CHAPTER 1

The Globalisation of School Choice? An Introduction to Key Issues and Concerns

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SUMMARY As one would expect of any complex reform process, the results of recent neo-liberal reform to Australian schooling are at best unpredictable. While choice has always been part of Australian schooling, governments of all political hues have been enhancing their commitment to educational choice by increasing funding to the non-government sector. There is now no choice but to choose and parents, students, teachers, politicians and bureaucrats have been drawn further into reproducing a social system that exacerbates social inequality. However, they are not simply dominated by a new freedom of choice or by naïve consumerism. Keynesian-style welfare remains influential enough in the political machinations accompanying the reformation of Australian schooling and, as some parents have found, the private sector does not necessarily generate greater levels of efficiency and accountability, nor are its standards automatically higher than those found in the public sector. Not only that, far from being the great source of openness, freedom and democracy that some would have us believe we will find in private enterprise, it is quite capable of squashing individual freedoms.

Choice is one of the key economic and social slogans of our time, or at least in the more economically developed nations of the globe. In a world marked by apparently infinite abundance, the logic of choice is compelling. Pushed along by desire for, and experience of, variety, profusion, richness and the possibility of reformation, people living in a variety of places are encountering a consumerist ethic that is difficult to resist. The idea of choice offers alluring promises of equality, freedom, democracy and pleasure that traverses
political and social boundaries. It reflects and evokes deep desires for autonomy, control and self-expression. In societies built upon the liberal commitment to freedom of thought and action a commitment to the expansion of choice simultaneously reflects and helps create a common-sense understanding of how the world should be organised.

Taking a lead from Hayakawa’s (1974, pp. 40-41) analysis of language in action, scrutinising words in terms of what they reveal about a person’s ‘state of mind’ rather than what they might have to say about the facts of the matter at hand, choice is what he calls a ‘purr-word’. It does not ‘snarl’ at us in the ways that its apparent antonyms, the concepts it is mobilised against, can do. When, in political discourse and everyday speech, ‘choice’ is lined up against concepts such as ‘compulsion’, ‘regulation’, ‘homogeneity’ and ‘bureaucracy’, it is clear what we are meant to like and to dislike. If it is a politician extolling the virtues of school choice, she or he can be fairly confident that the intended audience will share some degree of antipathy for the sorts of bureaucratic compulsion and homogenising regularity that the right to choose is meant to liberate us from. And as Boulton & Coldron (1996, p. 299) have shown in the British context, parents are strongly attracted to the promise of control over important decision making that the idea of educational choice is thought to bring to them.

While this volume is not arguing for the curtailing of choices being made available to people, the various authors do question and complicate the persuasive logic of consumption underpinning a commitment to choice as it is applied to various forms of education. In a radically unequal world, where some are clearly born with more choice than others, it seems imperative that we do so. But we are not simply responding out of the equally compelling logic of equality that also underpins a commitment to freedom and democracy, we are interested in the practice of choice in a wide variety of educational settings, as well as in the consequences and outcomes of the uneven flow around the globe of the ideas and ideals that underpin this practice.

According to Duesenberry’s (1960) popular distinction between economic and sociological analysis, ‘economics is all about how people make choices’, while ‘sociology is all about how they don’t have any choices to make’. Determinism is not an issue in this collection. Despite the obvious sociological/anthropological training evident through all of the papers in this collection, there is no appetite for portraying people as dupes of the system. Nor for that matter are we interested in the economic determinism underpinning the beliefs associated with the so-called rational choices from which human action is said to be derived. Rather, we are interested in interrogating the dynamic interplay between culture, structure and agency evident in the real-world choices made by flesh and blood human beings, the constraining factors, the enabling opportunities and the more prosaic moves towards ‘getting by’ and ‘making do’ that mark the everyday activities of human subjects. The vast majority of the papers in this collection draw on a
rich array of empirical data emerging from the 'local level'. They help illustrate the ways in which global ideals are always inflected through local realities and the importance of comprehending the geographic specificity of globalisation. However, before considering the implications of what is revealed through the volume, it is useful to consider some of the broader theoretical and ideological issues surrounding the question that many parents perceive to be one of the most important of their lives – at which school should I enrol my child? And as this volume shows, the dilemmas of this decision are not confined to the more economically developed world.

