Doomed to Fail: The Built-In Defects of American Education
by Paul A. Zoch


As reviewed by Diane Ravitch

Paul Zoch manages to achieve what some might have thought impossible in the opening words of his new book, *Doomed to Fail*: he criticizes the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (Chester E. Finn Jr.) and the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (Linda Darling-Hammond) for committing the same error. Although these two institutions are usually seen as antagonists, both, he says, blame teachers when students do not learn. Zoch lumps together the Fordham Foundation report “Better Teachers, Better Schools” and the National Commission’s “What Matters Most” as reports that assume a direct causal relationship between a teacher’s actions and the students’ learning. Zoch contends that they are both wrong. Students are responsible for their learning, he writes. If they make sufficient effort, pay attention, do their homework, and exercise self-discipline, they will learn.

A high school teacher of the classics for nearly 20 years, Zoch has written a stunning critique of American education. He shows how reform after reform has gone forward with the same assumptions: that students are passive recipients of instruction, that teachers are all-powerful molders of inert student clay, and that students have no responsibility for their own academic success.

Ultimately, Zoch maintains, all education is self-education. The secret of academic success is no different from success in other fields of endeavor, and it involves hard work, the will to succeed, and practice, practice, practice. Yet when students fail or become bored, critics insist that it is the teacher’s fault.

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Zoch shows persuasively and in great detail that progressives derided instruction but never held students accountable for their own learning; it is always the teacher who is to blame if the children aren’t motivated. Consequently, students have come to expect that their teachers must entertain them. As one of Zoch’s students said to him one day, “Maybe if you’d sing and dance, we’d learn this stuff.”

Most of the book is a brilliant recapitulation of the history of American education, written from Zoch’s perspective as a seasoned classroom teacher. He demonstrates convincingly that American education has been deeply influenced by seemingly inconsistent philosophies. His own personal lodestar is William James, the great Harvard psychologist, who understood that the key to individual success is effort: the student who strives and persists in the face of challenge will succeed. James’s message of personal responsibility and willpower, Zoch hastens to point out, is now considered Victorian, old-fashioned, obsolete. Yet he also notes that the students who “live in accordance with old-fashioned principles of effort and will to succeed are the stars of our public schools, the usually unsung heroes who in the future will provide the great brainpower of our country. Such students are actively working to create their own reality and destiny.” Sadly, he observes, students who live by these values learn them at home, not at school, for our public schools today are founded on an ideology diametrically opposed to James’s beliefs.

The current philosophy that dominates American education, Zoch demonstrates, is a strange concoction that has produced our current woeful situation. Behaviorists (James B. Watson, Edward L. Thorndike, and B. F. Skinner) encouraged the view that students were simple, passive, and easily manipulated. According to behaviorist principles, it is no longer “incumbent upon the student to do what is necessary to succeed;” for it is the responsibility of the teacher “to find the right stimulus that will cause a
student to respond as desired.” In the behaviorist worldview, the environment is all, and the student is passive and as helpless as an infant.

Along come John Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, Colonel Francis Parker, G. Stanley Hall, and other progressives, whose philosophies relieved students of responsibility to make the necessary effort to learn unless they wanted to. Like the behaviorists, Dewey saw the classroom environment (created by the teacher) as ultimately determinative of whether students learn. Kilpatrick and other leading progressives thought that if teachers could discover children's natural interests, then learning would be easy and fun. Hall worried that studying hard was actually dangerous to children's health. The possibility that a student might "struggle and strain" to learn something not of his own choosing was foreign to progressive theorists. Indeed, they emphasized the importance of joy, not effort. Zoch shows that progressive dogmas about natural learning are clearly in conflict with the Jamesian philosophy of effort and insists that parents and teachers teach "the will to succeed" by setting clear expectations and demanding effort, not accepting laziness.

The paradox that Zoch highlights is that the American public wants orderly classrooms with high standards, but American parents don't mean it when it comes to their own child. Zoch sagely warns: "Students must learn to create their own success and to succeed despite inimical circumstances, for the simple reason that the circumstances of life will never be optimal.” If we cannot expect students to achieve until every child has a perfect teacher, Zoch warns, we will wait a long time indeed, because the number of such paragons will always be small. We would do students a favor, he says, if we taught them that their success depends on what they do, not on what someone else does for them.

Strange that American education should have evolved according to a philosophy that is fundamentally at odds with the self-reliance that has always been a strong element in American society. It is as though entire communities were to decide that they could improve their football teams by spending millions on professional development for coaches. Zoch's engaging book, if widely read, will introduce an important element that has been missing from most of the talk about school reform: student effort.

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