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Deborah Meier

“Getting Tough” in the Schools

A Critique of the Conservative Prescription

The release of a half-dozen prestigious reports on schooling in America has initiated, according to Secretary of Education T. H. Bell, “the greatest, most promising development since the turn of the century.” Schools are, again, big news.

Diane Ravitch, a serious neoconservative historian and educational writer, provides an intellectually respectable description of the circumstances that have, presumably, necessitated these “promising developments.” This is what gives her new book, *The Troubled Crusade*,¹ its importance today and explains its extensive and positive reception. Although modest in tone, it builds a case for Bell’s agenda and provides background for other official reports. To understand its impact, let us see how it fits into the current educational hoopla, and then examine it on its own merits.

The current recipe for reform is clear: more tests, more homework, longer school hours, mandated state requirements, stiffer standards for promotion, stricter discipline codes, merit pay and, sometimes, tuition tax credits. This litany is not new. There has been a consensus in the popular media since the early 1970s that educational standards have “declined” and that a “return to basics” is needed. What is new is that these major reports are the product of a combination of forces—political, educational and, above all, corporate. Together they have agreed on one solution: “get tough.” Ravitch’s book, in its own way, comes to the same conclusion.

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The reports of the National Commission, the 20th Century Fund, and the Education Commission of the States are primarily focused on how schools can better serve a flagging economy. Ravitch offers an interesting departure. It’s Jefferson’s call for a “crusade against ignorance,” not the needs of the economy that, she says, she’s concerned with.

Like the National Commission, Ravitch sees the American public schools as a remarkable triumph. They have been endangered, however, by well-intentioned but ultimately corrupting defects that she generally lumps together under the label of “permissive progressivism.” This progressive ideology was defeated after the war, or fell of its own flabby weight, to be replaced briefly in the late ‘50s by what Ravitch enthusiastically calls “a pedagogical revolution.” Initiated by alarm over Russia’s launching of Sputnik, the new reforms were, however, soon thwarted by concern for equality rather than excellence. Despite major achievements, made possible by an enormously expanded federal presence in education, American schools witnessed a dangerous decline in quality. They tried to do too much and did most of it badly. To redress this problem, we must limit our scope and build a more rigorous program based on the ideals of a liberal education for all.

It is a familiar argument, with its neoconservative stress on the virtues of “limiting our vision.” But a familiar story, well-told, can add new insights. To assess Ravitch’s contribution it might help to examine how she deals with three recurring themes:

- (1) the interdependence of democracy and education;

(2) the unintended negative effects of the reforms of the 1960s that were aimed at eliminating the educational gap between classes and races;

(3) the claim that schools work best when they limit themselves to cognitive and/or academic goals.

Democracy and Education

RAVITCH TREATS as a received truth the idea that democracy rests upon formal education, that ignorance breeds tyranny, and that without literacy representative government will falter. A serious writer whose task is to report on the status of Jefferson's "crusade" cannot, however, afford to rest on such attractive platitudes. Does it not matter how we define both education and democracy? Shouldn't we ask what kind of knowledge, gained under what kind of circumstances? And is all this not affected by the kind of problems that children will encounter when they enter the adult world?

The drive by successive waves of new immigrants to seek emancipation through formal schooling is enlightening. Equally enlightening is the history of schools at the service of elites: making some people feel superior and others inferior, some self-confident and others powerless. Equally enlightening are the persistent failure of democratic countries to close the gap between the educational achievement of lower- and upper-class students. Enlightening too is the compatibility of high levels of literacy and intellectual talent—even lots of high culture—with some of the world's cruelest tyrannies.

By leaving such complexities virtually untouched, Diane Ravitch contributes to muddled thinking about the relationship of schools to society, particularly the connection of schools to powerful political and corporate institutions. Avoiding the issue enables Ravitch, for example, to accept the dubious popular notion that school priorities in the '60s and '70s were set by disadvantaged minorities. It enables her to assume that we can safely rely in the '80s on a corporate interpretation of priorities. This is the kind of question that cannot be examined critically if we do not recognize the problem itself.

The impact of modern technology—a rallying slogan for much of the current debate on education—is not quite what the National Commission on Excellence glibly and optimistically suggests. In fact, the economy does not need an enormously expanded, intellectually more sophisticated labor force. An intellectually more rigorous education will not put America's youth back to work. The job prospects for most Americans are bleak; an increasing number of the jobs that will become available will require low levels of skill and at most an elementary education.