**Economic Imperatives**

Those of us born into this more economically developed world, and who are old enough to remember, can probably recall a time when business and stock market reports were not part of the daily news broadcasts on radio or television. This helps highlight how in the past three decades or so we have witnessed and experienced a dramatic increase in the influence of economic theory on social action and political practice, a movement that Henig (1990) attributes to Milton Friedman’s enormously influential book *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962). Pusey (1991, p. 3) argues that since the late 1970s most nations have been driven by a conservative political agenda that has aimed at shifting the coordinating functions of society away from nation states and bureaucracies towards economies and markets. This hegemony of economic theory has helped ensure that political action is now perceived and experienced as a subset of economic behaviour (Henig, 1990, pp. 653-654).

A commitment to the expansion of consumer choice is undoubtedly one of the key driving forces behind the changes we have witnessed in the relatively recent past, but as early as 1881 one of the pioneers of the discipline, Francis Edgeworth, asserted that ‘the first principle of Economics is that every agent is actuated only by self-interest’. Despite the obvious oversimplification at play here, a point that Edgeworth readily acknowledged, this sort of representation of humanity persists in contemporary economic models (Sen, 1982, p. 84). It continues to exert a powerful influence on economic thinking. Rational choice theory, which assumes that all agents within a given political sphere maximise their own individual welfare by acting out of narrow self-interest, is a dominant assumption of the neoclassical economic enterprise (Johnston et al, 2000). This influential idea has generated two broad theoretical streams, that of public choice theory and social choice theory. The former emphasises the politics behind the selection of goods in the public arena, and the latter focuses on the strategies evident when groups of social agents make their mythical rational choices (see Audi, 1999; Black, 2003).

The literature on these broad topics is enormous and we are not going to replay the vexed and strikingly abstract ideas contained in this body of literature. We do, however, wish to align ourselves with scholars who see
individual persons as more than *Homo economicus*. The unnecessarily impoverished nature of a theoretical base that conceives of human action as motivated exclusively by strategies aimed at maximising economic benefits is clearly challenged through this volume. Humans are not atomistic beings; they are deeply connected to the social structure in which they are embedded (Granovetter, 1985; Shils, 1989, p. 134). The economist Amartya Sen (1982) is correct in asserting that traditional economic theory pays insufficient attention to social structures and contexts, mainly because the *realism* of the chosen conception of humanity is usually not an object of economic inquiry (pp. 88, 99). The single-preference ordering of classical, and neoclassical, economic theory does not offer enough scope to comprehend the various interests and ideas of what should be done that underlie the actual choices and behaviours made by individual persons. Sen describes ‘the *purely* economic man’ as a ‘social moron’ and astutely observes that ‘economic theory has been much preoccupied with this rational fool decked in the glory of his one all-purpose preference ordering’ (1982, p. 99).

More than twenty years ago the sociologist Granovetter (1985, p. 484) observed that ‘the idealized markets of perfect competition have survived intellectual attack in part because self-regulating economic structures are politically attractive to many’. Granovetter’s proclamation remains apposite to the current era. In the wake of the reforms initiated in the mid 1980s by the Thatcher and Reagan regimes of the United Kingdom and the USA respectively, that have long since washed up onto many a shore around the globe, the convenient fiction of self-regulating economic structures remains politically attractive. These waves of reform, which emphasised the classically liberal ideals of the private over the public, individuals over collectivities, self-reliance rather than welfare, and self-discipline rather than bureaucracy, are now often situated by scholars of various political hues under the umbrella term of neo-liberalism. The political consensus has shifted in many parts of the world to the point where the so-called ‘big government’ of the welfare state has become the enemy of efficient and free markets, where citizens are portrayed as clients of the state or consumers of government products, and individuals are construed as the basis of community (rather than the other way round). As part of the emergent neo-liberal logic the expansion of consumer choice has trumped equity as a major political goal.

