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Paul Shaker
Simon Fraser University

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RESPONSE TO BOOK REVIEW

Author Paul Shaker Responds to the Video Review of his Book, *Reclaiming Education for Democracy*

Thank you and specifically the reviewers for your close attention to our book, *Reclaiming Education for Democracy: Thinking Beyond No Child Left Behind (RED)* (Shaker & Heilman, 2008), and for the fair and sensitive reading that you gave the book. As you can imagine, such academic attention is deeply gratifying. I have been invited to respond to the video review in print and I choose to do so in an informal manner, without footnotes, and by giving my individual reaction. At the same time I wish to acknowledge my co-author, Professor Elizabeth E. Heilman, of Michigan State University.

Purpose and Audience

The reviewers ask about the purposes and audience for the book and about the book they were looking for as they entered into their joint reading. The book's highest purpose would be to motivate educators like themselves to reflect on the conditions of U.S. education and to be better equipped and energized to take action in the best traditions of our profession. From watching the reviewers' reaction to the book, I would say that goal was met. In my opinion, we need to see the scope and ideology of the forces influencing U.S. education since *A Nation at Risk* (1983) if we are to *reclaim* education, not as an economic good, but as a public good in our democracy. We need to know the complexity of the forces acting against our concept of public schooling, and we must grasp what the core values and techniques of those forces are. Without this type of knowledge we are unlikely to organize an effective challenge to the "new commonsense of education."

The origin of the book for me was my reading of Diane Ravitch's *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform* (2000). I thought this book was an extremely unfair and inaccurate attack on John Dewey and his version of Progressive Education. Also, I did not think the book was authentic. That is, it read to me like a commissioned project, a book written to defame a hero of American democracy by an author who knew better. In fact, the book closes with what is in my view an apology by the author. Chapter 7 of *RED* details my argument. Dr. Ravitch's celebrated "return" to the mainstream of educators in the past several years supports my analysis.

I was so motivated by what I considered a "hatchet job" on one of our greatest Americans, who contributed both in politics and academia, that I reviewed *Left Back* for *The Journal of Curriculum Studies* (2004) and began the additional research that eventually led to "The New Common Sense of Education: Advocacy Research vs. Academic Authority," a co-authored piece in *Teachers College Record* (with Elizabeth Heilman, 2004) and, ultimately, to *RED*. Given these origins, I acknowledge the reviewers' observation that *RED* often has a confrontational tone and can be read as "dichotomizing." Other reviewers have pointed this out. My response is that there is a place for confrontation on the way to ultimate understanding and reconciliation. (The reviewers speak of agency, voice and place along these lines.) *RED* is written in part to inform and in part to motivate. My analysis was that educators, while passive, were being pushed from effective practice of their own profession. I thought we needed to more clearly understand the nature of the conflict we were in and we needed to begin aggressively asserting ourselves in the halls of power.

Such action would necessarily be in the political sphere, which does not operate according to the values we aspire to in our classrooms and organizations. In politics and media at the present time we cannot, in general, present ourselves as kind mentors. We are perceived as merely another interest group, with no moral protection. We, therefore, have to equip ourselves with the knowledge and techniques that prevail in these worlds. None of this is to say that we should lose the tolerant, humane, and accepting attitudes we bring to our students in our classrooms. Once we find a place in the public forum, we may be able to present ourselves effectively in such authentic ways.

I feel this tension in the reviewers' response to *RED*. When the book is confrontational, they are discomfited by its tone. On the other hand, their conclusions about *RED* suggest that some of my aspirations are realized in them as readers. That is, they understand the challenge educators find themselves up against and they are motivated to *reclaim* the perquisites we should have as educators in a democratic society.

Heart and Passion

One of the reviewers' recurring themes is to speculate on the book they wished *RED* would be, or the book they wanted

RED to be. As an author this is a most provocative line of discussion, full of potential for reflection and another book! As I understand the reviewers', the book they were looking for would be more full of "heart and passion," less "dry and academic," less dichotomizing, more descriptive of how to live a democratic life in classrooms, an "Obama version" of *RED*.

My first response is to say that *RED* is aimed at helping us secure the possibility of realizing our vision of education. Unless we as educators are more effective politically and in media terms, our aspirations are irrelevant. *RED* is primarily focused on defining the challenge we face and motivating us to assert ourselves. In my view our professional house is burning and we need to put the fire out. For this reason, as the reviewers point out, the majority of the book lays out the conflict we are in, and only the closing chapters focus on a vision of the future. This is the design of the book: the third of the three sections is "Visions for Change."

Secondly, as regards those closing chapters, in my part of the writing, I did try to lay out what contemporary public education could be, and in somewhat specific terms. See, for example, the list of fifteen attributes of "a good school" that concludes Chapter 8. This is excerpted from "Public Schools as Public Good," a co-authored article (with Prof. Peter Grimmett) in *Education Canada*. Additionally, I suggest the reader look for allusions to the psychology of C. G. Jung, which is a theoretical foundation of *RED*. Through the lens of Jung's *analytic psychology*, holistic, humanistic themes are introduced throughout the book. These point to non-material or spiritual values that are fundamental to the emerging, democratic schools we hope for. An example would be Chapter 4's "A Matrix of Movements" section, which examines spiritual groupings along two axes: mythos/logos and individual/collective. My work since *RED* has focused on the spiritual elements of education (as you can see in [my *Journal of Educational Controversy* article in this issue](#)), but *RED* is a prior work that is aimed at making the schools safe for these transcendent values.

Conclusion

As I have written here, it is a gift to have careful reviewers respond to *RED*. I can learn and grow from their reactions. When I listen to them as readers of *RED* I am particularly heartened because I see the primary purposes of the book realized. That is, this audience of three was motivated to have a reflective discussion about the political and media conditions affecting public education. They surfaced their own central ideas and values about what democratic education should be, including the importance of community. Ultimately, with *RED* as one small part of their background, they are more likely to act on society in an informed and effective way.

Reclaiming Education for Democracy may not be the book they wished they had read, but if I am correct about its effect on these readers, *RED* helps make America welcoming of that book and the reclaiming of public education that it would portend.

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