If you want to discuss the relationship of schools to democracy, you cannot skip over the school's historic connection to employment. To presume that schools are unaffected by the condition of the labor market is either naive or deceptive. When we fail to acknowledge the dual function of schools we paper over an important reality.⁴

Facile platitudes about democracy also obscure a related phenomenon. While there is a notable distance between theory and practice in all schools, it is greater in some than in others. And this difference is largely determined by social class. Ravitch spends time on race, sex, and other "handicapping" conditions, but class, like the needs of the labor market, she renders invisible.

There is a conservative tradition, accepted also by many latter-day progressives, that some children, perhaps most, are frustrated and embittered by undue complexity—either the complexity of having to make choices or of having to deal with subtler subject matter. Such elitist views have long been openly held in European countries, although in the United States they generally take the form of disputes over IQ scores.

When John Dewey wrote his famous 1916 manifesto, *Education and Democracy*, he was challenging this traditional view. Despite his efforts, neither the progressive movement he helped start, the "pedagogical revolution" of the late '50s, nor the "romantics and rebels" of the '60s altered the inner workings of most schools that poor and working-class children attended. True, all children now had to go to school for a longer time, and hard-pressed teachers had to invent new ways to manage.

amuse and, if they could, educate at least the most "promising." On Chicago's South Side, for example, many schools in low-income areas still had bolted-down desks well into the '60s. Penmanship, weekly spelling tests, a board full of computation tasks requiring a lot of copying, and good manners—these were the staples in such schools.²

Anyone today who visits elementary schools that are attended mainly by low-income children notes the prevalence of programmed scripts based on behavior-mod techniques, reading "kits" consisting of hundreds of unrelated paragraphs followed by multiple-choice questions, and reams of ditto sheets. Lower-class schools are often devoid of books (except perhaps workbooks, readers, and the textbook); instead of libraries they have remedial reading and audiovisual "labs." It's not universal, but it's common.

The trouble is that while Ravitch sees the liberal arts as a bulwark of democracy, and progressivism as its enemy, something entirely different has really been going on, and it was neither "liberal" nor "progressive." To understand why, it's necessary to consider what working-class parents see as the relationship between schools and their real lives. They are not blind to the fact that the employment opportunities available to their children signify certain priorities. Unless they're prepared to see the school as an agent for social change, they know that the "real world of work" their children must face is not exactly a model of democratic citizenship. That's at least in part the rub, and one Ravitch avoids. To talk nobly of schooling and democracy while ignoring the issue of work is an intellectual evasion.

One reason, after all, that poor and working-class parents are often ambivalent, if not downright hostile, to schools that seek to "empower" children is precisely this concern. "They don't need all that fancy stuff," they complain, "just make them obedient and do their work." The teacher is the boss; that's the way life is, and they may as well learn it young. (Modern, more self-confident, and better organized parents may not, in fact, always take the boss's side against their children.)

Well-to-do children, in contrast, are expected to enter occupations with a far wider

latitude for independence and autonomy. They are, furthermore, expected to use their leisure time to promote culture and participate in democratic political life. For these more affluent and more privileged families, the ideals of good citizenship and appropriate job habits are not so clearly in conflict. The school may be mildly repressive, but it is trying to educate on the basis of a model that matches children's own ideals of "adulthood." For such children, the teacher is not a "boss" but a guide and model.

When the educational progressives raised the question of schools and democracy, they saw them as critically interdependent. They saw the school as a major shaping force, the first public domain children confronted. The school is a society in its own right, said Dewey, not simply preparation for life. If it was to be supportive of democratic values, then its citizens (the students) needed to develop the kind of "constructive intelligence" that would enable them to rethink answers to social problems, *including issues of work*, in a systematic manner.

However misguided their answers, these were the issues that the giants of progressive education grappled with, both theoretically and experimentally. At a time when employment possibilities for young people are rather bleak, Dewey's central question becomes even more pressing. Ravitch's response is rhetoric, devoid of precisely the contextual detail that might help us see the connections between contemporary education and democracy.