**Choice as a Neo-liberal Imperative**

According to one of the leading scholars of globalisation, neo-liberalism comprises a set of political economic practices based on the proposition that human well-being is best advanced by ‘liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). The state’s role, one that is often not acknowledged, is to provide the basic infrastructure and institutions necessary to secure private property rights and
the functioning of the market. If necessary, this is achieved by force. Current forms of neo-liberalism are closely associated with the push for a globally unified economy. The growing power and influence of transnational corporations and the organisations that protect their interests is significant. In terms of the latter, by far the three most significant are the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. The practices associated with the development of so-called free markets on this global scale, such as structural adjustment and debt repayments, are so varied and massive in scale that it can be difficult to trace their many impacts, intended or otherwise (Forsey & Lockhart, 2004).

According to Harvey (2005, p. 65), neo-liberals aim to generate competition by fusing privatisation and deregulation together. The advocates of this philosophical approach to human organisation advocate a competitive environment because of its ability to eliminate red tape and to increase efficiency and productivity. Additionally, competition is also said to mitigate overt and covert consumer costs through the production of cheaper commodities and services and by reducing the tax burden. While Kipnis in his discussion of Chinese education systems in this volume challenges assertions that a commitment to privatised, deregulated state institutions is a necessary condition for the production of hugely competitive and seemingly efficient and productive systems of human enterprise, the broader point we wish to make here is that the real-world consequences of economic and institutional reform are never as straightforward as neo-liberal advocates posit them to be. Granovetter (1985) has pointed out that in classical and neoclassical economics the social relations of human subjects, if they are acknowledged at all, are treated as 'a frictional drag that impedes competitive markets' (Granovetter, 1985, p. 484). While economists may be disinclined to pay attention to the messiness of actual practice, the gaps between the rhetoric that justifies the reform and its actual practice are not only striking, but are important because they can, and should, inform future policy developments.

As already indicated, choice is a difficult concept to argue against, but looking at it as an example of language in action, the effects of choice policies are not necessarily as benign as their stated intentions suggest. A number of researchers in different parts of the world have commented on the ways in which the neo-liberal emphasis on choice has reshaped earlier concerns with equity and social welfare (Jenson & Sineau, 2001, p. 241; Daune-Richard & Mahon, 2001; Kershaw, 2004, p. 928; Forsey, 2004, Walford, 2006). Writing about child care in Canada, Kershaw (2004, p. 928) draws an explicit link between the language of choice and the articulation of neo-liberal principles. He argues that this has happened within a politically neutral rhetorical framework that shifts the responsibility for social inequality to individual citizens (Kershaw, 2004, p. 928). In Sweden, according to Daune-Richard & Mahon (2001, p. 161), market choice has been posited as the means for truly respecting difference and variety in the light of the apparent
failure to do so within standardised solutions offered by the paternalistic welfare state. And the rhetoric is seductive; as Boulton & Coldron (1996, p. 299) show out of their research among British parents, even those who have not been particularly concerned about choosing a particular school for their child still place high value on the availability of choice. For these researchers the conclusion is clear: ‘educational discourse has shifted to embrace the ideology of competition and market forces’.

**Institutional Imperatives**

But today’s calls for choice are being voiced in a particular institutional context that preceded the spread of contemporary neo-liberal thought. The twentieth century, particularly in the post-World War II era, ushered in a revolution of mass education enrolments, and constructed public school systems even in the poorest of nations. A multitude of ‘one-best-systems’ have been established around the world, most rooted in a global template of mass education. Choice policies are very much an aftermath of this worldwide institutionalisation of schooling. Neo-liberal and other forces are taking existing organisational templates and are variously reshaping them in unique ways across and within different nations. Further, choice agendas are being influenced by other broad policy currents, particularly those that aim to promote quality assurance and academic standards. Many states are implementing standardised test score regimens to gauge levels of learning among students and compare them across jurisdictions. Indeed, comparisons of these scores are increasingly international. These ‘quality’ reforms are also often paired with ‘choice’ reforms in wide-ranging reform agendas that attempt to harness schooling to strategies for wealth creation (e.g. Finn, 2002). But quality reforms sometimes stand in tension with choice; whereas choice programmes are premised on the necessity of decentralising power by stimulating market forces in ways that presumably empower parents and teachers, quality assurance frameworks often serve to centralise governance over education, and redirect much decision-making power to the hands of bureaucrats. The different ways in which these broad reform agendas interact in each country provides another source of international variation.

