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Diane Ravitch Revised?

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Abstract

Long associated with conservative views on education, Diane Ravitch recently has won wide acclaim from educators and others who do not identify with conservatism. The publication of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* has been central to her newfound popularity because it is an effective critique of the market-based reforms she previously championed and because it defends both public schools and their teachers. As attractive as these stances are to defenders of public education, Ravitch's book offers little evidence that she has backed away from an underlying conservatism that is complacent about inequalities inside and outside of public schools.

Who would have imagined that Diane Ravitch, a historian of education long associated with conservative ideas, would become a celebrity among educators who had no sympathy with her views in the past? This is exactly what has happened since the publication of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, which renounces her previous support for market-based educational reforms and provides a largely compelling critique of school choice, testing, charter schools, No Child Left Behind, and mayoral control of urban school systems.^{[Footnote1](#)} The very fact that the book defends public schools and their teachers in a climate where, at least in cities, the criticism has been relentless, helps explain why she is endlessly in demand for speaking engagements, particularly from teachers, and why she won the Friend of Education award from the National Education Association.

Not only educators have embraced her, however. She was the keynote speaker at a national meeting of operation PUSH, for instance, and her book has garnered positive attention from liberal and even left-leaning publications outside of education. In a curious twist, a review by her friend, fan, and fellow conservative E. D. Hirsch in the *New York Review of Books* offered somewhat more tempered praise than one in *The Nation* by Jay Featherstone, a long-time proponent of progressive education.^{[Footnote2](#)} Ravitch, as Sam Dillon noted in the *New York Times*, “[B]uilt her reputation battling progressive educators...”^{[Footnote3](#)} And she battled the overlapping political left as well. Although Dillon dubiously claimed that Ravitch now “is in the final stage of an astonishing, slow-motion about-face on almost every stand she once took on American schooling,” her critique of educational reform echoes, though rarely credits, the left.

Familiar Criticism

Her book certainly is not strikingly original, and her sense of detail is not always sure. Her writing on the conservative lineage of the voucher movement, for example, has long been familiar to and rehearsed by voucher critics. She does not seem to have intimate knowledge of the Milwaukee Parent Choice Program, the first and by far the largest voucher program in the country. She understandably gets the spelling wrong of the absurdly named, abysmal former voucher school, Alex’s Academic of Excellence, by mercifully misstating “Academics” as “Academic.” (p. 131). More importantly, her statement that “vouchers usually cover only a portion of the tuition” (p. 121) does not apply to the Milwaukee program and obscures its capacity to enroll some 20,000 low-income students. Finally, she condemns major foundations that “prefer to create a marketplace of options, even as the marketplace helps to kill off highly successful Catholic schools” (p. 221). But the Milwaukee voucher program has been an integral part of that “marketplace of options” and funds many Catholic schools that otherwise would not survive.

If from a left perspective, Ravitch has nothing really new to say about vouchers, essentially the same is true about her critical commentary on testing, charter schools, mayoral control, and wealthy foundations. Regarding testing, for instance, Deborah Meier, in a 1984 *Dissent* article, criticized Ravitch for not understanding the ways standardized testing debases and narrows the curriculum.^{[Footnote4](#)} Ravitch’s discovery that No Child Left Behind does just this is distinctly behind the curve. Similarly, she is hardly on the cutting edge when she notes the forms of student selectivity that should (but often don’t) give an achievement advantage to charter schools over public schools, or when she points out that mayoral control and foundation meddling are anti-democratic. The book is very effective, nonetheless, as a comprehensive, clearly written, forceful attack on what passes for educational reform. She demonstrates that this market-oriented agenda damages teaching and learning, diminishes democratic control of education, and undermines commitment to public education.

Although the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, some of those parts are very good. What Ravitch lacks in originality, she makes up for in the skillful presentation of evidence. She does a fine job, for instance, of showing how test scores and graduation rates are gamed in high-stakes environments, and she is particularly effective in uncovering the shenanigans that undergird the fraudulent claim of improved student performance under mayoral control in New York City. Most devastating, as a number of reviewers have pointed out, is her chapter “The Billionaire Boys’ Club,” which documents the ways massively wealthy foundations—Gates, Broad, and Walton—guided neither by public accountability nor reliable research are arrogantly reshaping education along market principles.

