



education review // reseñas educativas

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Kuhn, John. (2014). *Fear and Learning in America: Bad Data, Good Teachers, and the Attack on Public Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

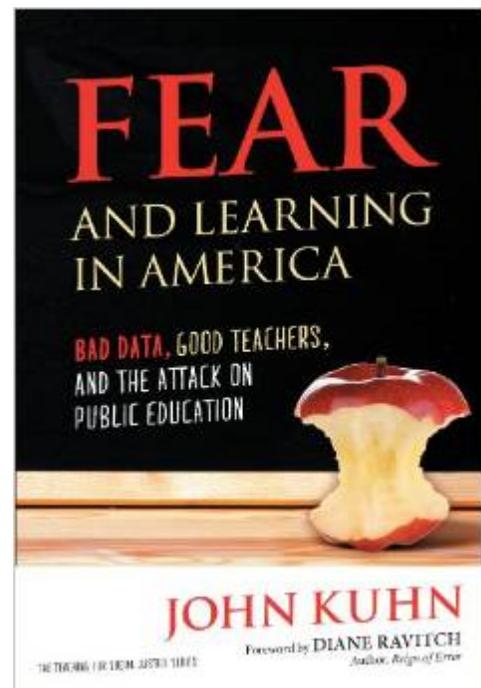
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If you believe something is wrong with the way America is “doing” public education, you would be a proverbial choir member as John Kuhn preaches to you in his book *Fear and Learning in America*.

After a particularly frustrating conference meeting in February 2011, Kuhn, a superintendent in Texas, returned angrily to his hotel room. His exasperation fueled a modern “Alamo Letter,” in which he lambasted government officials for their “accountability-related bureaucracy” and “underfunding” of schools, all while “the Texas flag still waves proudly from our flag pole” (p. 20). In short, Kuhn promised in the letter to never surrender in his fight for students until education was made a priority by legislators who he felt had consistently underfunded education. After emailing the letter to a local newspaper and noted educator Diane Ravitch (who, it should be noted, wrote the foreword to this book), his plea ended up going viral. Since the original letter was written in 2011, Kuhn has given speeches as rallies, written commentaries and blog posts, and spoken extensively about the need to reform education. This book seems a natural extension of Kuhn’s mission to fight for students.



Kuhn's passion and anger echo feelings I myself have had at times and he was able to put into words my own frustrations about many things I believe are wrong in current school reform movements. Kuhn especially highlights the unfair negative attention teachers, students, and schools have been receiving lately, arguing that they are not failing but rather the system itself is failing. As a parent, educator, student, and community member vested in figuring out ways we can improve our schools across the country, this text resonated with me in many ways. As an academic and scholar, however, I tended to view this book in a more restrained light. While I nodded along in agreement with many of his arguments, a vast majority of the citations Kuhn uses (by my count, 69 out of 83 references, or 83%) come from newspapers, magazines, websites, or other blogs. This is not to say these sources are not relevant or useful, however, since the book is packaged to look like and feel like an academic text, his use of sources that are not necessarily peer-reviewed should be noted. As a doctoral student constantly reminded to back up statements with peer-reviewed sources, this could be perceived as problematic to educational researchers looking at Kuhn's text. While I would love to have a drink and talk about education reform with John Kuhn the man, I may hesitate to use this particular book in an academic paper.

All this aside, John Kuhn is a fantastic storyteller. He weaves his narrative with strands of his experience volunteering in Peru, threads of his teaching and working as an administrator and uses a cutting humor throughout that leaves no question as to what he thinks about current reform movements in US public education. His stories are engaging and interesting. While I love stories and Kuhn's storytelling in particular, there were times Kuhn seemed to have trouble tying his point about educational reform back to the story being told. For example, his story "The Gringo Did It!" (pp. 106-113) was truly captivating but it did not seem to be tied as closely as it could have to the point he was trying to make in the chapter about accountability.

Something I appreciate about Kuhn's book, however, is that he does end with some concrete ideas of how he would like to change education. I get frustrated reading texts that highlight problems in education but offer no solutions. Kuhn presents 6 solutions (pp. 137-138) that are truly Texas-sized. Universal Pre-K, removing property value to determine school funding, finding better "gatekeepers" in teacher prep programs, using test results

to diagnose, not punish, factor context in accountability, and increasing teacher and student voice in policy—these are six great ideas that could revolutionize how we “do” school in the US. However, they are very broad, and potentially difficult to implement. Nonetheless, I appreciate that Kuhn leaves the reader with hope after 130+ pages of lambasting the current system of education.

Kuhn writes on many topics with which I tend to agree, and does so in blistering fashion. For example, when discussing the systemic issues surrounding poverty and learning in cities, Kuhn writes, “the problem is that our poor inner-city children are surrounded by an apparatus of unfairness that serves as an apparent near-guarantor of their station in life” (p. 86). This argument, which is compelling at face-value, would have been even stronger had he referenced, for example, work done by Massey and Denton (1993) or Wilson (1996), who both discuss this issue at length. Another point that stood out to me was in his section regarding the “Achievement Trap.” Kuhn penned a fantastic line of, “test scores are a facsimile of reality, and narrowing gaps between them is a facsimile of equality” (p. 123). While this moves me emotionally, I would suggest references to something such as pieces by Ladson-Billings (2006) or Milner (2010) to help this argument become even stronger and more relevant to academics.

There are other places where Kuhn makes bold claims (again, ones that I would generally agree with) but does not offer any data to back up these claims. Perhaps ironically, when discussing school funding, Kuhn writes that, “data about funding for schools and school supports, for example, are ignored in accountability...” (p. 63). It is not that I necessarily disagree with this emotionally, but I believe Kuhn’s argument could have been stronger had he cited certain examples. The same goes for when he writes about school ranking systems. “. . .the structures elaborated on the tests are often fraught with subjectivity and perfectly suited for behind-the-scenes manipulation” (p 49). I believe this is another place where some outside reference would have strengthened the argument considerably. There are other instances of this scattered throughout the text.

This book would be a nice addition to someone’s library who is interested in reading about educational reform out of curiosity or to get an insider’s perspective on some of the shortcomings of recent reform efforts. If someone were to agree with Kuhn’s points, this text will get him or her fired up to help make changes. If someone

were to disagree, this text may be quite inflammatory. Either way, it is an engaging read on a topic that should be of concern to anyone interested in making American schools better.

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About the Reviewer

Scott D. Farver is a first year doctoral student in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education at Michigan State University. He served in the US Peace Corps in the Philippines, and taught 5th grade near the Navajo Reservation in Northwest New Mexico. He is interested in studying equality in education as well as examining issues of multiculturalism in teacher preparation.



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