Reviews of Books

Linda Darling-Hammond. *The Flat World & Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2010.

American education has struggled to develop systems for meeting the needs of low-income and minority students. The author begins her book by presenting evidence of how this lack of excellence and equality has manifested itself in schools nationally since the early 1970s. Socioeconomic status, a strong indicator of how successful schools can be since the mid−1960s, is here used to demonstrate some concrete causes effecting instructional programs nationwide to this very day. Resegregation, a concept that many parents turn a blind eye to nationally and locally, is boldly brought to the foreground of the author's analysis of inequity and provides a strong foundation for her subsequent in-depth description of how teacher preparation, teacher efficacy, and access to a high quality curriculum have lead to the state of dysfunction in many American schools.

In this era of accountability, with its increased focus on standards and student achievement, assessment and data-driven decision-making have dominated many conversations being held around reform in America's schools. Despite the fact that key mandates such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and more recently Race To The Top (RTT) were designed to close the achievement gap, the reality has been that English language learners (ELL), students with disabilities, and many of those living in poverty have been negatively affected by systems that reward high-achieving districts (many of which already have access to resources not available in lower-income districts due to their tax base), while punishing those already experiencing the greatest hardship. These reform efforts, which have been focused almost solely on using student test scores as the impetus for change, have many wondering why a more systemic approach, better suited to transforming the already bleak realities faced by at-risk populations in schools today, haven't been considered more appropriate.

The impact these unrealistic reform efforts have had on the profession of teaching has also created a ripple effect on student learning. As merit pay and teacher evaluations based on student test scores become increasingly popular in American schools, strong and experienced teachers are leaving the more vulnerable districts in search of schools where students are already achieving at moderate levels. As a result, many low-income districts that for years have been struggling with teacher retention are desperate and left to hire teachers with little or no proven teaching experience. The results are hardly surprising. Graduation rates in urban schools are down, more urban schools are closing year after year, and teacher morale is at an all-time low as more jobs are cut from these already crowded schools.

The author goes on to discuss how unequal school funding and poor resource allocation are also related to teacher turnover and student achievement outcomes. Here the author challenges the deficit paradigm inherent to many urban schools by presenting evidence that low-income schools and districts receiving equal funding can promote student learning. Unfortunately many advocates of the status quo continue to argue that funding given to low-income schools will be wasted on adults that may mismanage the resources, and/or students that cannot benefit from their appropriation. These prevailing and outwardly biased assump-

tions bring the author's concept of an opportunity gap out into the open. The author presents irrefutable evidence that poor and minority children need equal funding if they're going to have the kind of teachers and conditions that can help them succeed. She also posits that these funding differences are at the root of the resegregation problem here in the United States.

In chapter six the reader is shown more coherent models of education from countries that have reformed and/or managed to maintain their educational system. While American schools (particularly those in urban locations) are unique in that they often receive a greater influx of immigrant and ELL students than other developed nations, it's extremely important for researchers and practitioners to be able to identify and adopt approaches that have met with success abroad. There is ample evidence to suggest that America has fallen behind many other developed nations in math, reading and science, and far too often educators have pointed the finger at someone else within the system instead of seeking out an alternative lens through which to view their own practice.

In the last three chapters the author moves from description to prescription by laying down a framework for improving the profession of teaching by overhauling teacher preparation programs, focusing on equity, and providing a vision for what quality schools look like in the future. The profession of teaching and teacher preparation is analyzed throughout the book and it is here the author provides her most concrete cues for improving the work being done in schools. A strong emphasis is placed on fixing teacher recruitment and retention through extensive training and coursework, mentoring from master teachers, ongoing professional development, leadership development, and equitable compensation. The author also contends that school improvement can be accomplished by creating opportunities to share teacher knowledge and skill to create more widespread expertise. The quality of American teacher candidates varies greatly from state-to-state and when set into the context of other countries and programs nationally that have had success creating more cohesive preparation programs, appears to be in complete disarray.

In chapter eight the author provides a vision for what equitable and excellent schools look like. She goes on to argue that systems can be created to support the learning needs of all students. Key overarching strategies include dismantling inequities that feed the achievement gap, staff development, expanding our notions of curriculum and assessment, and reconfiguring both resource allocation and accountability. One strategy supported by the author is to use inquiry-oriented and project-based learning to promote challenging individualized instruction. The author supports assessment that is performance based and believes that public expectations should be set for projects that appear before teachers, parents, peers, and the community. Another strategy is to redesign schools to provide students with small learning communities that focus on safety and relationships between kids and adults. In this model successful schools help students develop lasting relationships characterized by learning with teachers, peers, parents and the community.

Successful schools have strong teachers and leaders, many of which were prepared by universities in their region and/or those that advocate for progressive teaching strategies. These schools structure their own staff development and allocate significant amounts of time for staff collaboration. The author goes on to present evidence that more responsive and innovative schools are focused on sustaining these practices by joining forces with other schools (successful or otherwise) to promote change on a greater scale. Opportunities for reform were found to result due to a shift from a more hierarchical system, where there is a chain of command, to a more horizontal one where professionals at all levels are held accountable for students success and collaborate with others before making decisions that effect student learning.