**School Choice as Global Policy**

The worldwide institutionalising of education over the twentieth century occurred largely through bureaucratic methods of organisation. Bureaucracy used to enjoy higher levels of communal agreement in the industrialised world, and was seen to deliver fairness and efficiency to national populations; a consensus that has been undermined in recent years (Connell et al, 1982, p. 19). In response to a perceived crisis in national economic competitiveness felt in a range of nation-states, the last twenty-five years or so has seen a new global education policy consensus emerge. Not surprisingly, given the current
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ascendancy of neo-liberalism, this new programme advocates the flattening of bureaucratic structures, a greater focus on excellence ahead of equity, and shifting the emphasis of national governance from citizenship and service towards clientism and consumerism (Adnett & Davies, 1999, p. 221; Lingard, 2000, p. 84). The belief is that greater levels of equality are only achievable through the sorts of excellence promoted by 'market devolution' and the privatisation of public institutions (Lingard et al, 2002, p. 12).

Chubb & Moe (1990), two political scientists who have been particularly influential on education policy in the USA and beyond, were among the first scholar-activists to clearly articulate a programme of market-based reform of schooling. Readily borrowing ideas from Thatcher’s Britain (Chubb & Moe, 1992), they count themselves among the many who believe that 'centralization and bureaucratization are substantially at odds with the effective organisation of schools and the successful provision of education' (1990, p. 142). They assert that for government schools to become substantially more effective, the institutions managing them must cede control to individual schools (pp. 183-184). Indeed, they argue elsewhere (Chubb & Moe, 1988) that private schools provide the model upon which public schools should be shaped, a view that has become politically orthodox in many different polities (Edwards et al, 1985; Tooley, 2000; Brown, 2002; Forsey, 2007). In developing countries, where educational equity is usually even more problematic than it is in the industrial nations, structural adjustment policies have been imposed largely as a means of ensuring stability for foreign capital (Morrow & Torres, 2000, pp. 43, 52). These policies, which are normally associated with correcting imbalances between foreign accounts and domestic consumption and the ameliorative remedies of deregulation and privatisation of the economy, are often correlated with public sector austerity (Carnoy, 1995, p. 653). Some of the consequences for education systems in these developing nations have included reductions in public funding for education programmes, an increased emphasis on private education initiatives, and a concomitant reduction in the amounts of household income available for the education of children (Reimers & Tiburcio, 1993, p. 14). In other instances, equity concerns are increasingly embedded within choice and quality frameworks. One prominent example is the US No Child Left Behind Act, which attempts to join quality and equity goals by extending choice to students in schools deemed to be low performing. Another example is provided by voucher programmes that are targeted to disadvantaged populations. Neo-liberal thinking has reshaped the policy landscape in many countries not by entirely eliminating equity concerns but rather by re-embedding them within choice and accountability frameworks.

In warning against seeing the new political configurations of our time as 'monolithic projects imposed upon passive victims', Larner (2005, p. 12), a social geographer, urges researchers to pay attention to the specificities of neo-liberal political economies, and to be sensitive to the complex, hybrid
‘political imaginaries these new spaces, socialities and subjects are likely to embody’. This was certainly a significant part of the rationale for the symposium that brought these papers together. The anthropologist Appadurai (1996) urges us to think of globalisation as a current, a tide, as a flow of ideas, of capital and people, of material goods, of policies and practices. As already suggested, the flow of ideas and policies is uneven, and as Appadurai has argued, it is important to acknowledge the uneven ways in which they embed themselves into local cultural-political landscapes. The implementation of national and regional educational policies cannot be understood separately from the specific sociocultural settings in which they become embedded (Phillips, 1992; Walford, 2001). Inevitably, the ideals and ideas lose at least some of their internal coherence as they are incorporated into the local political systems. Showing this complexity is part of the point of this collection.

**Outlining the Chapters**

The chapters gathered together here emerged from a symposium held at the University of Western Australia (UWA) in late 2006. Convened by the authors of this introduction, our aim was to develop a range of empirically-based research profiles from a wide variety of nation-states to explore a significant global trend. With the generous support and sponsorship of the Institute of Advanced Studies at UWA we were able to realise this aim. The collection of chapters shows that while some nations have managed to resist the neo-liberal imperative to diversify and privatise school systems, the vast majority have embraced the ideology of competition and market forces at least to some degree, although it is important to acknowledge straight away that some nations have been cajoled and bullied into opening their arms as part of a structural adjustment of the body politic.

