

Education Policy Analysis Archives

Volume 4 Number 10

June 30, 1996

ISSN 1068-2341

A peer-reviewed scholarly electronic journal.

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Arizona State University, Tempe AZ 85287-2411

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Being Popular About National Standards: A Review Of *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen's Guide*.

Diane Ravitch. *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen's Guide*. Washington: The
Brookings Institution, 1995. pp. 223. \$22.95 (hardcover)

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Abstract: I assume that Diane Ravitch is someone who is as deeply committed to a fair and socially just education as I am--even when our political and educational agendas may differ--I also assume that re-stratification and fostering the power of the conservative restoration is not what she wants either. Thus, I do urge you to read this book, but perhaps for different reasons: to see it as a cautionary tale and then to watch as the public policies that are justified under its rhetorical umbrella and that are actually implemented on the ground go in uncomfortable directions.

Before you read any further, you should know that this will not be a "disinterested" review by a "disinterested" observer. Diane Ravitch and I have a prior history of interaction in print. Thus when her book written with Chester Finn--*What Do Our 17-Year- Olds Know?* (1987)--appeared I was invited to review it for a major journal. While I thought that the volume did raise some interesting issues, I also argued that it was flawed and was ideally suited to advance the neo-conservative attack on schools. Diane Ravitch responded, partly in a serious way but also in a relatively "cute" way that did not deal with the substantive concerns I raised, perhaps because of the length limitations imposed on any response. Through it all, it was clear that we disagreed in truly major ways. But, even with these substantial disagreements, the discourse never became that form of character assassination that too often poses as arguments between left and right.

At the risk of seeming consistent, I have exactly the same reaction to Ravitch's recent volume on national standards as I did to her earlier book on testing. Once again, it raises some interesting issues and once again I believe that its arguments are deeply flawed. This volume too is ideally suited to support political and cultural positions that are more conservative than Ravitch herself may be.

National Standards in American Education is meant to be a popular book. I do not mean this at all negatively. Educational policy and practice have become ever more complicated and strikingly political. Thus, there is a great need for books that sort through the complexities, present clear syntheses of different positions, and clarify what is at stake when particular positions are taken. Yet, because of this, authors of popular books have a real political and ethical responsibility to their readers. They must clarify, yet not overly simplify. They must do justice to positions about which they have serious disagreements. The task of the popularizer is to make arguments accessible, without creating caricatures-- straw-persons--whose arguments are but pale reflections of their original depth and power. Therefore, writing popular books on important issues requires an immense amount of discipline, not only stylistically but in reading and presenting the substantive arguments for or against one's position on educational policy carefully.

These requirements make me more than a little nervous about what Diane Ravitch has done--and has not done--in this book. Ravitch is indeed a fine writer. Her style is clear and unmythified. She has a nice way with words. However, she is considerably less successful in the other demands placed upon the popular writer. She all too often doesn't deal with either the best or the most rigorous arguments of those who do not agree with her presuppositions, often preferring to deal with only the somewhat rhetorical and brief statements of opponent's positions. Whether this is conscious or not, this is quite a clever strategy. It enables the "naive" reader to think that the author is being fair and equitable, at the same time that some telling points made by opposing arguments can be all too easily dismissed. (This is not only a problem with those whose educational, ideological, and political positions are similar to those of Ravitch. Unfortunately, this strategy is also found among those whose positions are closer to my own.)

Given the intense conflict over educational policy now--when it is crucial to listen carefully to multiple arguments about who benefits from the ways our curricula, pedagogies, and evaluation mechanisms are organized and controlled--I worry about this in general. But, in the case of this book my worries are more specific, since Ravitch has done this to my own writing as well as that of others. For example, as some of you may know, I have written at length about the movement toward national curricula, national standards, and national testing. I have raised a number of questions about its overt and hidden effects, its social and cultural claims, and its position on a "common culture" (Apple, 1992; Apple, 1993b).

In general, I have argued--along with many others--that the results of this movement will be that it will be captured by neo-liberal and neo-conservative tendencies and used for purposes whose large scale effects will be damaging to those with the least economic, political, and cultural power in the United States. I have also argued that many of these kinds of proposals are based on little understanding of the daily lives of teachers and the already intensified conditions under which they work. In even more recent work (Apple, 1996), I have brought to bear powerful empirical evidence--much of which was available even when Ravitch was writing this book--to demonstrate these effects. Yet, the representation of my arguments is taken from a two page piece written for a popular political magazine, a piece that was simply meant to provide something of a beginning point to make the reader aware of a set of issues, not to fully argue about them.

Ravitch wrote *National Standards* while in residence at The Brookings Institution in Washington. As with many of these kinds of think tanks, it too has moved significantly to the right. Thus, the political center has been redefined, often to such an extent that what earlier

would have been considered to be quite a conservative position has often now become "moderate." This signifies a major transformation in our commonsense. Much of our public discussion involves quite simplistic neo-conservative versions of the issue of a "common culture." Increasingly, at the same time, other elements that surround what has been called the "conservative restoration" are becoming dominant. Thus, public is seen as bad and private as good. More and more, the neo-liberal emphasis on the marketplace as the ultimate arbiter of justice has been taken as "truth." Indeed, our very idea of democracy is in the process of being transformed. The citizen is now replaced by the individual consumer (See Apple, 1993a; Apple, 1996). And our ethical sensibilities are withering so that many people have now become almost inured to the human suffering that is produced by the ways in which our institutions operate--a reality that may be best described by Jonathan Kozol's powerful phrase "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1991). While many of us lament this fact, my basic point is to remind the reader that Ravitch's book was itself written under a particular political aegis. It needs to be situated within a set of larger movements, not as an isolated volume about one part of educational life.