Ravitch does not note it, but there is a strong parallel between the influence of these foundations on cash-strapped urban districts and the ways major foundations a century ago took advantage of the absence of public funding of Black education in the South to fashion educational institutions meant to subordinate African Americans.^{[Footnote5](#)} Certainly the rhetoric of foundations is quite different today, but not only are the reforms they support likely to produce urban public schools even more unequal to their suburban counterparts, but their

commitment to markets over democratic politics disenfranchises African Americans and Latinos who through school board elections had finally attained some voice in running the schools their children attend, albeit under unfavorable material circumstances. Substituting mayoral control for elected school boards is the preferred form of governance for foundation largesse in order to minimize opposition to the reform program and restore elite control over urban schools.

Despite the conservative nature of the reform agenda, there is no countervailing influence from the Obama Administration. On the contrary, Ravitch shows how entwined the Department of Education is with foundations and how the deployment of federal money advances their agenda. Most notably, she points out, eligibility for Race to the Top grants required states to lift caps on charter schools and make it possible to evaluate teachers and principals based on student test scores. Ravitch says nothing about mayoral control in this context since the regulations were silent on the topic. Elsewhere, however, she notes that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been a strong promoter of mayoral control. Consequently, it is understandable that public officials would feel pressure to support mayoral takeovers as a way of attracting federal funds.

Ravitch's vehement critique of a reform agenda that she had once supported with vigor is an effective assault on educational ideas that have practically become hegemonic. For progressives to celebrate her, however, is no cause for celebration. In part, it is embarrassing that she has written a clearer critique than rhetoric-shackled writers from the left often muster. More importantly, although she has renounced support for market-based reforms, she offers little evidence that she has backed away from her opposition to both the political and pedagogical left.

Continuities

Diane Ravitch first became prominent when the prestigious National Academy of Education published a small book of hers called *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (1978). Although the revisionists represented various disciplines and points of view, they took issue with the conventional narrative of the past that saw the evolution of public education as the unfolding of expanded democracy and opportunity. In a review of Ravitch's book, historian David Tyack succinctly laid out the revisionists' general orientation to public education: "They have argued that its basic structure was hierarchical; that its operation was class-biased and racist; that it was imposed by elites (or that working class demands were coopted by capitalists); that its ideology was suffused with notions of social control; that tinkering with minor improvements would not set it right; and that, most important, it was foolish to suppose that schooling could correct basic inequities of American life.^{Footnote6}" Although Tyack, hardly a radical himself, acknowledges that Ravitch uncovered some legitimate scholarly problems with this body of work, he viewed her reading of it as fundamentally unfair, a polemic that "wins points by ridicule, selective use of authorities, and construction of composite arguments that not one of her real opponents would endorse in toto.^{Footnote7}"

Whether or not one agrees with Tyack's criticism of *Revisionists Revised*, Ravitch's new book, despite its renunciation of the reform agenda she had supported in recent years, does not deviate from core beliefs about politics and education that her writing has consistently articulated over time. Nothing in *Death and Life* suggests that she no longer has complete faith in comity and incremental change, pluralistic compromise and representative democracy, and formal legal equality and meritocracy. She views public education, to the extent that it can be trimmed of anti-intellectual fads and made resistant to politicization from both left and right, as a fundamental vehicle for promoting democracy and equal opportunity. In keeping with this outlook, her historical studies have been critical of McCarthyism and book banning on the right; on the left, broadly construed, she has criticized progressive education, busing for desegregation, the community control movement, radical student activism, a robust multiculturalism, ethnic studies, and affirmative action. For the most part, her current study either does not address these topics or treats them non-judgmentally. There are exceptions, though. For

instance, she continues her habit of deriding progressive pedagogy by offering a snide and distorted view of balanced literacy in which, she claims, “Children are expected to teach one another” (p. 35) and each classroom must have “a rug and a rocking chair” (p. 73). More significantly, Ravitch’s enduring values come out in her treatment of several topics she has addressed in previous works as well. These include *A Nation at Risk*, a national curriculum, neighborhood schools, and teachers’ unions.

