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Ravitch, Diane. (2010). *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. NY: Basic Books.

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The first decade of the twenty-first century in American education has been most influentially marked by legislation known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Signed into law by George W. Bush in early 2002, NCLB has drastically changed the nature of schooling in the United States. In Diane Ravitch's most recent book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, the author provides a historical and comprehensive overview of the key issues involved in this shift—testing, choice, learning standards, and the ongoing ideological struggles between policymakers and teachers. Organized thematically, not only does this book address how these pieces interconnect and have evolved over time, but Ravitch, an educational historian, strings together a story

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for readers who may be unfamiliar with the recent history of education reform by recounting how the school choice and testing movements began before NCLB was put in place. Their intensification through the implementation of NCLB, Ravitch asserts, contributed to the establishment of a climate of accountability today that has roots in years past. Particularly, it was this major shift in American education which has resulted in our current overreliance on test scores as the primary measurement of school quality and which has greatly diminished the richness of curricular content taught in our schools.

Ironically, the current state of schooling described by Ravitch is curiously one that the author herself helped to shape. Well known for her role and influence in the Department of Education under President George H.W. Bush, Diane Ravitch has been a powerful and influential voice over the last twenty years promoting the same reforms she now criticizes. Her words and presence have often stoked heated debates, and she has harnessed immense credibility with the same organizations and people she questions in her new book. Thus, perhaps in a preemptive attempt to address criticism for what seems to be a drastic professional change of heart, Ravitch begins building her argument by reflecting on her own experiences with educational reform, helping to set the stage for a book which is at times both honest and provocative. In this way, Ravitch raises critical questions likely to already be on the minds of many readers. Is our current approach to education working? Or are we, with the best of intentions, failing to prepare our children for the tribulations of a life to come? The author addresses these questions head on, highlighting specific cases and examples that will likely not only appeal to parents and teachers but will benefit both educational historians—those who try to make sense of what and why things happened—as well as policymakers—those who must plan for the future based on guesses and estimations of how proposed solutions *might* work.

It is in this way that Ravitch explains how “elected officials of both [political] parties” during the 1990s “came to accept as secular gospel the idea that testing and accountability would necessarily lead to better schools” (p. 95). In particular, while the quality or validity of the tests themselves was often left unquestioned, the author

deepens her critique by asserting that it is not the idea of testing itself that is problematic but that “testing is not a substitute for curriculum and instruction” (p. 111). Moreover, the testing era of NCLB has resulted in school closures and a renewed onslaught of criticism of teachers held responsible for poor student test scores. Ravitch highlights:

The trouble with test-based accountability is that it imposes serious consequences on children, educators, and schools on the basis of scores that may reflect measurement error, statistical error, random variation, or a host of environment factors or student attributes. None of us would want to be evaluated—with our reputation and livelihood on the line—solely on the basis of an instrument that is prone to error and ambiguity. (p. 166)

In addition, corporate models of education with their narrow focus on outputs such as standardized testing and accountability alone tend to overlook the quality of the curriculum. As an advocate for national, shared learning standards, Ravitch strongly believes in the value of a rich and coherent school curriculum as the key to improving educational outcomes for children. In describing “systemic school reform” efforts in the last twenty years, she notes that “the curriculum was supposed to be the linchpin of systemic reform, the starting point for instruction, teacher education, assessment and professional development. Absent a curriculum, systemic reform and alignment made no sense” (p. 32). Hence, “one of the unintended consequences of NCLB,” Ravitch argues, has been the disappearance of “time available to teach anything other than reading and math... [which are] the only subjects that [count] in calculating a school’s adequate yearly progress, and even in these subjects, instruction [often gives] way to intensive test preparation” (p. 107). Thus, any improvement in test scores can often be attributed to the teaching of strategies and skills related to conquering tests and not necessarily the deepening of student knowledge and honing of critical thinking skills needed to prepare children to succeed in college or in the modern day workplace.

