

Book Reviews

Sigal R. Ben-Porath and Michael C. Johanek. *Making Up Our Mind: What School Choice Is Really About*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 208 pp.

In the University of Chicago Press's latest entry in its History and Philosophy of Education series, philosopher Sigal R. Ben-Porath and historian Michael C. Johanek take on school choice, providing a broad conceptual and temporal frame for contemporary debates. Only a sliver of American schoolchildren have the option to attend something called a charter or use something called a voucher. Even when other nonpublic options are counted, schooling in the United States is hardly awash in "privatization." Still, debates about choice, the authors suggest, are both less recent and more fundamental to mass education generally. For Ben-Porath and Johanek, the problem recurs at moments of "design," when a contentious and anxious polity attempts a programmatic answer to an enduring question: "What is the relationship between the aims that society attaches to schooling and the opportunity families have to select the institution where their children would be educated?" (p. 16). While Johanek and Ben-Porath are fully credited as co-authors, the book is split into two parts—with Johanek's historical reflections anchoring part one and Ben-Porath's normative assessment contained in part two.

In part one, Johanek covers American schooling from the colonial era to the twenty-first century, using "choice" as a shorthand for key "moments" when design questions were posed, and where parents and youngsters found their options newly prescribed, expanded, or regulated. Johanek casts Americans on the eve of revolution as unique in their experience of schooling as "an intentional decision" (p. 27). For the early republic and antebellum era, Johanek portrays venture schools and state-chartered private academies as a patchwork of "flexible solutions . . . competing for student interest and resources" (p. 33) alongside the ascendant system of publicly funded common schools. With common schools winning the contest, and state power ultimately compelling attendance, one might declare the design stage concluded at the close of the nineteenth century. But even within American childhood's newly narrowed boundaries, religious pluralism in an age of mass immigration opened the choice question on new terms. In urban America, Catholic education entered as a competitor to the booming public system, enrolling nearly one-third of American schoolchildren in large cities between 1870 and 1930. To the extent

that Catholic schooling achieved success, Johanek argues it was due to its ability to “affirm immigrant identity and agency” (p. 41), its openness to compromises across lines of church and state, and its embrace of public-sector standards of accreditation.

If these episodes remind us that markets, choices, and “design trade-offs” have always been with us, Johanek traces the stakes of today’s choice debates to the “social geography of schooling” (p. 51) built in the middle of the twentieth century. This social geography constrained the dreams that black southern migrants brought to northern cities at the same time as it propelled the dreams that white homeowners brought to the suburbs. Johanek recounts how school administrative tools (enrollment rules, district boundaries, siting priorities, transfer policies, catchment areas) became technologies for the preservation and extension of racial segregation. In the South, segregationists gained infamy for massive resistance to *Brown*, but they also enacted subtler devices, including eventually illegal “freedom of choice” plans and geographic feeder patterns deployed by de facto segregated regimes in the North.

While the courts quashed segregative opt-out schemes, choice gained credibility in the name of integration. At the end of the sixties, twin fears—that white and middle-class families were fleeing from urban centers, and that court-ordered busing would speed the exodus—generated voluntary integration plans. Technical novelties encouraged transfer options and built integrated student bodies where they hadn’t existed. The champion concept, the magnet school, fused a committed integrationism with a passion for curricular specializations and themes. Magnets shared their moment with a zeitgeist for critical experimentalism—efforts to educate, as proponents affirmed, “outside of the official order, critical of its suppositions” (p. 64). Johanek’s assessment is more detached: the postwar US was nothing if not a “republic of consumers” (p. 64), and even critical outsiders found themselves branding, pitching, and shopping for “options”—with assistance from philanthropic foundations, corporate donors, and an expanding federal education state. Alternativism thrived in its less radical forms: parents liked alternatives *of* schooling, not alternatives *to* schooling. By the end of the 1970s, even “no-nonsense” disciplinarians and Christian traditionalists offered themselves as alternatives.