Basically, Ravitch is strongly in favor of national standards. These are to remain voluntary and dynamic, not mandatory and static. They are to be assessed in multiple ways, with a focus on that latest buzz word, performance assessment, not multiple choice tests. These kinds of examinations should be given to all individual students in a way that provides comparative performance data on similar students of the same age and grade level. Accompanying this will be the creation of report cards for individual schools and districts. Such clarified national standards and more detailed performance assessments will help colleges and universities and will assist employers. Employers will rely on high school transcripts and there will be a closer connection between what schools focus on and the skills needed to "succeed in the workplace."

There are elements of insight here: the voluntaristic nature of any standards that may be developed; the reduced emphasis on simplistic paper and pencil standardized tests; the urge to give "the public" more information about what schools are doing; the need to communicate to students and parents that education is very important; and so on. Yet, for all of her evident insights, it is almost as if Ravitch lives in an unreal world at times. Among the most powerful driving forces in American education at this time are increasingly something that sounds suspiciously like Social Darwinism and an impulse to use schools for re-stratification. At the same time, neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and authoritarian populist religious fundamentalists have created a tense but effective alliance in which market plans are coupled with proposals for national curricula and national testing. In essence, by putting in place national standards and then national performance testing, we can then set the market loose, since "consumers" will then have sufficient information to be able to choose among "products" (or schools). As odd as it may seem at first glance, the centralizing and rationalizing impulses of national curricula and national testing may be essential first steps toward the long term goal of marketization and privatization of schools through choice and voucher plans (Apple, 1996). This combination of strong state/weak state is exactly what is being tried in a number of nations under the new conservative policies being implemented. As Whitty and others have shown, the results have been more than a little undemocratic or very contradictory (Whitty, Edwards, and Gewirtz, 1993; Whitty, in press; Pollard, et al., 1994). Why should we expect that the US will be any different?

Of equal importance, is the fact that the fiscal crisis now being experienced in many states has meant that seemingly fine sounding plans--sometimes quite similar to what Ravitch has asked for--have served as excuses to put in place much of what she is against. Thus, for example, in a number of states--even after a good deal of work was done on higher standards and on more flexible forms of assessment--money was only allocated by the state for standardized, reductive paper and pencil tests. It was too expensive to do otherwise. The rhetoric of higher standards and of more flexible modes of assessment coupled with the fear of "declining economies" and "declining achievement" created a sense of urgency to get more testing in schools. However, the

rhetoric of "higher" and "flexible" ultimately functioned to increase the power of mandatory state-centered testing of a relatively reductive kind, at the same time as there continued to be no growth in the ability of schools to do anything more about even meeting the old standards and tests. It ultimately functioned to add one more way of intensifying teachers jobs and of blaming the school even more for the social dislocations of this society. Speaking as bluntly as I can, my own prediction is that one of the most powerful and damaging effects of the standards movement and of the performance assessment movement will be to affix labels on poor children that will be even harder to erase than before.

I could go on here. But my basic point is a simple one. Diane Ravitch is quite a good writer and is able to make what seems to be an articulate case for higher national standards and more emphasis on performance assessment of particular kinds. However, she does this by simplifying the contentious issues, by ignoring important counter-evidence, and by failing to fully understand some of the most powerful economic, ideological, and political currents in the United States and elsewhere.

National Standards in American Education could perform a valuable service if it was read as a set of arguments about what to be very cautious of not doing in our drive to "reform" education. There are valuable issues raised in it. However, I predict it will be put to exactly the opposite use. It will add support to those neo-conservatives who wish to centralize control over "official knowledge" or by neo-liberals who want to reindustrialize the school by making schools into places whose primary (only?) function is to meet the needs of the economy and who see students not as persons but only as future employees. And this will occur at the very same time as major corporations are shedding thousands upon thousands of workers, most of whom did quite well in school, thank you very much. It will be used once again to export the blame for our economic and social tragedies onto schools, without providing sufficient support to do anything serious about these tragedies. And, finally, it will be used to justify curricula, pedagogic relations, and mechanism of evaluation that will be even less lively and more alienating than those that are in place now. (For alternatives to these kinds of things and to those that are proposed by Ravitch, see Ladson- Billings (1994) and Apple and Beane (1995)).

Do not misconstrue what I am saying here. As I have argued elsewhere, I am not in principle opposed to national standards or to the processes of assessment--if and only if they are employed to instigate a national debate at every school and in every community about what and whose knowledge should be considered "legitimate" and about the very real patterns of differential benefits our schools produce (Apple, 1996). If they do not do this, then they should be approached critically and with immense caution. Since I assume that Diane Ravitch is someone who is as deeply committed to a fair and socially just education as I am--even when our political and educational agendas may differ--I also assume that re-stratification and fostering the power of the conservative restoration is not what she wants either. Thus, I do urge you to read this book, but perhaps for different reasons: to see it as a cautionary tale and then to watch as the public policies that are justified under its rhetorical umbrella and that are actually implemented on the ground go in uncomfortable directions.

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