



education review // reseñas educativas

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a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

January 20, 2011

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

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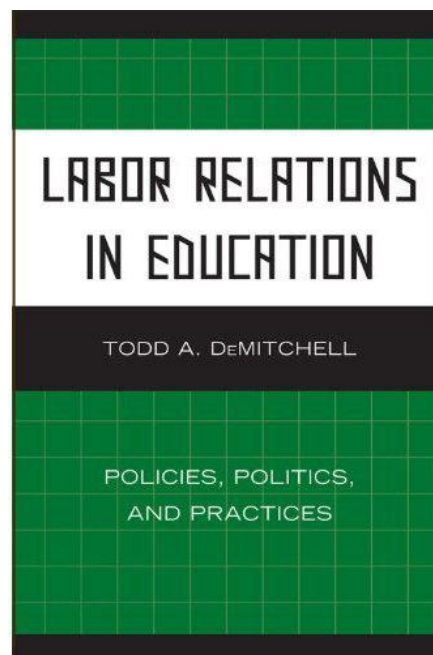
DeMitchell, Todd A. (2010) *Labor Relations in Education: Policies, Politics, and Practices*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing

Pp. 208

ISBN 978-1607095835

Reviewed by Dan Jacoby
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Few colleges of education require students to take courses on collective bargaining and school unions, though future teachers and administrators would be better prepared if they did. Instead, new educational professionals may look to Todd DeMitchell's concise new book for a terrific overview into the labor issues that profoundly shape how schools work. Drawing upon his expertise as a researcher and as a negotiator for several school districts, DeMitchell ably guides us through the history of labor relations, the legal context in underpinning collective bargaining, core issues created and resolved by union contracts, before finally providing a hands-on guide on how to negotiate a contract. Despite occasionally one-



Citation: Jacoby, Dan. (2011 January 20) Review of *Labor Relations in Education* by Todd A. DeMitchell. *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1027.pdf>

sided coverage, **DeMitchell** nonetheless gets the job done.

Though he reviews research findings--many of them his own--the text largely assumes an advocacy role, rather unsubtly dropping academic neutrality in order to tout reform unionism, or sometimes alternatively dubbed, post-industrial professional teacher unionism. The reform concept has been defined and advocated most forcefully by Kerchner, Koppich and Weere in their 1997 work, *United Mind Workers*. DeMitchell's book may be distinguished from its forerunner because of the author's clear identification with school administrators. Fellow travelers in the post-industrial union cause (like this reviewer) may experience some cognitive dissonance if they also simultaneously see themselves as proponents of strong bargaining rights for teachers.



A call for reform is easier to heed when it comes from persons within the institution being reformed. That is particularly true in this case because many critics of the post-industrial union movement believe it is merely a new form of managerialism wherein workers assume greater responsibility and stress without commensurate or corresponding recognition or rewards. Thus, while most of the concerns raised by DeMitchell have validity, they do not fully absorb the realities confronting teachers and the organizations they elect to represent them. For those critics it would help if DeMitchell spent equal time addressing administrative reforms that would equally advance the cause of learning, instead of focusing almost entirely upon what unionists should do.

At the heart of question of teacher professionalism is the extent to which the teaching profession can govern itself. As other professionals have done, DeMitchell argues that teachers must shift from bread and butter bargaining to include a greater emphasis upon the welfare of their clients, which in this case means prioritizing the learning of students. Instead, he argues, labor contracts that emerge within the existing industrial union context produce formalization, centralization and standardization. DeMitchell argues that we would have better schools if labor was willing to institutionalize greater flexibility, innovation and cooperation. Acknowledging the absence of trust is a fundamental difficulty in reform efforts labor

relations, DeMitchell places too little much responsibility for this upon teacher unions. Unfortunately, he seems largely to forget about the longstanding grievances that have given rise to the American labor movement generally, and to those more specifically raised by teachers. Where he wishes to advance the cause of teachers as professionals, he seems less apt to appreciate the fact that unlike doctors, lawyers, psychiatrist and architects, teachers are typically hired and work as employees, and are not independent agents. It is this aspect of their work that continues to create the greatest impediment to professional governance for teachers. To associate mistrust with industrial style collective bargaining is to miss the fact that employer-employee trust requires that school administrators embrace the professional authority of teachers as individuals and as members of a profession whose unions bargain on their behalf.