Schools and Equality Since 1960

RAVITCH ACCEPTS the notion that schools in the postwar period should have sought and did seek to maximize "equality." In 1945 "one's educational chances were limited by the accident of birth and by the color of one's skin." By 1965 schools were explicitly ordered to break this "correlation between social class and educational achievement." (Ravitch generally equates social class with race.) In the words of President Johnson, whom she quotes approvingly, the schools must provide not merely "equality of opportunity" but "equality as a fact, as a result." This was and is the rhetoric of

the powerful "accountability movement" and the "more effective schools" strategies in vogue today. It is one of the rationales offered for city and state efforts to centralize curriculum and standards, with a concomitant loss in influence by the local community as well as the individual teacher.

The extraordinary expectation that schools can produce equal results logically requires one of the following three assumptions:

- (1) that the educational and cultural background of the family is irrelevant to a child's school success (being advantaged is of no advantage to our offspring . . .);
- (2) that we can design a curriculum that bypasses any family advantages;
- (3) that we can transform schools in some other substantial and meaningful way.

Even if we ignore the impact of poor nutrition and health, or the unequal financial resources available to families to supplement public expenditures on education, children still do not enter the race as equals. Parents who already speak in the vocabulary of the school cannot avoid providing their children with a continuous competitive edge in a system built upon rank order. Even with additional resources, the disadvantaged will always be, on the average, behind. And if, by some near-miracle, they did improve their rank, causing a relative decline in the status advantage of some other more powerful constituency, might not the rules be changed?

A look at the changes over the years in reading tests given to first-graders suggests that this may be just what has occurred. The standardized tests given in the pre-1960 epoch were substantially shorter and easier than any in use today. Older tests consisted of alphabet-recognition items, initial consonants, and two- and three-line phrases and "stories" accompanied by pictures. Tests like these are now given to kindergarteners, and first-graders are held back based on tests formerly given to older children: requiring complex phonetic information, the reading of substantially longer paragraphs, more complex questions, and no pictures. The stakes were raised, and thus the ranking has remained the same.

The second idea—building a "culture-fair"

curriculum that does not favor middle-class children--has become popular lately among urban educators responding to the demand for equal test results. Every child is to be exposed to the same unambiguous, explicit, and sequentially ordered curriculum, albeit some may have to do it more than once till they get it "right." If teachers and children are to be held accountable, then, this idea assumes, schools should only teach what can be measured objectively. The first casualties are generally the "liberal arts," both because they are harder to tailor to such specifications and because they are considered a luxury anyway. It does not, therefore, seem an option for Ravitch.

Nor is Ravitch interested in exploring the third possibility: that the challenge to produce equal in-school results might require a redefinition of achievement and new ways of measuring it (see my article in *Dissent*, Fall 1981, on reading tests). She also scorns related reforms aimed at altering the curriculum, pedagogy, or the ways schools relate to the children's culture and community. In fact, she defines these kinds of reforms as the problem. (Granted, no one would argue that all the reforms offered were serious or sensible.) Thus we're left with the noble goal of "equal results" minus a practical strategy.

Furthermore, she is not willing to accept either of the "escapes" frequently offered. She does not defend a two-tier system, in which some children are expected to engage in higher-level thinking and others are given an explicitly watered-down curriculum or pushed out altogether. Nor does she accept the position put forth by such critics as Christopher Jencks and Lester Thurow—that schools were never a sensible vehicle for achieving equality, if we define equality in terms of an eventual fairer distribution of income. And there is considerable evidence that, at least for those previously denied access, a lessening of the wage gap was a major goal of their support for educational equality. The two were assumed to go together. Ravitch rejects a consideration of this whole question since "Americans had long ago decided, without much discussion . . . that education would be the best vehicle through which to change society." But maybe a little discussion *would* be healthy? If the connection

between schools and society is more complex than the public has acknowledged and conventional rhetoric encourages, then schools will continue to bear the brunt of *unexamined*, perhaps mistaken, expectations.

