

### **Book Review**

**A Review of Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. NY: Teachers College Press.**

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### **The Flat World and Education: A Review**

According to the National Association for Multicultural Education (2003), the aims of multicultural education are to resist oppression, respect cultural differences, teach the stories and perspectives from the diverse range of human experiences, and seek equity because their morality demands it. Commitment to the mission of multicultural education rests at the heart of Linda Darling-Hammond's *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine our Future*. Her work is a broad examination of American multicultural education in a global context. Her conclusions tie the moral obligations at the root multicultural education to the decline of American competitiveness. For Darling-Hammond, addressing the inequities in the American education system is more than just the right thing to do, it is an economic imperative. Her exploration, spurred on by Friedman's (2005) assertion that the twenty-first century has witnessed the dawning of unprecedented international economic competition, juxtaposes descriptions of broken and inequitable American educational institutions with case studies of practices from equitable policies from school systems around the United States and in diverse, high-achieving nations. Darling-Hammond asserts that America's destiny rests on its ability to make the same capital and intellectual investments in the education of minority culture groups as it does for white and affluent children.

### **Exploring Global Contexts: Darling-Hammond on Equitable Education Policy**

Linda Darling-Hammond's *The Flat World and Education* is a call to action targeting American education policy makers. Her premise extends Friedman's (2005) contention that the wide disparities in resources and influence that existed among powerful and weak nations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century are rapidly closing. Darling-Hammond contends that this is especially true for education, where American policy is inherently flawed. The most pronounced faults include inequitable access to resources among various populations of American students, a system of punishment and reward for schools and teachers that bears little relevance to improving instruction, and the absence of a cohesive national policy for preparing quality teachers. These elements conspire to undermine American achievement and create vast achievement gaps among racial, cultural, and socio-economic groups in the United States.

### **A new audience for the multicultural message.**

Darling-Hammond begins by outlining student achievement data comparing American children to students from other high-achieving nations. Her depiction suggests American students are rapidly losing ground, a source of alarm for liberals and conservatives alike. She examines this problem under a microscope by paralleling the stagnation of the American educational system with the success enjoyed by Finland, Singapore and South Korea. According to Darling-Hammond, these three nations invested in their children's' education by building systems that ensure all of their children had equitable access to quality instruction.

After describing how far American students have fallen behind, a point agreed on by both liberals and conservatives, Darling-Hammond clarifies the policy solutions that have been proposed to solve this problem. She explains that most conservative educational policy groups believe the problem can be addressed by deregulating education policy, doubling down on punishments and rewards doled out to schools based on their standardized test performance, and making it easier for talented individuals to enter the teaching profession. Darling-Hammond disagrees with this position. For her, the chief problem is a truculent refusal by American education leadership to commit to addressing the wide disparity in resources invested in poor and minority students versus more affluent white American children. Darling-Hammond believes that this inequitable policy is unsustainable. She argues, "We can ill afford to maintain the structural inequalities in access to knowledge and resources that produce persistent and profound barriers to educational opportunity for large numbers of our citizens" (p. 25). Where many authors of multicultural texts root their arguments in morality and social justice (Banks, 2007; Kozol, 2005; Sleeter, 1996), Darling-Hammond expands this plea to a wider audience, including conservatives, by explaining the destructive effects of inequitable education policy on American economic competitiveness.

### **The origins of inequity.**

Darling-Hammond argues that structural inequities in the American education system cause the wide disparity in achievement among wealthy, poor, black, and white American children. She suggests the persistence of the myths of a "culture of poverty" and "inadequate genes" among poor and minority children (p. 30) are used as excuses by policy makers to defend their refusal to provide resources to poor or minority children. According to Darling-Hammond, white and affluent children are much more likely to receive adequate program funding, access to quality instruction from well-trained teachers, and a curriculum that promotes critical thinking. At the same time, many of America's most vulnerable children languish in crumbling school buildings, receiving stale instruction from dispassionate teachers aimed at allowing them to meet proficiency on uninspired multiple-choice standardized assessments. Darling-Hammond suggests racial re-segregation, as well as a reticence by many school systems to abandon the 20<sup>th</sup> century factory model of instruction, are also causes of the achievement gap.