It is also inappropriate to associate centralization and standardization within schools strictly with the advance of industrial unionism. Instead, as Tyack points out in his classic *The One Best System*, the drive for standardization and efficiency well predates the success of teacher unions. Gould's (1981) *The Mismeasure of Man*, reveals how the standardization of intelligence testing in the early twentieth century was superimposed upon already rigid urban curricular systems. If the search for flexibility has now pushed school policy toward vouchers, charters and Educational Management Organizations (EMOs), it cannot solely be because unions have created top-down bureaucratized school districts. Thus, where districts have been freed from collective bargaining in order to pursue more flexible curricular approaches that fully draw upon professionalism of their teachers, in practice such reforms are infrequently pursued, though managerial flexibility is (Jacoby, 2010; Wilson, 2006).^{1 2} Diane Ravitch (2010) also makes it very clear how, in pursuit of high performance, major public school districts have

¹ Jacoby, Dan (2010) Teacher unionization and school governance, *Educational Policy*, 2010 (online first edition).

² Wilson, Steven (2006) *Learning on the Job, When Business Takes on Public Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

pushed their unions aside to implement much more rigid curricular schemes.³

Thus, while not denying industrial unionism as a force for standardization, it would be helpful if DeMitchell and other advocates of reform unionism did more to discuss the extent to which school districts themselves have contributed to standardization. In fact, one could argue that if—as DeMitchell and others insist—seniority based transfer rights policies are a major problem in school districts, one might do well to consider whether the size of school districts isn't part of the problem itself. Central control of large district school systems virtually begs for standardization as a method of managing teacher assignments.

The problem for teachers is that large systems not only centralize, they also delegate power to principals whom they cannot always effectively monitor. Excellent principals work carefully with their teachers, but if management becomes arbitrary in its treatment of teachers, then teachers have reason to seek formal systems of redress. A move towards local control could usher in greater flexibility, but if that move occurs without strong unions, we can expect serious management problems of the types rampant in charter schools.

Despite these questions involving DeMitchell's overall perspective, nonetheless he portrays many of the immense difficulties that occur within the collective bargaining system accurately. He cites his own survey based research to show that many teachers have significant qualms about their union's "blind protection" of their members, their unwillingness to eliminate seniority based systems, and their underutilization of peer review to counsel weak teachers towards improvement or out of the profession. What is problematic is the extent to which he ascribes these difficulties primarily to unions and urges them to reform unilaterally. In this sense he is asking teachers to organize the changes many desperately want before school districts demonstrate that their willingness to work collaboratively with unions towards their common ends. Given the politicized nature of schooling, the recurrent

³ Ravitch, Diane (2010) *Life and Death of the Great American School System* NY: Basic Books.

attempts to manage schools by non-professional parents, communities, and businesses, and shifting currents of thought, it hardly seems unwise for teachers to seek some contractual protections for the long-term investments they must make in their skills, schools, and students.

DeMitchell's *Labor Relations in Education* is valuable in three major ways. He provides apt descriptions of current labor relations and the conditions that have fostered them. He also successfully provides an insider's perspective on how collective bargaining works. Finally, he ably informs readers of and points them towards a reform unionism that could play a significantly role in improving our schools.

Where *Labor Relations in Education* lets us down is in its failure to examine the wider settings that dictate how districts contribute to the nation's educational systems. Though it may be forgivable as symptomatic of the times in which we live, a relatively one-sided account perpetuates the misleading notion that teachers may operate independently as professionals despite the political and economic contexts currently shaping schools and education.

About the Reviewer

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