BOOK REVIEW

Title: **The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education.**

Author: **Diane Ravitch**

Publisher: **New York: Basic Books**

Year of Publication: **2010**

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Diane Ravitch created quite a national stir when this book came out last year in the United States. Here was a highly respected historian of American education publically recanting her previous advocacy of two main ideas shaping educational reform today: 1) the adoption of free market business practices to make schools more competitive, and 2) the use of standardized testing as the main assessment tool of student learning. Not only have these reforms failed to produce better schools, Ravitch argues, but as her title makes clear, they are actually threatening the education of a whole generation of young people. She hopes her book will contribute to a renaissance in the American public school system, just as Jane Jacob's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* helped to spark urban renewal. She hopes it is not too late.

Although she is not a fan of John Dewey (she is often categorized as an essentialist), Ravitch unwittingly espouses pragmatism when she defends her about-face: "...my views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality....It is a mark of a sentient human being to learn from experience, to pay close attention to how theories work out when put into practice" (p. 2). Using her skills as an historian, she tells the story of American education in the past two decades. We learn how the market-based reforms that came to full flower in New York City after 9/11 and subsequently spread throughout the United States had their roots in one

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school district that had imported Balanced Literacy from Australia and New Zealand in 1987. She shows how (in her view) the carefully reasoned recommendations of a commissioned report (*A Nation at Risk*) morphed into the crude and unrealistic mandates of a federal law (*No Child Left Behind*); how Barak Obama has quickly fallen into step with the direction set by George W. Bush to measure basic skills and punish those schools that fail to measure up; and how the private capital of billionaires such as Bill Gates is underwriting the proliferation of charter schools at the expense of public schools.

What can Canadian educators take from Ravitch? First of all, this book affirms once again how inextricably tied we are to the Americans. I did not know that "Balanced Literacy", the new buzz word in Ontario schools, came to us via the States from Australia and New Zealand over twenty years ago. Ravitch likes to expose the vacuousness of educational jargon, and Balanced Literacy is not spared:

> When I met with the former director of curriculum and instruction [in San Diego], she wanted me to know how valuable she found Balanced Literacy. She said, "You won't believe this, but we had fourth graders who didn't know the difference between point of view and perspective. So we had to stop and teach it to them." I wrote that down and said nothing. I did not want to admit that I didn't know the difference between point of view and perspective either. I began to understand what teachers had been telling me about the district's demand that everyone mouth the same jargon. (p. 64)

Second, Ravitch gives us a cautionary tale about the perils of putting too much emphasis on standardized testing. True, some of Ravitch's criticisms of standardized tests do not apply to Ontario: in contrast to most American tests that narrowly assess basic skills and use multiple choice questions throughout, the Education Quality and Accountability Office tests are linked to the expectations of the Ontario Curriculum and include opportunities for students to write their

own answers. Nevertheless, her deeper critique hold true for us as well: by focussing on literacy and numeracy, high stakes testing pushes teachers to "rob Peter to pay Paul." If test scores need to be improved, more instructional time will be devoted to language arts and mathematics at the expense of subjects that are not tested, such as physical education or visual arts. An official from the EQAO told me recently that there were no plans to extend testing to other subjects areas. Imagine what would happen if the EQAO decided to implement province-wide testing of physical fitness in Grades 3, 6, and 10. Considering the startling increase of childhood obesity, is not such a test more necessary and more urgent than boosting literacy scores?

Albert Einstein is reported to have quipped, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." In Dewey's original laboratory school, testing as conventionally understood did not exist. Students tested their ideas out in concrete situations. The test of practice was the one that really counted, but not in the sense of grades or report cards. Moreover, teachers worth their salt know that it is often the most valuable learning experiences that are the most difficult to define, measure, or quantify. They are immeasurable. In fact, the attempt to evaluate or assess them may well destroy them. Ravitch's favourite English teacher, Ruby Ratliff, exemplified education in this sense. But she wonders whether there would be a place for such a teacher in today's high school:

> Would any school recognize her ability to inspire her students to love literature? Would she get a bonus for expecting her students to use good grammar, accurate spelling, and good syntax?... I don't think so.... But under any imaginable compensation scheme, her greatness as a teacher–her ability to inspire students and to change their lives–would go unrewarded because it is not in demand and cannot be measured. And let's face it: She would be stifled not only by the data mania of her supervisors, but by the jargon, the indifference to classical literature, and the hostility to her manner of teaching that now prevail in our schools. (p.194)

Finally and most importantly, this book forces a reader to re-consider, or perhaps to consider for the first time, the main purpose of education. For Ravitch, the essentials of education are curriculum and teaching, not testing or accountability. In her view, the curriculum must be explicitly and coherently grounded in the liberal arts and sciences and taught by teachers who are "well educated, not just well trained" (p. 13). As an historian, Ravitch naturally espouses the teaching of history which she finds woefully lacking in most states. One of the exceptions is Massachusetts where students are required to learn world history in tandem with American history. This causes me to question why the Ontario Curriculum does not require students to learn any world history: Is this not necessary in a world that is becoming increasingly interdependent on a global scale?

In 240 pages, Diane Ravitch brings the reader up to speed on the current state of American education. She convincingly demonstrates that the spheres of business and education are qualitatively distinct and that a school run as a business will likely destroy the joy of learning. Aimed at a general audience, it is clearly written and well researched with 30 pages of end notes. Whether or not one agrees with Ravitch's educational philosophy, her book is stimulating, informative, and thought-provoking. When an educationalist of her stature changes her mind, one must take notice.

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