Despite all of this, Ravitch doesn't raise an eyebrow at the demand that schools create equal results. She's for it. She contends that it was made difficult to attain during the 1960s largely by the understandable but unfortunate oversensitivity of black militants to looking at their own family structure, and the poor judgment of well-meaning romantics and ideological rebels.¹

Ravitch acknowledges the existence of a persistent, age-old "democratic dilemma." The traditionalists with whom she most sympathizes—Robert Hutchins, Arthur Bestor, Paul Woodring—had trouble translating their ideals into forms applicable to mass education. In fact, she admits, they "failed to confront the question at all." Such a failure is of more than passing interest in light of the fact that it was the main concern of those misguided "reformers and romantics," as well as a key to the mandate Ravitch accepts: to teach all with more or less equal success, in a manner that meets elite standards.

She willingly confronts the dilemma: it just turns out not to be so complex. More homework, tougher grading, fewer electives, and more tests: "toughness" and "rigor" will apparently do the trick. Whatever the merits of these perennial favorites, they hardly seem responsive to an age-old "democratic dilemma." Does she imagine that Hutchins, Bestor, et al. hadn't the wit to think of these cures also?

Writers about schools get away with such pitifully superficial palliatives—worthy of TV talk shows—so long as they operate on a level of rhetoric and abstraction that removes them from confronting the classroom day by day.

The best conceived curriculum cannot be tested in the abstract. The university specialists who designed "new math" in the late '50s learned this the hard way. Somewhere, sometime, one must investigate what happens as teachers and children pursue an actual curriculum. Not Ravitch. The most famous contemporary observer of children's efforts to learn, Jean Piaget, makes it into her book just once, to

score a point against a popularizer of open education. Ravitch has left the whole area of classroom experience and children's learning almost untouched. Not perhaps out of lack of sympathy (she tells us she sympathizes). Just lack of knowledge?

In the only section in which she tries to look at classrooms, she manages to thoroughly distort some important potential sources. *Thirty-Six Children*, by Herbert Kohl, is *not* a description of how he replaced the "prescribed curriculum" (tough?) with one that "encouraged children to express themselves through creative writing" (easy?). Kohl, in fact, describes an effort to build a rigorous sixth-grade curriculum around mythology, which included having children do a great deal of writing. James Herndon did *not* write about his "triumphs over his principals, the other teachers, and the system." Herndon's books are models, in fact, of collegial compassion. He reports with sensitivity and some amusement how his often ornery pupils dealt with his innovations, and he acknowledges having had minimal success in changing anything. John Holt's *How Children Fail* did *not* describe schools "that crush the joy of learning." That book was about both his favorite school and his favorite teacher. It was not joy but children's strategies to avoid learning that concerned him and that he carefully described.

The popularity of these books lay in their capacity to evoke scenes teachers recognized, while also provoking them to think more deeply about their meaning. We had seen these students in our classes. (We'd also seen students like some of those described.) We'd been similarly confused, outfoxed, and embarrassed. We knew that even if we shared the classic ideals of Robert Hutchins, we were unable to translate them into practice because of the conditions of our job, the situation of our students, the nature of the school, or our own inadequate knowledge about teaching and learning. As for the platitudes—we knew them only too well.

Unlike many writers who described schools, Kohl, Holt, and Herndon understood that real children needed breakfast and lunch, even if that seemed downright nonintellectual; that parents and children who felt humiliated or disrespected (for reasons that often baffled us)

could make our lives miserable; that real children got restless and bored even when we thought we were being clear and inspiring, felt intimidated even when we thought we were being understanding. It wasn't, to paraphrase Herndon, "the way it was supposed to be."

On Cognitive Goals and School Limits

IF EDUCATION is to serve democracy, says Ravitch, schools must accept a more limited function. Schools failed, she claims, whenever "their leaders and their public alike had forgotten their real limitations as well as their real strengths."

The appropriate "limited" goal is variously described by Ravitch as "cognitive," "academic," and "intellectual." The three terms have separate histories of use and meaning that are themselves revealing. And none of them leads inexorably to any particular set of curricula or pedagogical practices. They don't even set obvious "limits," since many of the practices Ravitch proceeds to criticize were justified on strictly "cognitive" grounds.

Two of the critics of progressive education whom Ravitch invokes on behalf of these limited goals are Robert Hutchins and historian Arthur Bestor. Bestor's attack on the mushy-minded establishment progressives appeared in the mid-'50s. He made a passionate appeal for a system of mass education aimed at teaching "the power to think." Hutchins asked for even more. "Our mission . . . is to change our environment, not to adjust ourselves to it," he declared in an attack on the conservatism of the '50s school establishment. America, said Bestor, does not need a program that "substitutes 'life needs'" for the disciplines of science, math, history, and foreign languages: "children do not need schools to learn how to blow their noses and button their pants."

