

Book Review: *Making Sense of School Choice: Politics, Policies, and Practice under Conditions of Cultural Diversity*, by Joel Windle 2015

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This book received not one, but two of TASA's book awards in 2016: the Raewyn Connell Prize for the best first book in Australian Sociology and the Stephen Crook Memorial Prize for the best book in Australian Sociology. The awards are well deserved. This book offers a powerful and systematic critique of the neoliberal policy of school choice that characterises education systems in countries around the world.

School choice policies aim to maximise the educational options open to families, by subsidising private schools, offering various specialised schools and programs in the public system, and by de-zoning public schools, so parents can apply to send their children to a non-local school. In Australia, these policies have been expanding since the 1980s, were substantially boosted by the conservative Howard government (1996-2007), and continue to enjoy widespread support by governments of both mainstream political parties.

Windle's main focus is Australia as 'an extreme case of marketized schooling' (p 1), where 96% of students attend a school that is in competition with others in the same neighbourhood. By international standards, he writes, few Australian students attend schools with a balanced socioeconomic mix. The book also includes plenty of international examples, which show just how widespread the school choice agenda is, but also provide insights into opportunities for challenging it.

Making Sense of School Choice explains the origins of the school choice agenda, which lie essentially in neoliberal economics. Windle details how it was shaped ideologically, by key players such as economist Milton Friedman and the US think tank, the Brookings Institution, and is now part of the 'soft power' of 'neoliberalism as a social imaginary' (p 10).

As with other research on the topic (e.g. OECD 2012; Reay & Ball 1997; Roda & Wells 2013), *Making Sense of School Choice* shows that school choice leads to increased inequality and segregation – economic, academic and ethnic. One of the distinctive contributions of the book is its novel conceptual framework contrasting 'socially restricted' and 'socially exposed' schools. Socially restricted schools are the model for the entire school choice system to follow. These schools, including private, select-entry, charter, high-demand public schools and the like, are able to exercise choice in who they enrol, and as a result, typically boast better than average results. As such they function as a cultural ideal for all schools. However, the majority of schools are 'socially exposed', at the opposite end of the spectrum. Despite the universalistic rhetoric of school choice, Windle argues that in reality, educational autonomy is only for elite populations.

Around the world, the socially restrictive ideal is implicitly understood to be white. Working class and ethnic minority populations have a different standard of schooling imposed on them – this is a ‘racial double standard’ (p 21) with origins in colonial power relations and capitalist relations of production.

Perhaps the richest, most evocative chapters deal with how families engage with school choice, focusing on parents with more and less choice options. This discussion is based on a survey of 666 parents and students, and interviews with families and school staff. For well-resourced middle-class Anglo-Australian families, Windle argues that there is a process of ‘matchmaking’ between schools and students that involves not just academic qualities, but the ‘whole person’, often entailing prestigious musical, artistic and other capacities which are inaccessible to most. For the less well-resourced, school choice is much more about convenience, location, and maintaining continuity between the sociability of home, neighbourhood and school. A Melbourne survey found that only a minority of parents considered more than one high school option, usually the closest public school. Parents who did consider more schools were more likely to be of a high socioeconomic status, non-migrants, and English-speakers, i.e. ‘those with the most resources were more active in school choice’ (p 42). School choice is therefore meaningless or irrelevant for many parents. As such, parents are not the main drivers of marketization.

Next, the book examines school choice from the perspective of schools, showing how provision is differentiated in different market segments. Public schools compete against private and select-entry schools by offering accelerated streams, stronger music and sports programs, and even by abolishing vocational programs in an attempt to appear more academically-focused. But often their success is at the cost of their poorer public school neighbours, whose enrolments decline as a result. In contrast, research in France has shown that cities with less competition between schools also have less socially and ethnically segregated schools.

The book then broadens the focus to international forces that have been advocating curriculum conservatism, from Rupert Murdoch to think tanks and media organisations, who have successfully created ‘a new kind of common sense around schooling’ (p 119). The significance of these forces is evidenced by the French experience. During his 2007 election campaign, President Sarkozy announced he would introduce school choice. However his rhetoric ‘fell flat’ in the absence of any organised public or political reinforcement and the policy was ‘quietly abandoned’ (p 122). In Australia, by contrast, Windle writes, ‘support for school choice is shared across the political spectrum, is heavily promoted by powerful lobby groups (private schools) and think tanks, and is advocated by the wealthy and corporate media in a coordinated manner’ (pp 122-123).

The final chapter addresses how schools may be more equitable via curriculum and pedagogy, examining examples of alternative, community and democratic curriculum reform, including Brazil’s ‘citizen schools’. In the Australian case, Windle argues that

primary schooling offers a superior model for education than secondary schooling, because its curriculum is not developed to separate stronger and weaker students via examinations, and economic outcomes are more distant. As Windle writes, 'primary schools offer a vision of what secondary schooling could potentially look like if it were not so shaped by struggles over access to higher education' (p 57). Ultimately, the book argues, it is the system of credentialing that needs to be reformed, and alternative pathways need to be developed that carry equal weight and value to the current narrow and conservative school curriculum.

My only criticism of the book is its use of the notion of cultural diversity to frame the work. Diversity is included in the book's subtitle and features heavily in Chapter One. The book's first paragraph explains that school choice policies are justified with the argument that schools will be more responsive to cultural diversity. This is a somewhat strange explanation, given that in Australia and elsewhere, school choice is more commonly justified by appeals to schooling quality, supposedly enhanced by competition.

I wondered why 'cultural diversity' was included in the sub-title of the book, because the concept of diversity is not deeply developed. For example, the relationship between ethnicity and educational outcomes is complex. Historically, students from non-English speaking backgrounds were considered under-achievers in the Australian education system. However, the children of some recent migrants tend to be over-achievers, as seen in the dominance of Asian-Australian students in public selective schools in Sydney and Melbourne. The book acknowledges this ethnic polarisation, noting: 'Australia is somewhat unusual in that the highest-performing schools, as well as the lowest-performing ones, have student enrolments greater than 80 percent from language backgrounds other than [English]' (p 18).

Arguably, the book's subtitle is somewhat misleading, as the idea of cultural diversity is not sufficiently conceptually integrated into the overall account of the social consequences of school choice policies. On the basis of the book's evidence alone, inequality and segregation are primarily factors of class-based resources. However, for anyone with an interest in education, social inclusion and social justice, this book offers a profound and important critique of our current system.

References

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