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Summary and reflections on the book "Death and Life of the Great American School System" by Diane Ravitch

Abstract. The book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* by Diane Ravitch highlights the history of education reform and her critiques towards the various federal education policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act. Ravitch discusses how her views about these reforms have changed over time; how she once believed that they could be good but now sees the danger it causes students, teachers, and the education system as a whole. Her book allows readers to reflect on the importance of individualizing students and not teaching to the test. How student need to be seen as learners and not test scores. It also allows future American teachers to reflect on what we can do to change our failing system. Ravitch's novel is a critique towards the ever-changing educational system landscape and allows the reader to reflect on what can be done differently to benefit the students.

Diane Ravitch was the former US Assistant Secretary of Education from 1991 to 1993 during the George H W Bush administration. George H W Bush was the 41st president of the United States and served from 1989 to 1993. She is also a research professor of Education at NYU, a historian of education and the founder and president of the Network for Public Education. With her vast knowledge of education reform and firsthand political experience, Ravitch wrote this book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* in 2010 to comment on how her views of education have changed overtime. She explains that education needs to be improved and can be improved through the use of a strong curriculum that is grounded in liberal arts and provides ample opportunities for children (Ravitch 21). Ravitch discusses the No Child Left Behind Act and how she favored the act in order to shorten the achievement gap but that it left decisions up to the states with no guidelines for what students should be learning. She later changed her opinion on the act because it bypassed standards and curriculum. No Child Left Behind act was a vital piece of education reform passed by the Bush Administration that requires schools to test students in grades 3-8 and once in high school. She continues to criticize George H W Bush's administration by discussing the goals he set for the children of 2000 in January of 1989 (Ravitch 37). How the goals were to change the way of schooling, to master subjects and how these ideas led to statistics showing how different racial groups were receiving higher grades than others, creating a hierarchy. She then focuses on the education issues that are placed into the hands of non-educators and how there is no quick fix to school reform (Ravitch 70). The next chapter discusses Mayor Mike Bloomberg's "children first" act which was implemented in the New York City school system. The act was used to improve test scores on standardized tests by implementing a new math and reading program into schools. Ravitch comments that Bloomberg wanted to run the schools like a business which caused many teachers to complain about micromanagement. Teachers were forced to teach in specific ways even if their methods were successful.

The next half of the book goes into more detail about No Child Left Behind and standardizing testing. Accountability is the central focus of the No Child Left Behind act and how, in theory, it would hold teachers, students and principals accountable to raise the achievement scores. In trying to reach those goals, Ravitch comments that curriculums now focus on improving test scores rather than

acquiring knowledge. This is a new idea to introduce to American School systems. Most US school districts allow their teachers to write their own curriculums, as long as they follow state guidelines and standards. Later, she discusses the history of national standardized testing. She believes that the problem with standardized tests is not the test themselves but rather, “the misuse of testing for high stakes purposes, the belief that tests could identify with certainty which students should be held back, which teachers and principals should be fired or rewarded, and which schools should be closed” (Ravitch 145). She argues that students learn more about test taking methods than the subjects themselves. Ravitch also declares that good teachers are ones who teach to the test and improve test scores (174). She comments on philanthropist and their role in education reform throughout history and about her own experiences in school. The last chapter places emphasis on the failing strategies of school reform and how it is no new phenomenon that our school systems need to change. Ravitch suggest that a strong, high national curriculum is one step towards improvement and how common core is a great example of current advancements in the school systems.

The relevancy of the publishing date of the book portrays the importance of the issues that Ravitch describes. These are not issues from many decades ago, these are reform movements that are happening before our very eyes. The Common Core was implemented in 2010 and No Child Left Behind in 2002 (FindLaw). These acts are at the forefront of the education reform debate, whether they are solutions or problems. As an incoming American teacher, it is important to consider some of the major issues within the profession that I am going into, one of them being the reform for the entire system itself. While Ravitch’s suggestion for a national curriculum is nice in theory, how can it be implemented affectively and how can new teachers like me change the climate of education for the upcoming generation we will be teaching? What can we do to make sure that we highlight the individuality of each and every one of our students and to not be the “good teachers” that the system wants us to be? Ravitch defines “good teachers” in today’s climate as teachers who teach test taking skills and do everything in their power to get their students good test scores. We do not want to be those teachers and instead want to be seen as “bad teachers” because we considered our students interests, liberal arts and give students different experiences and opportunities to learn. We want to consider students as a whole and how students should be treated as humans and not test scores.

There is also too much emphasis being placed on test taking and test scores that students, including myself, assign their personal worth to grades. In my Asbury Park (seaside town in New Jersey) internship last semester, I had to ask a student a number of math questions to see what extent he understood place value. I started the “test” by explaining that it does not matter what grade you get since this is not grading you on any new information but what you already know. The student kept asking me after each question, if he got it right and what his grade would be and no matter how many times, I would explain to him that there is no grade and that it did not matter; He was adamant about knowing. The student cared more about his grade then the actual math that I was asking him to complete. This is just one example on how test scores are being over emphasized in schools. I also saw in this same placement the teacher teaching student test taking methods for the upcoming standardized test they were going to be taking in the fall. This teacher taught History and English but instead of using his time to teach the students these vital subjects, he was forced to go through sample test questions and teach the students how to get the right answers. Like Ravitch argues, curriculum focus on improving test scores rather than learning valuable content.

Overall, Diane Ravitch’s political and educational system knowledge of education reform led her to write this narrative about her views on the current system and what she believes should be changed. She also comments on the importance of a national curriculum throughout the book and how that is a vital aspect to fix the problems with the education system of today. Her writing allows teachers to reflect on the importance of the individuality of each of their students and to not “teach to

the test”. How standardized test scores hold too much merit in the educational system and that we need to rethink how we can structure our system in order to highlight our students’ humanity instead of their test scores.

Works Cited

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