The final chapter provides a policy guide for creating excellent schools by working to create meaningful learning goals, equalizing funding, and improving teacher quality. Despite efforts from programs around the nation to improve teacher recruitment and teacher retention in high-need areas, increases in funding for these programs are still needed. The author argues that if schools do not rethink teacher preparation and work to ensure that strong and capable teachers are present in every classroom, some students will continue

to receive a higher quality education than others.

Strengths

The author does a tremendous job throughout the book of highlighting many of the quick-fix approaches to improving education that have fallen flat over the years. Misconceived standards based reform, faulty teacher recruitment strategies, and impersonal approaches to curriculum implementation all receive fair but critical treatment. The author's ability to challenge the status quo and re-direct our attention to more systemic methods of school transformation make this book a useful tool for those outside the profession who may be unfamiliar with how we've gotten to where we are, as well as for researchers and practitioners lacking a more macro-level understanding of the inequities in American education.

She also does a tremendous job of supporting her arguments for equity with clear and appropriate supporting evidence from schools and teacher preparation programs nationally and globally. This global piece is often missing from educational research here in the United States and as a result, practitioners in struggling schools have often been left with little else but personal inclination or externally derived and often times ill fitted models in their quest to develop their instructional programs (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2008). The brilliant part of this book is that the author is able to present disparities in spending at a state, national, and even global level as it relates to specific problems being experienced by educators in schools everywhere today.

For example, New York State has a relatively large budget per student compared with other states and other countries. Despite this schools locally have demonstrated little improvement since multi-billion dollar federal mandates such as NCLB and RTT arrived to transform the educational landscape in 2001 and 2009. Ask any experienced educator why and without having read this book they'll be able to identify many of the shortcomings and even strategies presented by the author. What this book does is hold a magnifying glass up to our systems of spending and teacher preparation in a way that few have been able to on such a large scale. Even though I have invested a considerable amount of time working as a teacher both here in the U. S. and abroad (10 years), and have worked as an educational researcher (3 years), I have just now learned that the U. S. spends only half of its budget on classroom instruction and teachers as compared to 80% in other countries (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Many educators and even non-educators are aware that poor resource allocation and mismanagement are the causes for organizational decline in schools. What our newspapers, and televisions haven't done a good job telling us is about how it's being mismanaged compared to others. Until research like this shines a spotlight on key causes for weaker instruction like the one mentioned above, problems at the local level will never receive the treatment they deserve from those who are in a position to really make a difference.

The real challenge here will be whether or not those in power can take the steps necessary to redesign a school system that has been in place for nearly a century. While a handful of schools have had some success in areas where there has previously been little hope, by deregulating and in a sense abandoning the traditional design, these innovative practices cannot spread unless similar changes are made on a large scale. The policy changes presented by the author at the end of the text are backed by solid evidence from exemplary systems. The growing issue of concern is whether we can realize the urgency and potential of these reforms at a local, state, and national level before we hit rock bottom.

Weaknesses

Thirty years of research have established a clear connection between principal leadership and student achievement (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). Despite this knowledge and the significant role school principals

play in allocating resources, holding students and staff accountable, promoting staff development, and recruiting teachers, the author devotes little energy to including these key players in her vision of equitable schooling. Only briefly in the final chapter does the topic of developing leadership in school receive any kind of prolonged treatment. Here the author opens a rudimentary discussion that begins by placing school leadership second only to teachers' influence in predicting student achievement, continues by illustrating the importance of principal preparation and credentialing, and concludes just a few paragraphs later by saying that there should be federal monies made available to enhance leadership centers where administrators can gather to share best practice.

While I understand that the purpose of this book is to develop a discussion about the field of education focused primarily on how state and federal governments can make schools better, I'm perplexed as to why principals aren't included alongside teachers in her in-depth exploration of why schools do and do not work. In chapter five Darling-Hammond (2010) includes the following passage, but goes no further to explain how principals do this, or the implications doing so might have for other administrators, teachers, and the future of education:

> Pioneering school leaders can develop innovative organizations, engaging curriculum for students, and useful assessments, but most cannot easily withstand short-sighted governmental policies that stand in the way of good practice and require outmoded or inefficient approaches (p. 162).

Curiously, examples of principals that have withstood the bureaucracy and pressures from above, and those that have thrived in this era of accountability are omitted from this text. Even though many of the same arguments the author makes for teacher preparation can be transferred to principal preparation, and teachers and even students can be regarded as school leaders in their own right (Hallinger & Heck, 1996), it's important for readers of this text to understand the degree to which teachers, particularly inexperienced teachers, take their cues from school leaders. School leaders are instrumental to developing collaborative, inquiry-oriented systems in schools so that teachers can better communicate and feel comfortable innovating in the classroom (Blase & Blase, 2004).