By the 1980s, few free schools or freedom schools remained, but the magnet concept was triumphant, wedding “market incentives” (p. 61) to the imperiled ideals of educational desegregation. But a sense of decline had deepened, bolstered by the negative emphasis of Reagan-era back-to-basics critiques and a growing movement for vouchers. It was in this context that reformers began to run with the

magnetlike notion of “charters”—team-led teaching communities where best practices could be developed under autonomous management.

When the New Democrats took the presidency in the early 1990s, charters became their signature dish, stamping education debates with the Democratic Leadership Council’s idiom of agility, accountability, and innovation. Clustering in just a few states and cities, charters nevertheless marked national priorities. For Johaneck, the charter spirit was neither new nor surprising; reformism, localism, and the educationalization of social problems are older and broader than charter schools.

New in the post-1990 period, and without precedent, Johaneck argues, was the design role taken by “an interrelated ecology of corporate, governmental, media, policy, nonprofit, and foundation resources” (p. 76). For those who circulated through the revolving doors of the “new education philanthropy,” “comprehensive test-driven accountability framework[s]” linked expanding parental choice subsystems to the metrics that defined “failing schools” (p. 73). While the choice-and-accountability movement might appear today to be facing a reckoning, Johaneck’s account is a reminder that its supporters are well-financed, the pushback is recent, and its advocates have hardly been banished from circles of power.

Entering the scene set by Johaneck, Sigal Ben-Porath organizes her normative contemplation in part two of the book along three motifs: the balancing of private interests and public aims, the need for innovation and the call for accountability, and the contrast between goals of equalized opportunity and the reassertion of stratifications and separations. Further complicating things, Ben-Porath emphasizes, is education’s triple identity as a private, public, and positional good. Pitting the libertarian vision of a “competition-driven free market” (p. 88) against the civic-minded defenders of democratic citizenship’s “great sphere” (p. 92), Ben-Porath takes seriously the notion that parental authority over their children’s education is “an important dimension of liberty” (p. 84), but judges that “society has too high a stake” (p. 96) in the outcome of schooling for parents to be entirely free to choose. With regard to claims of innovation and improved accountability, Ben-Porath is less credulous, seeing the charter movement as having introduced “narrow, uninspiring” (p. 101) curricula and “problematic” (p. 106) limits on democratic participation. On equality of access, Ben-Porath sees choice models as exacerbating separations and exclusions by race and class, providing only illusory answers to old questions of “who has which choices, how, and where” (p. 121).

Making Up Our Mind is a valuable and readable book, useful as a ready reference or course text for historical and philosophical foundations of education classes. Its introductory and concluding sections are

especially crisp in their conceptual outlay of central issues and their empirical snapshot of the current school-choice landscape. At times, however, the history/philosophy presentation leaves loose ends. Ben-Porath highlights many choice-booster's libertarian commitment to markets and antagonism to teachers' unions, but Johaneke's account only hints at the who and why behind these conservative lodestars. His rendering of the rise of contemporary school choice is that of an unplanned unfolding of liberal experiments against broader consumerist and privatizing trends in political culture. Even if we are persuaded by these broad strokes (as I am), the book's expository style, and its framing of education policy as a "design" question, tends to submerge those moments when contests broke out between committed and interested political actors. Perhaps this is why the authors seem so bewildered by the sweep of the choice-and-accountability ecosystem at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Bewilderment is a great start for research questions, and Johaneke and Ben-Porath will surely welcome new scholarship that begins to map the intellectual and institutional contexts (both conservative and liberal) that built the "education industry" of the late twentieth century.

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Deborah Blythe Doroshow. *Emotionally Disturbed: A History of Caring for America's Troubled Children*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. 344 pp.

There are always words for children who worry parents, confound teachers, and cause trouble everywhere they go. During the past century, these children have been called backward, delinquent, feeble-minded, retarded, minimally brain-damaged, and autistic. Recently, we have called them "developmentally disabled." Deborah Blythe Doroshow is interested in children called "emotionally disturbed" between 1940 and 1970. She argues that one particular institution—the residential treatment center (RTC)—created the emotionally disturbed child. Her interesting book explains how "emotional disturbance became a diagnosis, a policy problem, and a statement about the troubled state of postwar American society." (p. 4)