In part related to her concern that progressive ideology has shaped watered-down curricula with too much choice and too much concern for students’ interests and self-esteem, *Death and Life* devotes considerable space and offers fulsome praise to the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. [Footnote8](#) In faux tough talk the report calls for more required courses, longer school days and years, and harder work for students. Whether *A Nation at Risk* is corny or compelling, I suppose is a matter of taste. (I have never been able to get over goofy phrases like “a rising tide of mediocrity.”) It is odd, however, that Ravitch, who does such a nice job of debunking claims of rising scores in cities today, accepts at face value the dubious claim of falling test scores trumpeted by *A Nation at Risk*. [Footnote9](#) More importantly, in contrasting what she sees as the noble goals of this report with the reform agenda today, she misses similarities between the two not only in an emphasis on standardized test scores, but also in ideology. Ravitch states that *A Nation at Risk* is about the democratic purpose of education. It pays lip service to this, but it is fundamentally about developing human capital “to secure gainful employment” and restore the edge to U.S. competitiveness internationally. [Footnote10](#) Similarly, the reform agenda today focuses on human capital in the context of global competition. While this agenda does not really differ from the report in minimizing democratic goals, it does differ in eschewing democratic means as well.

At bottom Ravitch sees *A Nation at Risk* as promoting a strong academic curriculum for rich and poor alike, and this always has been central to her view of the contribution of public education to both democracy and equal opportunity. Nonetheless, she partly undermines this formulation in *Death and Life* by claiming vocational or career education is fine for some students in the last 2 years of high school. [Footnote11](#) It is hard to imagine such students would come from affluent backgrounds. Further, whether an academic curriculum promotes democracy and equality has much to do with the nature of the content of the curriculum and the opportunities to master it. Ravitch says nothing about how mastery may be more about privilege than merit. In any case, while her previous scholarship has faulted progressive education for what she perceived as the decline of the academic curriculum, she now faults the current reform movement for a testing regime that narrows and trivializes the curriculum, and for an approach to standards that fails to spell out what students should learn.

Although I take issue with her case for decline, her point about the present is important. [Footnote12](#) In cities, certainly, a regime of test preparation and dull textbooks tend to control what is taught and not taught. Little attention is devoted to a comprehensive view of what should be taught and how it could be taught through a rich variety of texts. Ravitch has long been a supporter of a national curriculum, but concedes that state-level curricula would be satisfactory as well. Progressives have feared that a national curriculum would be too prescriptive, too fact-oriented, and too Eurocentric. The defeat of the intellectually serious, mildly multicultural national history standards by a senate vote of 99-1, when conservatism was less ascendant, gives credence to these concerns. And the outrageous, right-wing social studies standards recently developed by the Texas Board of Education may not be representative of what other states might do, but the Texas fiasco provides a strong cautionary note about who gets to determine standards at the state level. [Footnote13](#) The development of city-wide standards, in contrast, holds significant promise, given the racial demographics of large cities, the periodic demands of students of color for access to high-level academics, and the proximity of cities to major universities where in recent decades a rich and diverse scholarship has been produced and disseminated by and about those whose experiences and gifts had been distorted by or deleted from the canon. To date, the dissemination of this scholarship too frequently stops at the schoolhouse door. Coalitions of teachers, professors, community members, and student activists might break down this barrier and do important curricular work.

Whatever Ravitch might think of the common curricula that would emerge from urban coalitions, her preferred location for the enactment of curriculum suggests a limited understanding of the relationship between education, democracy, and equality. In *Death and Life*, as in previous works, Ravitch strongly supports neighborhood schools. While in the past she defended neighborhood schools implicitly in opposition to busing for the purpose of racial balance, she now defends them in opposition to school choice. “The neighborhood school,” according to Ravitch, “is the place where parents meet to share concerns about their children and the place where they learn the practice of democracy. They create a sense of community among strangers.... For more than a century, they have been an essential element of our democratic institutions. We abandon them at our peril” (pp. 220–221). But how wide is the community and how robust the practice of democracy in neighborhood schools when they reflect the race and class segregation of their neighborhoods? How equal are schools in impoverished neighborhoods compared to those in affluent suburbs? Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, for instance, indicate that in 2009, eighth-grade students who attended schools in which 75% or more of the children were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a mere 1% scored at the advanced level in mathematics and 12% scored proficient. In reading, 0% scored at advanced and 12% proficient.^{[Footnote14](#)}

