

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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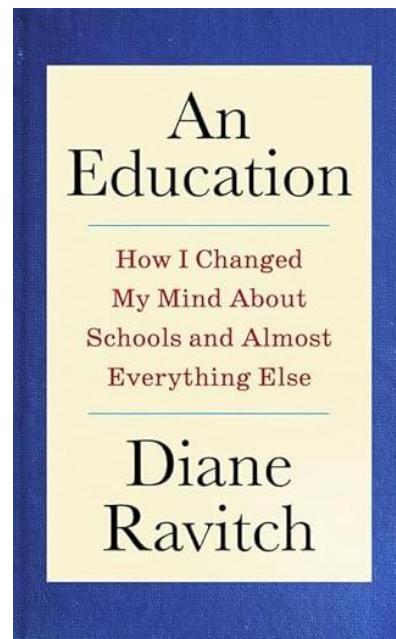
**Reviewed by John Thompson
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Diane Ravitch's *An Education* is dedicated to her wife Mary; her sons, Joe, Michael, and Steven; her grandsons Nico, Aidan, Elijah, and Asher; and her ex-husband Richard Ravitch. *An Education* intertwines deeply emotional personal and family experiences with the history of how she became such a transformative education leader. Although Diane denies it, I believe she is the most influential education advocate of the last century.

I have been reading Diane Ravitch's work for decades, but *An Education* is my favorite book. And my favorite passage started with Diane's citation of Robert Hutchins who wrote, "We have to learn to live with those whose opinions differ from our own. After all, they may turn out to be right" (p. 7). Then she wrote about Hutchins's statement that "... for three decades I didn't realize that it was intended for me" (p. 7).

Being from Oklahoma, I was captured by the first part of her book about growing up in Texas. I especially loved her story about meeting Roy Rogers at the rodeo when she was 9 years old. After Rogers slapped her hand, Diane said, "I determined on the spot that I would never wash that hand again!" (p. 29). Diane was a tomboy who loved horses and dogs. But she experienced sexism and trauma. She said she "did not have an idyllic adolescence. No one ever does" and her teenage years were "destroyed by my father abusing me" (p. 36).

Midway through her story, she recalls her complicated marriage to Richard Ravitch and then, her wonderful wife, Mary. Mary worked with the progressive educator Deborah Meier, opening a small school in New York City.



I was especially impressed by Diane's communication with Al Shanker. He sought to allow teachers to start schools within schools to turnaround kids "in the back of the classroom with their heads on their desks" (p. 151). Back in the late 1980s, it seemed like he might be able to bring diverse factions together. But, by 1994, charters had been high-jacked by corporate reformers with their winners and losers ideology.

In the middle of *An Education*, Diane reveals in great detail the inside stories of her years as a conservative. Back then, when I was an academic historian, I learned the most about Diane from reading her 1983 book, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945 – 1980*. Although I couldn't yet read her work through the eyes of a teacher, I was exceptionally taken by her calls for teaching background knowledge so students could develop reading comprehension skills so they could "read to learn," and her placing education pedagogies in a broad historical context.

Diane recalls the time when she supported meritocratic, standardized testing, and color-blind policies. She questioned bilingual education and even the benefit of the Equal Rights Amendment. This was the time when she made friends with Bill Bennett, President Reagan's Secretary of Education, Chester Finn, and Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander. I knew she had ties to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, but I too thought that progressives' criticism of him was too politically correct. And, until I read *An Education*, I knew little about the two sides of James Coleman's research, whose earlier research had seemed persuasive to me. Neither would I have thought that Chester Finn was like a "sibling" to Diane.

When explaining her then-conservative beliefs, I sometimes felt that Diane was too hard on herself. For instance, she was far, far from alone in failing to understand the wisdom of Gov. Ann Richards, who said, "If there ever is school choice in Texas, the hard-right Christians will get the money to indoctrinate children" (p. 138).

Moreover, as *An Education* schooled me on the propaganda behind the so-called "Texas Miracle," it did more than foreshadow the "New York City Miracle," the "Harlem Miracle," and the "Mississippi Miracle." It brought me back to the decades-long Oklahoma reality when our curriculum and policies were based on the Texas accountability systems. During most of my career, our policies were informed by one Texas trick after another for jacking up accountability metrics.