The first substantive chapter by Christopher Lubienski examines the choice movement in the United States. While the USA has not been the prime world leader in the actual use of market mechanisms in schooling, it does have a disproportionate presence on the global educational scene, serving as an aggressive exporter of neo-liberal, market-driven educational policies. Lubienski describes the growth of different forms of choice reforms, and summarises the growing body of research (including his own) of charter schools and voucher programmes. This comprehensive review leads Lubienski to be sceptical about the ability of choice mechanisms to consistently produce school outcomes that are more efficient, equitable, or effective. Yet Lubienski finds that this paucity of supporting evidence has not deterred choice advocates. Some are simply avoiding independent, peer-review processes in favour of writing ‘op-eds’ or publishing for in-house think-tank outlets. Others are replacing their original empirical claims about the performance-enhancing power of markets with more normative arguments about the harmlessness of choice. Lubienski concludes that
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despite the accessibility of technically-refined research on school choice, American policy making is increasingly reverting to an ideological mandate, and may be increasingly disconnected from empirical findings. Using some illustrative cases, Lubienski links this trend to a changing policy-making arena that is increasingly politicised, and a new political economy of research production in which partisan advocates can bypass traditional scholarly processes that were designed to instil an element of quality control. In this new ‘marketplace’ of research, he notes, rigour is often less important than talking points, rapid response, and institutional branding, and calls for free markets are heavily subsidised by well-resourced advocacy groups.

Scott Davies & Janice Aurini argue that Canada’s school choice movement has imported and adapted American understandings of choice in ways that underplay market rationales. Rather than hailing choice as a mechanism to boost test scores or desegregate minority students, Canadian choice-seekers appear to be energised by emerging middle-class parenting cultures. Davies & Aurini connect school choice to ‘concerted cultivation’, an intensive form of parenting in which middle-class parents increasingly structure their children’s lives and treat them as projects-in-the-making. Sociologists typically invoke this concept to link the varying strategies that parents use to align their child-rearing practices with school requirements, such as providing their children with extra lessons, assisting with them homework, or lobbying educators for prized spots in special school programmes, and to emphasise how such parental resources are unequally distributed by class and race. Davies & Aurini extend the concept of concerted cultivation by linking this parental agency to school choice, noting that choice-seeking alters parental relations with public educators from mere supportive roles to more directing and even adversarial roles. To substantiate their argument, Davies & Aurini first present survey data showing that wealthier and more educated parents are more likely to engage in choice seeking, and that choosers are more likely to embrace contentious notions of parental authority. They next present focus group data that illustrate how choice proponents rationalise their actions. Davies & Aurini find that choice advocates acknowledge concerns about the potential threat of choice policies to equity, but then redraw moral boundaries by portraying choice as a responsible and necessary form of parental involvement in schooling. They interpret these findings as illustrating new forms of parental agency and expressive cultural ideals in processes of class reproduction.

Focusing on his home town of Perth, the capital of Western Australia, Martin Forsey reports on research conducted among parents and their children regarding their educational choices. The people targeted for this research all chose to change systems, either from so-called ‘private’ schools to the government education system, or vice versa. While choice has always been part of Australia’s schooling systems, governments of all political hues have been busily enhancing their commitment to opening up educational choices for parents and students through increasing funding to the non-
government sector. There is no choice but to choose argues Forsey, but he notes that the attempts to ‘de-governmenralise the state’ in education is not the source of unbridled joy and satisfaction among the Australian population. Parents, students, teachers, politicians and bureaucrats have been drawn further into reproducing a social system that exacerbates social inequality but they are not simply dominated by a new freedom of choice or by naïve consumerism. As Forsey shows, Keynesian style welfarism remains an influential enough element in the political machinations accompanying the reformation of Australian schooling. The free market is rarely ever free, and, as some of the parents interviewed found, the private sector does not necessarily generate greater levels of efficiency and accountability, nor are their standards automatically higher than those found in the public sector. Not only that, far from being the great source of openness, freedom and democracy that some would have us believe we will find in private enterprise, they are quite capable of squashing individual freedoms. As one would expect of any complex reform process, the results of recent neo-liberal reform to Australian schooling are at best unpredictable.