This should come as no surprise to Ravitch. In her very first book, a historical study of schooling in New York City, Ravitch made it clear that she understood that segregated schools in high-poverty areas were unequal, and since that time concentrated urban poverty has become considerably worse.^{[Footnote15](#)} Ravitch also noted that the sanctity of neighborhood schools was invoked by racist whites who resisted efforts of African Americans to attain equality through leaving their neighborhood schools. Yet Ravitch seemed unaffected by this and assumed that over time educational opportunity would naturally extend to African Americans and Latinos, as it had for immigrants earlier in the century. Ultimately, white official and community-based opposition to meaningful desegregation provoked an alternative quest for equality in the form of community control over the segregated schools that African Americans and Puerto Ricans attended. But both in her New York study and subsequent writing she made it clear that she had no more sympathy with an effort she viewed as ethnocentric and disruptive of proper democratic process, as she did for busing to promote desegregation. At bottom, she did not recognize, to use Malcolm X’s phrase, that there were victims of democracy. As David Tyack wrote in his review of *The Revisionists Revised*, “Her virtues of comity and compromise are fine if one does not believe that fundamental injustice or deep inequality are at stake. But the whole point of the radical critique is that the economic and political system is so rigged against the people on the bottom that basic changes are necessary.^{[Footnote16](#)}” Meaningful change for those at the bottom of society, Ravitch fails to understand, has come far more from social struggle than from polite politics. She consequently misses one of the fundamental problems of voucher and charter schools. The wide dispersion of these largely autonomous institutions makes them immune to collective struggle, forcing parents into the role of consumer rather than activist citizen.

In previous books Ravitch had made it perfectly clear that she was hostile to advocates of Black power, but the same has not been true for teacher union power. She has been a steadfast supporter of teachers’ unions, despite having had conservative colleagues who not only see voucher and charter schools as ways of circumventing them, but as part of a strategy to abolish them. Ravitch rightly acknowledges the important role unions play in protecting academic freedom and protecting teachers from capricious administrators. But she has been particularly partial to Albert Shanker, the most prominent head of the United Federation of Teachers in New York City and later the American Federation of Teachers. Shanker, arguably, guided the UFT in the opposite direction that unions concerned with social justice should take. Although Shanker was a strong supporter of the Civil Rights Movement in the South, his organization refused to support the massive African-American-led school boycott of 1964 that sought desegregation of the New York City Schools. More famously, he led strikes, with the support of the administrators’ organization, that destroyed the community control effort in New York City. Like Shanker, Ravitch elevated the professional prerogatives of a largely white teaching force over the aspirations of

African Americans and Latinos for quality education. That quality also has been compromised by the practice of the UFT and unions in general to create unnecessary obstacles to dismissing incompetent teachers. In *Death and Life*, Ravitch claims, "It is not in the interest of their members to have incompetent teacher in their midst, passing along poorly educated students to the next teacher" (p. 176). This should be the case, but it is not in New York City unless virtually all of its 55,000 or so tenured teachers are doing a good job. According to a *New York Times* article from February 2010, three tenured teachers had been fired for incompetence over the previous 2 years. [Footnote17](#) Unions alone are not responsible for this sort of outcome, but there is nothing for progressives to celebrate here. Just public schools require unions to act in solidarity with the communities they serve.

The most important continuity between *Death and Life* and Ravitch's previous writing is a failure to compellingly place schooling and reform within the political economy. A century ago, while philanthropists were establishing a subordinate form of schooling for African Americans in the South, urban elites, in the name of creating orderly and efficient school systems according to business principles, engineered the replacement of ward-based school boards with at-large elected boards of prominent business men and professionals. Alternatively, they supported control by mayors when they could be counted on to choose elite boards. These board members hired "expert" superintendents who instituted bureaucratic, centralized school systems that in ideology as well as practice tended to treat students' social background as their proper destinies.

That configuration of control was durable until struggles for equality and the massive flight of whites from urban schools resulted in changes in both the class and race character of those who govern them. The current reform movement which touts mayoral control, superintendents from the corporate sector, and market-based principles represents, at bottom, another class takeover by the corporate elite. But it is an elite that, for the most part, no longer lives in cities, let alone sends its children to urban public schools. And in contrast to its desire in the past to rationalize urban school systems, now, it appears, the goal is to privatize them.