There is also evidence that suggests principals can exert direct and powerful effects on student achievement by using their leadership time to engage in what students identify as high influence behaviors (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007). While the author does a good job of re-focusing our attention on models of teaching and teacher preparation that have worked in the U. S. and abroad, I think it's important to note that throughout the text students, and their perspectives about what works in schools, are largely ignored as something that can help diminish the opportunity gap. While some might argue that student learning should be the focus of reform efforts for schools and not students thoughts and feelings, I agree, but ask who is better able to tell us about what impacts student learning than the students themselves?

The author does approach the topic in chapter two, where high school dropouts from dysfunctional learning environments are given opportunities to talk about how they were alienated from their education. This author goes on to provide the reader with some evidence that students perspectives often align with educational research, but goes right back into emphasizing the importance of strong teaching as the cure-all for creating successful schools. There is evidence that when adults really listen to what students have to say about their learning, and meaningfully use student voice to shape their experiences of school, students can be empowered as learners (Warner, 2010). What's more, when students grow in confidence and skill, teachers have an easier time in the classroom. Students that are made partners in the learning process are more willing to work with teachers and become involved in school. None of this however is discussed as it hardly relates to the author's core-arguments that money matters, and mismanagement and poor teacher preparation lie at the source of inequity.

For years now researchers and practitioners have looked to other adults to try to solve the problems kids are having in school. This has been problematic here in the United States where we have a predominantly

white middle class educational workforce trying to meet the needs of a student body that is becoming more diverse annually (Achinstein et al., 2010). An alternative to adults' perspectives and conversations about capital, (which we certainly have enough of when it comes to schooling in America), might be to look at our often overlooked and undervalued consumers of education. There have been few businesses or organizations that have so neglected to analyze what the client (in our case students) might have to say about the product and product delivery.

Alternatives

The author is very persuasive in her argument for shaking up the way people think about the field of education. Without adequate teacher preparation, new strategies for assessment, school redesign, and resource allocation, schools will continue to struggle. However, in this very systemic analysis I believe there is little that actual teachers can point to in order to reform their practice. The author addresses incompetent teaching as a symptom that needs to be treated. The author also talks about developing systems for overhauling the profession of teaching by developing systems for professional development, allocating time, and providing support for collaboration.

The book was written for an audience that has had little to do with improving education at a local level, and while I believe that policy-makers can stand to benefit from the author's roadmap to success, it is most useful for enlightening those who have been left in the dark. The people that are actually doing the work of leading, teaching, and learning are given little in the way of advice about how to develop their practice. As a result, practitioners that pick up this book may be left with only an assurance that someone else understands with they're going through, or a heightened sense of frustration when they learn how deep in the system these problems are rooted. I would include parents in this group of practitioners (as would many teachers, administrators, and students). While a few parents may pick up this text and become more insightful about the state of education, they're also largely excluded, or ignored as proponents of change.[1]

Chapter eight comes the closest to providing guidelines for improving administrative function in the field. While its focus is still tied to teacher preparation, it manages to provide a number of examples of how practitioners can improve the work being done in schools. Most educational researchers have a specific strength, or strand of expertise that permeates their exploration of a number of research topics. This author has proven her self to be an expert in academic restructuring, teacher development, and urban education for nearly thirty years, and naturally uses this expertise to develop an effective an argument about how to remedy the system.

As a long-time educator, I naturally tie my discussions about school reform to areas where I have found success as a teacher. Policy makers and those in a position to impact reform on a large scale need to see works like Darling-Hammond's to understand what can be done to impact learning in the classroom from the outside. However, I also think there needs to be evidence provided that large scale change can be made possible without looking to resources as a cure-all. This isn't to say that resources shouldn't be distributed evenly, or that they can't help solve some major problems in impoverished areas. I'm simply trying to demonstrate that when adults develop mechanisms for ensuring that student voice and participation are central to decision making practices in school, and build their educational contexts around the idea of listening to students, new theories can emerge to transform the work being done in schools (Cook-Sather,

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1 For example, the problem of resegregation raised by the author throughout the text, could be largely remedied if parents, particularly white parents and those from the middle class, could see the value in educating their children where they work and live, instead of fleeing for a homogenized education devoid of any opportunity to interact with the real world. If the author could emphasize what this does to their children in the long run, or to the system itself, they might think twice about uprooting for higher ground.

2010; Elden & Levin, 1991).

An alternative discussion might be to present how successful systems nationally and globally have produced new theories based on different groups of children, and how these theories have been tested through collective action with students. Educational reform roadmaps that call for more participatory approaches will not only help enlighten those interested in getting to the bottom of the educational crisis, it will be action relevant for those members of the community that have the greatest bearing on student learning. For too long students, who are without a doubt the insider's when it comes to education and student learning, have been left outside of discussions by adult practitioners who have developed agendas based on their own educational backgrounds, and researchers that have attempted to invoke their own agendas, identities, and memories on the work being done with kids (Biklen, 2004). A more balanced approach to presenting the inequities faced by many American schools, would be to actively involve the teachers, principals, students and parents that continue to deal with these inequities, in a more hands-on way.

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