Diane served as member of the National Assessment Governing Board from 1997 to 2004, and she would dig deeply into the numbers and the methods behind NAEP. But, as she explained, few journalists read the fine print of the assessment; and they wrote "breathlessly" about supposedly dismal results in traditional public schools. They certainly did not report properly about the way that students' outcomes were linked to family income.

While serving in the U.S. Education Department, Diane took the lead in establishing national standards for every school subject. Drawing on excellent historians, multicultural History standards were set. She hoped standards like

those would remain voluntary and “unify their respective fields and establish a common ground for a curriculum without telling teachers how to teach” (p. 139). But the conservative Lynne Cheney published a scathing denunciation of the standards. Cheney claimed that the History standards focused too much on people like Joe McCarthy and the Ku Klux Klan and not enough on Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. Thus began another battle in the modern wars over curriculum that have become especially destructive under President Trump.

Even so, in 2002, Diane hoped that Mayor Mike Bloomberg and Joel Klein – who knew nothing about education – would succeed in improving New York City Schools. Klein reorganized schools from top to bottom, with multiple schools per building drawing on funding from the Gates Foundation. I saw the chaos Klein created when visiting dozens of hurriedly opened schools, especially in Bedford–Stuyvesant. Usually, leaders of the new schools did not even know how many new schools were being opened in their building. And, even worse, Jack Welch CEO of General Electric pushed 20-70-10 “stack ranking,” meaning 70% of teachers would be in the middle in terms of effectiveness, and 10% should be “removed,” even if it took the use of invalid and unreliable metrics to evaluate all teachers.

Especially after Diane engaged in a seven-year debate with Deborah Meier, which further broadened her perspectives, she became an invaluable leader of the grass-roots opposition to corporate school reforms. She objected to top-down mandates on teaching reading. Diane was among the first to explicitly link in a detailed manner the conservatives’ favorite reforms to the wider privatization movement. She nailed it when she applied Hunt’s sobriquet “Billionaires Boys Club” to these would be reformers.

Diane dubbed the public relations campaigns which sold “reforms” as the “New York City Miracle.” Drawing on her insights from serving on the National Assessment Governing Board, she clearly explained why New York City schools flipped back and forth between A and F grades. Then, she linked President Obama’s flawed \$5 billion Race to the Top experiment with the problems with Common Core curriculum and tests that were years above students’ reading levels.

Diane quotes John Maynard Keynes who wrote, “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?” (p. 178). Today, Diane changes minds by clearly explaining the interconnections between free market ideology and profits, and the mindsets of elites who push privatization. She also reports daily on the interconnected attacks on schools throughout the nation. And now she is sharing the same wisdom when spreading the word about Trumpism and today’s attacks on democracy.

I always read Diane Ravitch’s Blog posts at <https://dianeravitch.net>. And I so very much appreciated *An Education*, even if it briefly pulled me away from reading her daily blog.

Reference

Ravitch, D. (1983). *The troubled crusade: American education, 1945–1980*. Basic Books.

About the Reviewer

John Thompson earned his PhD in history at Rutgers University. He became an award-winning author, a researcher for the ACLU/OK, and a lobbyist for Planned Parenthood. When the Hoova set of the Crips took over his Oklahoma City neighborhood in the 1980s, Thompson became attached to kids growing up in crack houses and took them hiking and camping and engaged them in community gardening. He became an inner-city high school teacher who played basketball with his students and took them on large numbers of field trips, introducing them to legislators and community and civil rights leaders. His book *A Teacher's Tale: Living, Loving and Listening to Our Kids*, told the story how corporate school reform turned his school into the state's lowest-performing mid-high. He has decades of experience writing about and opposing test-driven, competition-driven accountability. Thompson believes: Listen to your students, and they will teach you how to teach them. When taught the challenging material that affluent schools offer, his students took it as a sign of respect and responded in amazing ways.



About the Book Author

Diane Ravitch is a Research Professor of Education at New York University and a historian of education. She is the Founder and President of the Network for Public Education (NPE). From 1991 to 1993, she was Assistant Secretary of Education in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. She was responsible for the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education. She is the author of *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (2014), *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (2010), as well as many other widely read works. She was elected to membership in the National Academy of Education (1979); the Society of American Historians (1984); the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1985); and as the Eleanor Roosevelt Fellow of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences (2002). She is currently the most influential voice on the state of public education in America. Her blog, <https://dianeravitch.net>, has received more than 42 million hits.



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