Ravitch, like Bestor, forgets that "socialization" and "life needs" were not invented by progressives. Consider the stated goals of 19th- and 20th-century schools aimed (as historian Ravitch is well aware) at lower-class and immigrant pupils whose manners and behavior needed "Americanizing." Even the most conservative prep school emphasizes a version of "life needs"—only there it's called "character-

building." Learning to be a good sport, a team member, a leader, and a "gentleman" has always occupied a prominent place in schools to which elites send their young. If Bestor wanted the masses "furnished with the strengths that had made the old ruling classes great and powerful," perhaps these nonacademic concerns needed to be duplicated too.

In fact, to call for a solely "academic" focus is far from traditional and may only be a way of side-stepping critical questions. There is an inevitable "hidden agenda" of "life needs" implicit in any choice of courses and manner of delivery. The real issue is how and which "life needs" are implemented.

Ravitch's dismissal of such concerns leads one to wonder if it is really Hutchins's and Bestor's call for renewed intellectual content that she is championing when she calls for "limits." Is it the traditional "academy," previously offered only to the elite, that she has in mind for the masses?

Ravitch's treatment of the preschool program Head Start is an important case in point. She chides Head Start for accepting an early-childhood approach in which "cognitive goals were no more important and often less important than social, medical, and psychological services, nutrition, adult career development, and parent involvement." Head Start's failure is blamed on an unwillingness to establish limited "cognitive" goals. To make this point, Ravitch ignores the plethora of studies that indicate Head Start succeeded in precisely those long-range academic goals that she favors.⁶

More troubling, however, are the implications of Ravitch's critique of Head Start's intellectual/cognitive curriculum. We know what she thinks Head Start should not have been. But what *would* a "cognitively oriented" program for three- and four-year-olds be like? Even Bestor, after all, might not reject helping infants "blow their noses and button their pants." But Ravitch would exclude not only a child's health, nutrition, and improved family life, but also "free play and permissive adult-child relations" typical of middle-class nursery schools. What she wants is "structured learning." But learning what, and structured how? Isn't there a point where she must tell us?

Are the classrooms in which four-year-olds fill in workbooks more "cognitive" than those in which children work with sand, soil, animals, and blocks? Is a classroom organized around well-planned social and individual activity less structured than a room in which a teacher directs children on how to fill in their ditto sheets? Is instruction on verbal "concepts" such as over/under, the alphabet, and the names of the basic colors what Bestor meant by teaching "the power to think"? In accordance with the current demand for "rigor," many infant programs have abandoned both a concern for the family *and* all subject matter, replacing it in the name of "cognition" -- with isolated verbal skills taught in a vacuum of intellectual content. Is this the kind of elite academy Ravitch is offering the masses? (Would she have middle-class nurseries also abandon their traditional priorities?)

Lurking behind this apparently clear classification system of what's "cognitive" and what isn't, there are several unexamined assumptions that may have nothing in common with the broad love of culture and the study of human achievements that Bestor and Hutchins were defending. "Easy and nonverbal electives" may make a handy target (they're apparently bad even for preschoolers). But while their opposite --tough, verbal, and required-- may sound inspiring, it hides a sleight of hand.

The new common wisdom on behalf of "tough, verbal, and required" masks widely *divergent* agendas. Neither "the power to think" nor the knowledge and skill needed "to change our environment" is synonymous with such criteria.

Ravitch perceptively notes, in another connection, that "those who see the school as the leading edge of social change believe they can shape the values of children in ways that are broader, more humane, and more liberated than those of their parents." She chides them for failing to recognize that parents and community might be "appalled by the arrogance of educational theorists who presume to impose their values on other people's children." But not only progressives "impose" their values on other people's children. So do proponents of "high" culture and a more rigorous liberal-arts curriculum, whether they are progressives or

traditionalists, Dewey or Hutchins—or Ravitch.

