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

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Reviewed by Stephanie Nicole Robinson
Walden University

Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling is a commentary about how schools are used as a panacea for America's societal ills. Schools are failing because of the unrealistic expectations placed upon them, the lack of innovation, and the lack of academic focus. David F. Labaree opines what he believes are the true purposes of schools and how the modern day school system has come to be what it is today. *Someone Has to Fail* is appealing to anyone interested in reading a historical analysis of educational school reform.

Several reasons were given in the book as to how reforms are set up to fail on a national level. Two of the most compelling explanations were the organization of the public schooling system and teacher resistance. There are

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four complex levels that a reform must undergo and remain intact throughout: the conception or theoretical level, the school district level, teaching level, and the student learning level (pp. 109-111). Each level involves several thousands of people who must interpret the theory into practice. There is no way to enforce a reform effectively because of the relative autonomy at each organizational level (pp.123-128). The relationships also tend to have conflicting interests (p.138). In short, there are too many participants involved operating in relatively independent environments.

Of the two reasons, teacher resistance to reform was the most controversial. The need for independence to try things that have worked for them in the past and the necessity for building relationships with students were discussed in the book (pp.134, 137). Other writers agree with the need for teachers to control their classrooms (Siu-Runyan, 2007, pp. 67-68; Beherent, 2009). Test preparation was specifically cited by one teacher as a classroom interference and a hindrance to the freedom to teach (Beherent, 2009, p. 241). However, these arguments against school reform and more specifically No Child Left Behind were based on pedagogy. No Child Left Behind created standards but not a template on how to implement the standards. None of the writers cited specifically criticized the content or even the validity of the standards. The complaint was against using standardized tests for accountability and the pressure to use classroom time for test preparation to insure higher test scores which is important for a school not to be labeled as failing (Beherent, 2009, pp. 241-242). Although text books packaged with prewritten lesson plans, activities suggestions, transparencies, and tests have influenced what is taught and how it is taught in classrooms for decades, the resistance to these classroom intruders does not come with penalties like standardized testing.

One critique of the school system is that it provides equal access but not equality of outcomes. Once a group of previously disenfranchised students gains access to a higher level of schooling, it does not gain equality with the other groups because they tend to pursue even higher levels of education (pp. 10-11). Inequalities in educational outcomes persist because of the competitive nature of society in which people want to maintain their advantage

over others. I disagree with Labaree that this represents a failure of schools to satisfy social goals (p.17). Access to higher levels of schooling, promotes the opportunity for social mobility for all groups not just for the group with the lowest levels of education. Schools do not guarantee economic equality and neither does democracy.

Democracy can promote more open economies as compared to other forms of government. It does offer economic mobility but competitiveness among individuals will still be present (Schmitter and Karl, 1991, pp. 85-86). Schools like democracy do not offer equal economic outcomes because they were never meant to do that. It is not a failure of the schools. The goal of providing equal opportunity to succeed or fail is ultimately the goal of public schools and democracy. Individual motivation and the ambition to succeed bring forth competitiveness which is not necessarily detrimental to society.

I also disagree with Labaree's theory that the positive effects of opportunities to achieve higher levels of schooling are negated because other groups are pursuing even higher levels of education (p. 240). The proverbial door does not close behind a group once it passes through it. Once opened, the door stays open. In other words, when new opportunities are created for groups they also become available for the groups that come after them. From 1970 to 2008, educational attainment has increased for each gender, racial and ethnic group in the United States (U.S. Census, 2008). In 2004, the high school graduation rate for female students surpassed male students for all races and ethnicities except Asian and Pacific Islander (U.S. Census, 2008). In 2008, the difference in the rate of high school graduation among female students across all races and ethnicities was less than 5% except for Hispanic students (U.S. Census, 2008). Although there were gains in the educational attainment among Hispanic students, the achievement gap among female Hispanic students was more than 20% when compared to other races and ethnicities in 2008 (U.S. Census, 2008). Also in 2008, there was a 9% difference in the rate of high school graduation among African American male students when compared to Asian and Pacific Islander males but there was a less than 5% difference in the rate of high school graduation between African American male students as compared to White male students (U.S. Census, 2008). The achievement gap

between gender, racial and ethnic groups was closing at the same time that dominant group or white students were also increasing their graduation rates. Everyone was keeping pace with each other.

However, between the years 2000 and 2008, the rate of educational attainment increased modestly for all groups except Asian and Pacific Islanders which does not support Labaree's arguments that there is an increasing demand for higher and higher levels of education thereby creating credential inflation (Labaree, pp.12, 254-255; U.S. Census, 2008). In fact, in 2009, only 6% of men and 9% of women between the ages of 25 to 29 had a master's, professional, or doctoral degree (U.S. Census, 2010). Therefore there is still a very small group of people holding advanced degrees compared to the general population.

The argument that support for public schooling shifted from advocating republican ideals in the nineteenth century to consumerism in the twentieth century is not straightforward nor was the change as abrupt as it is presented in the book (p. 40). The emphasis on supporting the republic did not end but the wording changed. Terms such as "democracy", "civics", and "citizenship" replaced the word, "republic" but the intent remained (p. 23, 25-26). The differences between the reform rhetoric of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century could be attributed to the student body that schools were serving. The early common schools advocated the building of the Republic with emphasis on leaders to appeal to the middle and upper classes (p. 66). The general public was not compelled to attend schools until the twentieth century when compulsory school laws were passed. The arguments then shifted toward economic arguments to convince working class and immigrant parents not to send their children to the factories (pp. 87-88). Factory managers needed to be convinced to forgo cheap child labor and that they could profit by setting up factory schools to educate their workers especially the immigrant workers by teaching them English (University of Iowa Labor Center; Hill, 1914). Nation building was still present in the stated goals of assimilating immigrants and teaching civic virtues to the masses during the twentieth century (Robinson, 2004, pp.27-29, 35). There is a current resurgence in recognizing service learning by performing acts of good citizenship in school. Sixty-eight percent of elementary

and high schools as well as some universities in the United States support it (Kielsmeier, 2010). A few universities even offer minors or certificate programs in service learning (Kielsmeier, 2010). In 2009, the Obama administration called upon students to participate in service learning through United We Serve and signed the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act into law which links service learning to school curricula and professional development opportunities for teachers (Kielsmeier, 2010).

Although I presented an alternative perspective to some of the information presented in the book, I found Labaree's analysis engaging and thought-provoking. I agreed with the overall conclusion that schools have not been able to accommodate the demands of all of those involved: social reformers, consumers, students, teachers, or administrators. Labaree explained in *Someone Has to Fail* that for every gain that one group makes in an education reform effort, another group loses ground which counter balances the positive effects of that reform resulting in a zero-sum game.

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About the Reviewer

Stephanie Nicole Robinson, PhD, is a faculty member of the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership, Walden University, Baltimore, Maryland.

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Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