Geoffrey Walford’s chapter reviews the history of school choice in England, focusing particularly on the motivations for changes in 1988 and in subsequent years. It argues that, rather than being a case of ‘policy borrowing’ from Australia, the changes that occurred in England were more a case of ‘policy corruption’. England now has a well-established choice system in the state sector and there has been a considerable amount of research conducted on it. This chapter describes and evaluates several of these studies and discusses the relationship between greater choice of school and increased standards of attainment. It then examines the research work that has been conducted on the effects of choice on social segregation and finds mixed results.

The next chapter, by Izhar Oplatka, focuses on controlled choice within the city of Tel Aviv, Israel. Tel Aviv can be divided into three large socio-economic areas with large differences between the three. During the late 1960s attempts were made to ensure greater integration between different ethnic and social groups by bussing children from one area to another. In the 1990s, however, this system has gradually been replaced by one of controlled choice where parents are given a list of schools in different areas to choose from. The schools were encouraged to differentiate themselves from one another in terms of curriculum, extracurricular activities and teaching methods, and to establish clear criteria for admission. The education authority uses these choices to give as many people as possible their first choice while ensuring that all schools have a demographic make-up that is a fair representation of the population of the city as a whole. Oplatka argues that the reform was a result of a combination of integrative, egalitarian values with liberal, pluralist ones. He then examines how schools and parents have reacted to these changes. First, he investigates the marketing messages to be found in school prospectuses and through interviews with principals. Then
he reports on interviews with parents. Oplatka finds that both the schools' and parents' responses were more closely linked to individualistic, liberal and competitive values than to collective and egalitarian ones.

Mariano Narodowski's chapter examines the escalating provision of private schooling in Argentina. After a half century of steady growth, 25% of all student enrolments are now in the private sector, with wealthier families having practically exited the public system. In 2003, 92% of households in the highest income quintile sent their children to private schools, compared to only 8% of the poorest quintile. Searching for conceptual tools to understand this trend, Narodowski reasons that the Argentine Government can no longer be said to wield a 'state monopoly' on education, to borrow Milton Friedman's phrase. Instead, the public and private sectors co-exist in equilibrium between a 'quasi-monopoly' and a 'quasi-market'. Since most parents who can afford private schools have now opted out of the public system, that system can spend more money per pupil than it could previously. The private system consists of hybrid institutions that partly compete according to market rules, and yet also draw some state funds for teachers' wages, which lower their operation costs. Yet, Narodowski is struck by the continual thriving of private schools in Argentina, despite their lack of larger subsidies, and despite the absence of choice programmes or voucher experiments that might further stimulate their growth. Why then are private schools increasingly popular among Argentina's upper and middle classes? According to Narodowski, higher income families are seeking private schools as part of a broader process of social self-segregation. In a Bourdieuan process of distinction, these families are using private schools to differentiate themselves culturally from lower socio-economic status groups, and to construct exclusive identities based on notions of needing to protect their children from increasingly violent and dangerous public spaces. Yet, despite this rising inequality, both school segments are relatively stable, Narodowski contends, since the public system can now spend more per capita funds on needy students, while the private sector can attract an ample clientele and enjoy much governing leeway.

Educational opportunity in Tanzania, according to Kristin Phillips & Amy Stambach, is characterised more by 'being chosen' than it is by consumerist principles. In one of the poorest nations in the world, wealth is to be found in people, and poverty simultaneously refers to both destitution and not having enough children to support parents in old age. Cultivating educational opportunities for at least one child offers the promise of a safer future for parents, a process that involves a delicate balance of building social relationships. Drawing on intensive field research conducted in two socio-economically contrasting areas of Tanzania, Phillips & Stambach argue that the notion of school choice is peripheral to everyday social contexts of Tanzania. Reflecting on the history and contexts of formal schooling in the two research sites, they reveal the various 'hands' at work in Tanzania's educational systems. Phillips & Stambach uncover the mythical status of the
free-standing subject exercising a right to educational choice from a free-
floating range of educational options that is so fondly propounded by
marketeers. There is little that is ‘free’ about educational opportunities in
Tanzania; not only are fees prohibitive, the opportunities for secondary
schooling are rarely ‘open’ chances for enrolment. Opportunities surface only
in the context of social relations, and Phillips & Stambach’s ethnography
shows very clearly how people cultivate horizontal relationships of reciprocity
at the same time as they place themselves at the debt and the mercy of richer
benefactors. Unlike other types of political jurisdictions, in Tanzania choice
does not offer a means of mobilising sympathy or support for access to
education, much less access to a specific quality of education. Rather, it is the
cultivation of relationships – with neighbours, extended family, patrons, and
God – that provides the means for accessing the all too scarce opportunities
for educational advancement.