POLLSTERS REGULARLY REMIND US that most parents, while deplored "current standards," have always been and remain remarkably satisfied with the curriculum.⁷ When dissatisfaction is expressed, few favor more liberal arts. More vocational preparation to enhance their children's job prospects tops the list of recommendations. Shall we tell them these are "noncognitive" and thus taboo? Shall we be elitists and "impose" our values? Or shall we slip the liberal arts in under misleading arguments for "toughness" and hope "they" won't notice?

Ravitch is not alone in questioning whether we are best served by letting children "choose what they want . . . if they want . . ." But the difficulty is that there is more than one other choice. And "seeing that each and every one . . . receives a liberal education" is by no means the unanimous choice of those who are backing "rigor." In the name of "getting tough," Texas is now considering dividing children in the sixth grade into vocational, general, and elite tracks. Even if equally tough on all, it is not equally "liberal."

Texas is not alone. Many of the same corporations offering us their renewed commitment to schools are also advocating an earlier focus on career education, with an avowed interest in inculcating better "work habits and attitudes." Granted, young people are probably interested in and need to know about the "world of work" and how to deal with it. But a whole program designed around vocational skills is, needless to say, not often offered to those who can handle the academic/intellectual curriculum. Nor, in courses designed to introduce students to work, are intellectual and cognitive issues raised about the "real world" that might demystify the workings of our economy or suggest to students the possibility that human beings might alter current work relationships or employment patterns. In fact, the National and State Commission reports are blunt about the appropriate ideology of career education.⁸

That Ravitch ignores this development, often welcomed by hard-pressed parents desperate for some kind of job future for their children, is an inexcusable instance of her careless

bias. The young people who seek vocational schools—some of them find there the first meaningful contact with both subject matter and teachers—are vulnerable to the “life needs” rhetoric of the corporations. Why doesn’t Ravitch take on these powerful institutions in the way she takes on the “life needs” progressives?

To Ravitch it seems self-evident why ignorance about ancient civilizations or algebra is more dangerous to the future of democracy than ignorance about how to repair your automobile or ignorance about sex (two particular targets of her essays). It doesn’t rest on which is “harder,” which is “required,” or whether the subject is presented “verbally.” We’ve all known courses on ancient Greece that were easy and used audiovisuals. And we could certainly devise an automotive course meeting her three criteria—tough, verbal, and required.

THOSE OF US who want to perpetuate the liberal arts can rest our case on the power to impose and intimidate—or we can develop a reasoned argument aimed not merely against certain anti-intellectual critics of the left but at persuading the broader public of the liberal arts’ value.

The liberal arts require a coherent defense. The nature of that defense will help us understand both why and how they should be taught. If we fail to provide a defense, we are implicitly abandoning Jefferson’s “crusade.” The particulars that go into creating the ideal “well-educated” citizen are not sacred nor historically frozen: they too are subject to democratic debate. To advance the claims for a liberal education one must risk looking at its history, risk acknowledging that there may be various paths to “cognition” and “intelligence,” and that knowledge can never be entirely separated from the setting in which we learn it or the way in which it is taught.

“Is the traditional high-status curriculum valued by society *only* for social/historical reasons,” asks English author and critic Gabriel Chanan in an attempt to defend the liberal arts, “or does it have intrinsic qualities connected with the mastery of reality?”¹⁰ If the function of the traditional curricula is to provide a “mastery of reality,” various choices

could, after all, exist. One criterion in looking at choices, *from a democratic viewpoint*, is whether their mastery helps us not only in the exercise of power but also in the capacity to criticize power effectively.

The importance of “abstraction, writteness, and so on”—features common to traditional liberal-arts programs—may be attributable to “the particular history associated with dominant social groups, or it may be attributable to nothing more mysterious than that many middle-class jobs have an administrative, centralizing element.” Or, Chanan suggests, it may be essential also to the exercise of the social and political power needed to change the world.

Chanan wants to defend, not just impose, “the educational value placed upon abstraction and writteness . . . even though it also has a fetishistic element.” He suggests, furthermore, that a liberal-arts curriculum focused on “formal culture” need not be posed as an “alternative” to all other curricula. To do so “is to present an ultimatum: either you renounce your native identity and world views or you cannot have access to our special resources.” For Chanan, the heart of the “democratic dilemma” is how to make the “formal culture” accessible to all without requiring a renunciation of a student’s own culture.¹¹ Schools, Chanan proposes, can offer a “unified” approach without leading to a uniform one. The liberal arts might thus even become a source of pleasure, not merely an unpleasant duty.