### **Solutions for Solving Educational Inequity**

Darling-Hammond argues that increasing America's supply of quality teachers is an important first step in addressing structural inequity in the American education system. She upends over-simplified solutions like merit pay. According to Darling-Hammond, "this approach does not offer a strategy to ensure that teachers will have opportunities to gain the knowledge and skills they need to be effective, nor that all schools will have access to entice and hire the best teachers" (p. 195). She suggests that the United States should follow the lead of the world's high achieving by investing in teacher education.

Darling-Hammond's proposed changes include increasing the rigor and selectivity of pre-service university training. She also suggests radical revisions to in-service professional development modeled on the practices of high-achieving nations. These practices include enhancing opportunities for organized collaboration among teachers, increasing planning time, implementing improved systems for in-service teacher development, and affording more opportunities for teachers to explore new pedagogical methods and to conduct research. To this end, Darling-Hammond advocates for long-term apprenticeships for pre-service teachers under specially trained and vetted in-service teachers, the creation of professional development schools, and increasing the prominence of teacher performance incentives. For each of these proposed solutions, Darling-Hammond argues the need for national leadership to ensure cohesive and unified improvements to teacher quality across the United States.

#### **Policy reforms.**

Darling-Hammond's work is wide in scope and she proposes a suite of reforms aimed at addressing institutional inequities. The results are often complicated, but nuanced. Her stance on achievement testing offers an excellent case-in-point. She explains that the wave of standardized testing that followed NCLB reform made improvements for some students by introducing academic standards-based reform. She is particularly complimentary of the NCLB mandate to isolate and draw attention to achievement gaps among socioeconomic classes and races by forcing schools to chart and report their scores independently. She also offers praise for elements of NCLB that forced schools to ensure that their teachers meet minimum qualifying criteria to work in schools. However, she critiques elements of NCLB policy that fail to promote social equity. Her strongest criticisms of the policy include the absence of student performances as indicators of achievement, the narrowing of the curriculum experienced by many students as schools attempt to meet rigid guidelines, and the emphasis on punishing schools and students rather than using achievement data to target investments.

Darling-Hammond takes similarly sophisticated positions in other contentious education debates throughout her work. The changes to teacher preparation and in-service development she proposes challenge the positions of small-government conservatives, who might decry the expansive role played by the federal government, as well as local teacher unions, whose contracts frequently make the types of reforms advocated by Darling-Hammond impossible. She makes controversial, but reasoned and well-supported, appeals to limit class and school sizes, enhance collaboration

among teachers, increase the rigor of work assigned to students by shrinking standards and encouraging more complex and deep explorations of concepts, allow individual schools more autonomy to innovate, and allow parents more choice in deciding which schools their children attend.

### Conclusion

Darling-Hammond rejects the residual racism that drives America's current inequitable policies and tolerates the wide disparities in the resources committed to rich, poor, white, and minority children. While deriding President W. Bush's call to end the "soft bigotry of low expectations" during the debates over No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy, Darling-Hammond critiques, "No comparable complaint was registered about the hard bigotry of egregiously poor education, which has allowed students to be victimized by both the lack of resources devoted to their learning and the denial of a diploma that would open up productive options after high school" (p. 78).

Darling-Hammond's ability to cross ideological boundaries in each debate indicate her willingness to let her arguments follow the evidence. The result is a book that outlines a cohesive set of policies aimed at resisting inequity. Darling-Hammond rejects the covert bias and racism that rests under the surface of some arguments made in debates over the causes of the achievement gap that separates white, minority, and poor American children. Instead, she argues that American education policy creates an opportunity gap that separates these groups. For Darling-Hammond it is the wide disparity in the resources committed to each group that explains the differences in achievement among groups of American children. Her work suggests that addressing these inequities is both a moral and economic imperative for the United States.

### References

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