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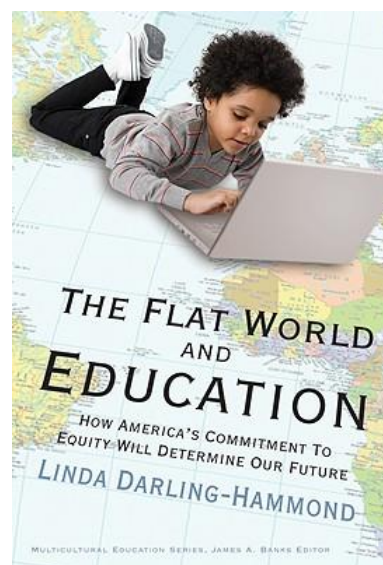
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Darling-Hammond, Linda (2009) *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. NY: Teachers College Press.

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Reviewed by Christina Jean  
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Does the American educational system serve all students well? Are students in United States public schools receiving the education they need in order to compete in an increasingly global society? What impact have standardized assessment and No Child Left Behind had on schools? Perhaps the most important question of all, though, is the question that should drive educational research and practice: what can be done to address the needs of all students; particularly those who have found themselves marginalized under new, more stringent accountability measures? Throughout my tenure as a high school social studies teacher and newly minted doctoral student, these questions, and many more, have plagued me. While I certainly don't have all of the answers, at



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least I feel more equipped to have the conversation now that I've read *The Flat World and Education*.

In her latest book Linda Darling-Hammond discusses topics ranging from the vast disparities in the distribution of educational resources in the United States, mostly along lines of socio-economic status or ethnicity, to the ways in which the American K-12 public education system can improve. This tome could have produced some of the same frustration for readers as Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991), in which the descriptions of the dire state of schools across the country serve to outrage the reader, but leaves them with few outlets for action. Fortuitously Darling-Hammond, while providing plenty of fodder for despair, balances her accounts of inequity with concrete ways in which individuals and systems can bring about the changes that must occur in order to fulfill the promise of an exceptional education for every single child in this country.

Darling-Hammond begins the daunting task of taking on the entire educational system by outlining what she perceives as the deficits within the current structure. Rather than relying on clichés and anecdotes to illustrate the disparities and inequities in many US school districts, Linda Darling-Hammond thoroughly and methodically supports each of her points with copious research and empirical evidence. For example, in her indictment of the use of standardized assessments to determine graduation and grade retention Darling-Hammond uses literally dozens of statistics, graphs, charts and stories to bring home the impact of this flawed policy. In an educational climate where data is the be all and end all for policy makers, Darling-Hammond has succeeded in cutting any potential critics off at the knees with her meticulous research and user-friendly interpretations of very complex statistics.



However, the inclusion of copious amounts of quantitative data doesn't take away from the "heart" of this book in any way. The gut-wrenching realities of educational inequity lie at the heart of the book. Page after page of descriptions and quotes illustrate the degree to which America's schools have become palaces or prisons of haves and have-nots. The voices of teachers, students,

administrators and parents speak throughout this work. Education as seen through the lens of these stakeholders takes on another level of poignancy for me in particular as a classroom teacher. For example in a discussion of the effect that the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) exit exams had on students from poverty and students of color, an administrator betrays the reality of systematic inequities when she says, “I think that the kids are being forced out of school. I think we’ve done a lot to force kids out of school” (p. 87). Later in the book a student remarks “School should not be mass production. It needs to be loving and close. You need love to learn” (p. 234). It is precisely these moments of honesty and sincerity that bring this book to life, and makes the story of educational inequity personal for anyone who cares about kids.

Having outlined her quarrels with the inadequacy of American education, and more specifically the ways in which the implementation of current policies disadvantages students from traditionally marginalized groups, the book begins to outline strategies for reforming the system. Darling-Hammond is well known as an advocate for adequate training for educators, and this volume serves to reinforce her well-known ideas, almost to the point of repetition. An entire chapter devoted to “Doing What Matters Most” sketches out a plan for improving teacher preparation in order to influence outcomes for students. Many of the points raised in this chapter also appear elsewhere in the book, and begin to lose their potency after much reiteration.

One novel aspect to this work is the fact that the author devotes quite a bit of ink to matters of education policy as a means to effect meaningful change. Typically educators, students and communities aren’t involved in conversations about the nuts and bolts of education, but here Darling-Hammond makes clear what constituents and other stakeholders should demand from their government in terms of improving public education in the United States. As a part of her larger plan to improve education for all students, this book outlines not only the responsibilities we all assume as concerned citizens, but also the avenues that anyone can and should take to effect positive change. Some suggested courses of action include demanding school choice and smaller schools for students, requiring

that federal and state governments distribute money and resources equitably and with a focus on classroom instruction, and insisting on standards and assessment that have meaning and relevance for students. Outlining a course of action allows the reader to escape the despondency that could easily accompany a reading containing this much evidence about the ways in the which schools are failing kids, and as a civics teacher, I found Darling-Hammond's suggestions particularly compelling.

Ironically, the use of the "flat world" metaphor had the least resonance for me. Using the education systems of other countries as a model for US reform was a tactic that didn't have as profound an effect on me as it probably should have. While some of the models employed by Finland, Singapore and Koreans are potentially useful and interesting, the fact of the matter is that comparing these countries with America is like comparing apples and herring, or chicken rice, or kimchi. For all of its many amazing features, the Finnish education has little to do with the current realities faced by American schools. Rather than proving to motivate and inspire me the chapter comparing and contrasting America to these other educationally progressive nations left me feeling bitter and wistful. Aspiring to an educational system akin to the one enjoyed by Singaporeans, the Finnish, or Koreans would require a nationalized education system, which doesn't yet have a realistic chance in the United States. In a "flat world" many American students may not enter the workforce prepared to compete for world-class careers, particularly students living in poverty or students of color, but enough affluent students will continue to excel and thrive as a result of our inequitable system that the status quo may seem pretty appealing for families, politicians and educators in a position to do something about it. As long as American schools default to racist and classist notions of meritocracy, says Darling-Hammond, no impetus for national change can take hold.

As a nation we are at a crossroads with regard to education. Schools don't exist to meet the needs of all students, and the young people with the highest needs continue to find themselves discounted and underserved. Darling-Hammond has done her homework, and uses copious quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate unequivocally that the American education system, if it is

to be equitable and effective in a “flat world”, cannot continue to operate in this way. Rather than leaving the reader to wallow in misery of the current situation, though, this book serves as a manual for how to effect real, positive and substantive education reform for the good of all students. With this in mind I believe that this tome would provide insight into education policy for educators, policy makers, members of impacted communities, and anyone who would purport to reform education. Armed with the ideas this reading provoked, I feel prepared to begin having conversations with anyone who will engage with me about the future of American education. Whatever the end product of those dialogues, though, there’s little doubt that the resulting system will have a distinctly American flavor.

### About the Reviewer

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