David Hargreaves, another English critic, in grappling with the same set of problems on a more empirical level, recognizes the centrality of the issue of “honor” and “dignity” as it relates to social class and school failure. He comes up with a somewhat different solution.¹² Yet neither Chanan nor Hargreaves has solved this dilemma. What is required is experimentation in the real schools, and the time and patience to observe and modify. In the process, more than one solution may be adopted in different places. But both Chanan and Hargreaves are asking the kind of questions that Ravitch fails even to recognize.

What we are not required to do in order to prove our devotion to the liberal arts is reflexively mimic a particular 19th-century curriculum and the pedagogic style that went with it.

The debate is not between “permissive progressives” and the advocates of a liberal-arts education, nor between “life needs” and “cognition.” And surely the new holy trinity, “verbal, tough, and required,” provides an insufficient if not downright intellectually dishonest criterion for measuring what’s worthy of inclusion. Yes, of course, there are “limits,” but Ravitch’s approach is more likely to lead to different limits for different kids; and we’ve been *there* before.¹²

IN HER 320 PAGES ON SCHOOLS since World War II Ravitch offers *not a word* about the massive introduction of standardized tests and standardized curriculum programs tailored to them. Since 1945 there has been a virtual revolution in the use of tests, test-oriented pedagogies, and test-related technologies. The recent revival in several states of the 19th-century notion of “payment by result”—by which schools would get financially rewarded for producing higher student test scores—offers a glimpse of where we might be headed.

As a consequence there has been a shift in decision-making from the classroom to the program experts who design the new teaching/testing programs and also determine what are acceptable measures of success. The removal of parents, and now teachers, from important decision-making roles has serious political consequences for a democratic society. It also affects the meaning of teaching. When teachers lose control over their subject matter, they turn in desperation to method courses. To separate the issue of classroom “management” from the content of the course is to turn pedagogy into a set of gimmicks. It is in the struggle to make a particular subject matter “belong” to the student that pedagogy becomes important; but that requires teachers who “own” their own subject matter, rather than ladling out a prescribed program.

The content of education has also been severely affected by this narrowing of curriculum to what can be quantitatively measured on a multiple-choice test, and then fit into a normal curve. What is left out is everything Hutchins was championing, and what remains is precisely what he derided as “miscellaneous dead facts.”¹³

Moreover, the focus of normative testing has played a major role in the trend toward defining all those in the bottom portion of any particular curve as “deviant,” in need of “special education,” thus justifying the systematic removal of ever larger groups of children who are not “making it” on normative scales. As they are removed from the rolls of “regular” schools we have an illusory feeling that standards have gone up (it’s a bit like neighborhood “gentrification”). But the losers do not disappear, except from our immediate view. The proliferation of “special education” enrollments is partly a triumph. Some kids do need to be provided with special services. But it has also become a way of trying to look more successful by merely redefining our population.

In her preoccupation with the critics on the “left,” Ravitch has not noticed these far more powerful and widely practiced challenges to Arthur Bestor’s belief that “serious intellectual training is not beyond the reach of the masses.”

Underlying many of the apparent contradictions between Ravitch’s professed goals and her analysis are unexamined class biases that run throughout this book as well as through many of the recent reports. The casual repetition of the cliché that the “racial revolution” diverted a promising “pedagogical revolution” and that “the pursuit of excellence” was soon “overshadowed by concern about the needs of the disadvantaged” contains an unexamined assumption: it depends, doesn’t it, upon one’s vantage point?

For those who were teaching in schools in which poor and working-class children spent their time, or for those millions of Americans whose children attended such schools, there was no such conflict. For the first time they saw the possibility that their schools might emerge from out of the shadows, might be exposed to some “excellence.” The implication that we did something for “those” children, at the expense of excellence, is untrue. But more serious, it’s invidious. Regardless of Ravitch’s intentions, it sets the stage for once again abandoning the disadvantaged in the name of “excellence.”

Throwing clichés at old problems is even more popular these days than throwing money

was once supposed to be, and it is even less successful at solving them. The new litany of "toughness" will produce neither excellence nor equality—and surely not both. It won't alter the connection between social class and

school achievement, beat the Russians and Japanese, nor eliminate unemployment. And it certainly won't help beleaguered children or their teachers in their daily struggle with classroom realities.