No friend of class analysis, I doubt that Ravitch would go this far. Consequently, she does not see class interests in the activity of Gates, Walton, and Broad, but simply arrogant behavior. She also is oblivious to the ways class and race politics have shaped federal policy aimed at addressing social and economic problems. Although she claims that it is widely understood that education cannot solve social and economic problems, increasingly the federal government has tried to do just that. It has substituted education for interventions that would build on job and social supports initiated by the New Deal. Spurred by the civil rights movement, the educational reforms initiated in the 1960s at least were predicated on the assumption that more resources needed to go to the children of the poor. The current reform movement, driven by the agency of concentrated wealth, is not interested in redistributing resources but rather claims it can improve education for the poor through test-driven accountability and choice.

Ravitch convincingly demonstrates that this improvement is not taking place and that market-based practices, in fact, are doing damage to already vulnerable school systems. Moreover, at the end of her book, she asserts that money does matter and implies that schools the poor attend should have resources equivalent to the schools of the affluent. It is hard to know how serious she is about this, however. Maybe she is inching to the left politically (and perhaps pedagogically too, as her friendship and joint blog with former antagonist Deborah Meier suggests). Nonetheless, her discussion of resources occupies only two paragraphs of the final section of the book, even though a money-doesn't-matter assumption undergirds the reform movement her entire book is devoted to criticizing. She also provides no notion of how she thinks this will come about or whether she thinks it is the proper role of government to diminish inequality inside or outside of schools. Her commitment to interest-group politics, in any case, is not likely to accomplish much in an environment where profound and increasing inequality of wealth is making democracy increasingly unequal. Political scientist Larry Bartels

provides evidence, for instance, that those in the lowest-third of the income distribution have no voice with either party.^{[Footnote18](#)}

A Limited Perspective

Although Ravitch's critique of the current reform agenda and defense of public education are valuable, her own view of public education remains limited by her political perspective. As noted earlier, she views it as a fundamental democratic good that since the turn of the 20th century has been buffeted by the imposition of fads and false panaceas by a variety of interest groups. This certainly is not completely wrong, but she has missed the deeper power relations that, depending on the balance, shape public education in a more or less egalitarian, democratic direction. Given the radical imbalance that exists today, it may seem appropriate merely to defend public education. But without addressing the inequitable practices of public education that existed long before the current reform movement, without developing a vision of education that is broader than neighborhood schools, tracked curricula, and organized teachers' narrow interests, it is understandable that many of those who have been denied equal opportunity will take their chances with charters and choice rather than public schools and voice.

Notes

1. Ravitch ([2010](#)).
2. Hirsch ([2010](#)); Featherstone ([2010](#)). Also, see Barkan ([2010](#)).
3. Dillon ([2010](#)).
4. Meier ([1984](#)).
5. See Anderson ([1988](#)).
6. Tyack ([1979](#)).
7. *Ibid.*, 14.
8. National Commission on Excellence in Education ([1983](#)).
9. See, especially, Berliner and Biddle ([1995](#)), Chap. 2.
10. The quotation comes from the second sentence of the report. The first three paragraphs emphasize human capital.
11. *A Nation at Risk* has a similar orientation. It opines, "Students have migrated from vocational and college preparatory programs..." See *Death and Life*, 26.
12. For the failure of progressive ideas to significantly influence teaching and learning, see Cuban ([1993](#)). See also Kantor and Lowe ([2004](#)).
13. Apparently even Thomas Jefferson was too controversial for the conservative majority on the Texas Board. According to James C. McKinley, Jr., the board "cut Thomas Jefferson from a list of figures whose writings inspired revolution in the late 18th and 19th century." See McKinley ([2010](#)).
14. For students in schools where 25% or fewer met poverty criteria, 15% scored at advanced and 35% at proficient in mathematics, and 5% scored at advanced and 42% at proficient in reading. See National Center for Education Statistics ([2010](#)).

15. Ravitch, however, could not seem to make up her mind about the causes of unequal urban schools. She first stated that African Americans and Puerto Ricans faced schools which “had inexperienced teachers, decaying facilities, and low academic standards.” She subsequently suggests it has more to do with poor people themselves: “Historically schools in slum neighborhoods had always been educationally inferior schools; the reasons, having to do with slum conditions that spilled over from the neighborhood into the school, were remarkably similar no matter what the color or national origin of the children in the school.” See Ravitch (1974). For the intensification of poverty in urban neighborhoods, see Wilson (1996).

16. Tyack (1979), 17.

17. Medina (2010).

18. Nonetheless, he argues that the poor benefit far more from democratic regimes than Republican ones. See Bartels (2008), Chap. 9, 10.

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