Parallel to this argument, options for school choice—namely voucher, privately managed, and charter schools—began to gain traction prior to NCLB and have endured

despite varying reports questioning their impact on improving student learning outcomes. Charters in particular, Ravitch argues, place mainstream public schools at a precarious disadvantage because of their ability to “attract the most motivated students... enforce a tough disciplinary code, but also because the charters often get additional financial resources from their corporate sponsors, enabling them to offer smaller classes, after-school and enrichment activities” (p. 136). For public schools and as a condition of NCLB, school choice was recently intended to allow students in “persistently dangerous or failing schools” (p. 97) the ability to transfer to a different school if they so desired. However, in the first few years of the federally mandated program, “less than 5 percent—and in some cases, less than 1 percent—of students actually sought to transfer” (p. 100) away from their neighborhood school. Even more troubling is the author’s assertion that the “achievement gap” between black and white student test scores is more substantial post-NCLB than it was prior to its implementation (p. 110). Questioning the handful of possible successes by the “alternatives” to traditional public schools such as charters, Ravitch confesses that she had “feared that choice would let thousands of flowers bloom but would not strengthen American education” (p. 12) as a whole. Public schools are thus left, she contends, struggling to teach, among others, “the most difficult students to educate, thus creating a two-tier system of widening inequality” (p. 145), begging the question of which children are truly benefitting from these reforms.

Ravitch reminds us that “public education is a vital institution in our democratic society, and its governance must be... open to public discussion and public participation” (p. 91). Many of the leaders and policymakers mentioned in this book, with their beliefs that teachers and teachers unions are obstacles to improving schools, are not anomalous. They are part of a growing polarization of system-level decision-makers against frontline teachers. Yet, in accordance with her changing position on such challenges, Ravitch notes that to her knowledge there has not been a study to date that “has demonstrated a clear, indisputable correlation between teacher unionism and academic achievement, either negative or positive” (p. 175). Herein emerges the most important contribution of this book to the current

educational debate. Ravitch affirms that it takes a “sentient human being to learn from experience, to pay close attention to how theories work out when put into practice” (p. 2). As a result, among her recommendations for how we may begin strengthening and improving America’s public schools, she includes the improvement of the conditions under which teachers work as well as the establishment of a shared, national curriculum.

It is important to note that even as Ravitch advocates for teachers and against testing and choice, it is in the subtleties of her descriptions of the data and history used to evidence the need for change where hints of the author’s ongoing beliefs and biases are revealed. The positive characteristics of neighborhood schools given throughout the book, for example, hint at suburban or mid-twentieth century stereotypes. In arguing against the recent increase in closures of many of these institutions under NCLB guidelines, she describes these local community schools as places where “graduates return and want to see their old classrooms... the trophy cases and the old photographs, to hear the echoes in the gymnasium and walk on the playing fields” (p. 227). Juxtaposed by her use of New York City and similar areas in building her argument, however, Ravitch’s description seems disconnected from the high-risk city and neighborhood schools she simultaneously defends and who often do not have the space or resources to have built the types of memories she describes. In addition, the author’s assertion that American schools shared a common curriculum for most of the 1900s fails to acknowledge the social expectation of assimilation that fueled policy and practice for most of those years. And though her recommendations recognize and emphasize teachers as educational professionals, there is little mention of how to address teacher preparation and ongoing professional development in ways that will support quality teaching in schools and ensure the continuance of impactful pedagogical approaches, such as participatory action research or inquiry-based approaches to instruction.

The author’s writing style is easy and enjoyable to read, accessible to both educators and non-educators alike. It is this readability that has contributed to making Ravitch an influential voice in educational reform and which heightens the suspense that this book, a turn away from

her past stances, will have on those who read it. As rational, reflective, and educated persons, our ability to change our minds when given reason to do so is essential to moving beyond the stalemate of opposing sides in order to improve education for all children. Though readers may be challenged by the author's past perspectives on polarizing and controversial educational issues, and though we may struggle to see past our own biases, today's educational challenge requires each of us to consider new data and information as it becomes available, to question the quality and validity of that data, and to change our minds when what we put into action does not work. We can only hope that Diane Ravitch herself continues to be a critical voice encouraging us to challenge our notions of what is and has been for what could and should be a better educational future for our nation's children.

About the Reviewer

Kathy J. Rho is a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. Her research interests include teacher education and development, as well as school and community collaborations, social and health service access, and the impact of reflective practice at the individual and organizational-level in relation to education reform.

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