Notes

¹ *The Troubled Crusade. American Education, 1945-1980*, by Diane Ravitch. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

² If corporations are deeply involved in setting our educational priorities, we might consider how well armed we are for the day when they might conclude, as does conservative economist Warren Robinson, that Americans are dangerously overeducated, and that this is a major factor in the decline of U.S. productivity. Robinson, in an article in *Education Week*, October 5, 1983, p. 24, argues that it's time to return to the old days when all but the very gifted among the needy paid the full cost of their higher education. For the good of the economy, and a happier work force!

³ According to Ravitch, progressive educators rejected the teaching of such traditional subjects as English, math, history, and science. They rejected a daily schedule with time allotted for specific subjects. They rejected tests, and all other forms of competition for grades or rewards. They rejected reliance on textbooks, as well as the domination of the classroom by teachers in terms either of curriculum planning or discipline. Where were the schools that meet this description? Based on her list, it seems hard to think of any place in America where such "progressivism" dominated educational practice. Some progressive ideas—more experiential learning, recognition of individual differences, etc.—were introduced, but they never replaced the traditions described above. And many schools were never exposed to these innovations.

⁴ Ravitch can't decide whether the '60s reforms were a success or not. She refers to the "unqualified success of the social revolution initiated by the Brown decision," a "rising level of educational attainment for the population as a whole," the "continued pre-eminence of research and scholarship" on the university level. Yet she also claims that we've witnessed declining achievement and severely lowered standards. In this respect she echoes the contradictions rampant in all the major reports that also argue both sides of the case—glowing triumphs of American schools and dire emergency straits facing us. Our world status, no less, is at stake! When the time was that "mediocrity" was not predominant remains, as always in this field, a mystery Ravitch can't solve for us.

⁵ Actually, Arthur Bestor did try to confront the problem. Based on an assumption that children varied only in the rate at which they could handle the identical material, he proposed a highly complex reorganization of schools into different tracks, moving through the same body of knowledge at different speeds (not unlike some current notions of "mastery learning"). He thought it would be pretty simple, given his enormous

faith in the efficacy of IQ tests and his limited knowledge about young children.

⁶ Two interesting examples are the Perry Preschool Project carried out by the High Scope Educational Research Foundation—an 18-year study of 123 Head Start students in Ypsilanti—and the Lazar Study sponsored by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The latter, entitled *Lasting Effects After Preschool*, pools 12 investigations of long-term effects and is reported fully in the *New York Teacher*, December 16, 1979.

⁷ See the Annual Gallup Poll, in the September 1983 *Phi Delta Kappan*, on public attitudes toward schools.

⁸ The Task Force on Education for Economic Growth of the Commission of the States advocates the teaching of "basic employment and economic competencies" such as "the ability to engage in interpersonal relationships...cope with the requirements concerning attendance and punctuality," understand "personal economics" and "our basic economic system: profits, revenues, basic laws of supply and demand."

⁹ Gabriel Chanan, "Culture and Equality in Education," *Educational Research*, vol. 8, no. 7, pp. 108-16.

¹⁰ Children do differ enormously, regardless of social class and/or race. They each bring with them their own "culture," an individual way of seeing reality. The culture of schools, with its specific norms, can also make intelligent middle-class children seem inadequate misfits. We all are in the position of the "deviant" in some subjects, having difficulty making sense of material in the way "the teacher" expects. A school that develops ways to communicate greater respect for "deviants" will be doing a service to more than the poor or racial minorities.

¹¹ David Hargreaves, *The Challenge of the Comprehensive School* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982).

¹² Ravitch says nothing about tuition tax credits—a curious omission—and startlingly little about teachers' unions. However, the 20th Century Fund Report, in which Ravitch participated, is fairly explicit in its attack on unions. A "trade union mentality" is blamed for the promulgation of endless bureaucratic paperwork, and unions are held responsible for transforming "what had once been a noble though poorly compensated profession" into a craft concerned with bread and butter issues—money and job security.

The standardized testing rage has even seriously undermined some foolish elite schools: why practice writing if examinations only require a No. 2 pencil in order to fill in pre-coded answer sheets? □