potential teachers to develop and

accentuate their own personal strengths in order to become a stronger teacher, while devising ways to minimize the damage or shortcomings that arise from weaknesses will give these education students a much more powerful set of tools than looking for the cookie cutter lesson. If the takeaway from Kozol's writing is that there are outstanding teachers everywhere and we can see from Labaree's accounts that the best teachers are the ones who know their own style of instruction and the way it plays itself out, it stands to reason that our education schools should spend more time focusing on developing the inherent strengths we all carry to make the passionate people with strengths into passionate and strong teachers.

Oxy's education department has several courses that develop students' ability to be self-critical and reflect on their own ideas and philosophies, but they come predominantly from readings and discussions about the ideal situations. So, while this is a good start, those discussions need to incorporate more of Freire's *praxis*. After seeing one's self in action, using latent abilities to teach to the strengths, a set of reflection exercises would easily make for a great deal of self discovery and development. Keeping with this model of self-understanding and developing students' existing strengths I would recommend the following additions to the coursework to both foundation level courses as well as higher level classes.

- For Foundation Level Courses
  - In at least one required course—preferably one of the most basic classes—include

- A self reflective piece on the student's greatest strengths and weaknesses
- An assignment detailing in what ways those strengths make the student a good teacher. Alternatively or additionally they could create or find strategies that utilize those strengths and weaknesses effectively.
- A similar assignment detailing the ways in which the student's weaknesses can inhibit their teaching and strategies to overcome those weaknesses in their classroom.
- A lesson planning assignment that includes using the strengths and weaknesses strategies in tandem with educational strategies for EL's, students with special needs, as well as with state content standards and learning objectives.
- Some or all required course include
  - A revision, addition, omission or some sort of updating of the strengths and weaknesses piece to account for growth or regression
  - An early goal setting assignment to help guide students to growth in areas of enhancing strengths and ameliorating weaknesses
  - A reflective piece towards the end of the course evaluating how well the student met these goals.

- For Upper level Education Courses
  - Courses should begin to include
    - Discussion of how philosophy and pedagogy interact with outlined strengths and weaknesses.
    - Development of unit and curricular planning that encompasses strength and weakness strategies
    - Discussion relating content specific strategies to strength and weakness strategies as well as general EI, special needs, GATE, differentiation strategies.

## Conclusion

When thinking about the stereotypical “starving artist” nobody would imagine that they exist in any significant abundance. Why would anyone pursue that lifestyle if they weren’t at least of above average talent? It stands to reason that not many would go into the line of work without some sort of promise of success, fame or gratification for their craft. Think now, however, of the idea that teaching is an art; something intrinsic in everyone, but needing to be developed in each of our own unique styles to be incredibly successful. Our teachers live a humble lifestyle and like the starving artists are known only by those whose lives they touch directly. Who says every teacher cannot be a Picasso, a DaVinci or a Monet? What separated these artists was their passion, their commitment to their individual style and their industrious practice of their trade. Teacher education can be so much more than it is, but only through careful, intentional exploration of the self and the world around us. Let us explore our pallet and brush of

lessons and strategies; let us paint a masterpiece of inquiry and curiosity onto the canvass of eager children's imaginations. Let us stop coloring by numbers, inside the lines and start to explore our own creativity and the beauty around us for inspiration instead.

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