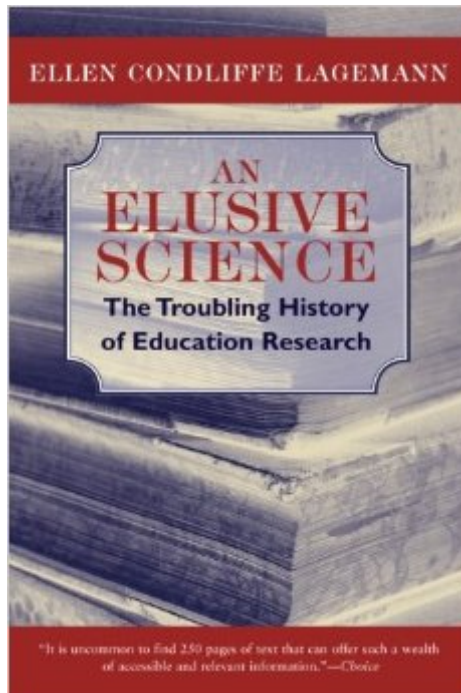


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# An Elusive Science: The Troubling History Of Education Research



## Synopsis

Since its beginnings at the start of the 20th century, educational scholarship has been a marginal field, criticized by public policy makers and relegated to the fringes of academe. *An Elusive Science* explains why, providing a critical history of the traditions, conflicts, and institutions that have shaped the study of education over the past century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"An Elusive Science" is a book that chronicles (with minimal editorial) about 100 years of education's attempt to become a science. The book starts off in the late 1800's, when, thanks to William James, psychology was just becoming a serious discipline, and the business of education was largely seen as a trade. Soon, "normal schools" were founded with the purpose of teaching educators, which gave rise to university departments, which gave rise to the idea of education as a research discipline. The author's main theme - if there is a theme to this historical chronicle - is that psychologist Edward Thorndike won the war of "visions" of what education research would look like, against his colleague, philosopher John Dewey. Following Thorndike, education research became very quantitative, behavioristic, and attached to developing systems. Curriculum development specialists wrote various methods of teaching in an effort to "objectify" a very personalized discipline. (Education, thus, was trying to become mechanized in the same way of Frederick Taylor's "scientific management" of the late 1800's.) The author follows this history up to the 1980's, where the tide slowly, but not completely, turned in favor of more qualitative approaches to

education. The biggest problem I have with this book is that the author did not make a greatly persuasive case that these results and this history was troubling, as suggested in her subtitle. Yes, education research became almost obsessive about quantization, systemization, and ranking things in hierarchy. The body of the book is only devoted to the idea THAT this happened, not WHY it was a "troubling" development. (She does this only in the introduction and epilogue.

In crucial ways this is a disappointing book. As a history of education research it devotes a great deal of descriptive attention to substantive and philosophical issues and to the personalities of early researchers, but very little to research itself. I agree that an artificial separation of the substance and philosophy of research from research as it's actually done would give a grossly distorted view of the real nature of education research. However, focusing almost exclusively on motives, disappointments, intra-disciplinary triumphs, persistently low status in the university hierarchy, and identification of funding sources of education research also seems misleading. It's all well and good to discuss testing and school surveys as research-based activities that dominated the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, while also acknowledging that alternatives, such as those proposed by John Dewey, received much less attention. However, I was hoping to read about some of the technical issues involved in these research-based activities. After all, psychometrics has developed in ways never dreamed of by Hall, Thorndike, or Terman. A good example is provided by the technical expertise required by Rasch modeling, something that has been with us for more than forty years. The author, however, leaves us pretty much in the dark as to how much early advocates of testing knew about even classical testing theory, such as that presented in Nunnally and Bernstein's widely used text. No, I don't expect Lagemann to offer a mini-course in measurement, but a brief discussion of the technical adequacy of early tests would be helpful.

Lagemann's book is a well researched look into American higher education, particularly concerning the emergence of Colleges of Education within universities in the late 19th century. Prior to this time, the field of "education" lay strictly within the confines of the individual disciplinary domains, and was not considered as a subject requiring special distinction. Lagemann is able to use this historical context to illuminate the struggles that theorists and psychologists at the time experienced as they attempted to determine if "education" could - or SHOULD - be deemed a "science," and the subsequent effect such decisions played in the educational setting of the University. And although the author may focus much of her book on the issue of economic funding (she describes the common cycle of insufficient funding, which leads to less research, which, in turn, leads to less

funding, etc), in my mind the most interesting part of her story is the description of those seminal debates that lead to the birth of the field of educational psychology, and the examination of the arguments for and against the pronouncement of "education" as a unique field. Although at the start of the 21st century we now rarely question the result of these 19th-century decisions, Lagemann's text is nevertheless a reminder that our current University setting was not necessarily ordained to be so.

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