Andrew Kipnis offers a richly detailed description of the policies of one
county in rural China that are aimed mostly at preventing school choice. At
the same time they promote intensive competition between students as
individuals, classes of students, teachers, schools, principals and school
districts, as well as ‘quality’ audits that are often absurd in their scientistic
nature. The county government does not encourage school choice, but
occasionally allows it to happen when it feels a need to raise revenues and can
identify a means of earning money by allowing a minority of wealthy parents
to exercise some rather limited choices. The opportunity for choice is neither
valued in itself nor linked to an ideology of freedom. The county
government’s combination of governing techniques can be said to have a
coherent logic of sorts, but this logic cannot be explained by the type of
analysis that sees the promotion of competition and audit as going together
with school choice as forms of neo-liberalism. Rather, what is happening in
rural China is that competition is valued as a tool for disciplining students
and teachers, and this discipline is valued in and of itself, for a wide variety
of reasons.

Prachi Srivastava’s chapter explores the tremendous growth of low-fee
private (LFP) schools in India by outlining and explaining the school choice
processes of one group of disadvantaged households accessing the LFP sector
in the Lucknow district of Uttar Pradesh. Rejecting notions of ‘false
consciousness’ and ‘dependency’ among the poorer parents in economically
developing countries choosing private educational options for their children,
Srivastava shows very clearly that the parents in Uttar Pradesh are very
actively engaged in the choice process. There are problems with this of
course, not least because of the deleterious effects the movement to the LFP
sector can have on the state education sector in India. Contrary to India’s
official policy of Education for All, schools were conceptualised by
Srivastava’s informants as operating in highly marketised, privatised and
hierarchical schooling arenas, a reality that challenges official Indian visions
of a ‘common school system’ aimed at providing a universally available and
equitable education system. The research participants in the study placed much greater value on the LFP sector than the state, and chose it for almost all of their children, even if the sector did not provide 'good' quality in any objective sense. Unless the state sector can convince parents that it can provide meaningful education opportunities for all, it is sowing the seeds for its own demise. If the state sector is as bad as it is perceived and documented to be, argues Srivastava, the resultant cream-skimming of clients even from among disadvantaged groups does not augur well for the future of schooling for the most disadvantaged peoples of India. While greater school choice through the LFP sector seems desirable to some disadvantaged groups, it may also be highly inequitable if it does not allow the state system to recuperate in any way.

The chapter by Lesley Vidovich & Yap Meen Sheng explores the development of school choice in Singapore through private international schools. From independence in 1965, the Singaporean Government invested heavily in education, and schooling was characterised by a high degree of centralised control. School diversity and choice were minimal until the late 1980s saw cautious steps towards enhanced school autonomy and limited privatisation. In the early 2000s the Government's renewed, yet restricted, moves to enhance school privatisation and choice were embedded in a broader economic goal to turn Singapore into a 'global schoolhouse' which sought to offer a diverse and distinctive mix of quality education services to the world. It was believed that international full-fee customers would be attracted to Singapore's new privately-funded, international schools. Concurrently, the outflow of local students purchasing education in other countries would be slowed because the Government would allow them to choose to enrol in Singapore-based international schools for the first time. Thus, school choice in Singapore has a strong international dimension, consistent with Singapore's active engagement with globalisation and its attempts to forge lucrative international education markets in a knowledge-based economy.

Their chapter examines two new privately-funded, international schools that opened in Singapore in 2005 and argues that, although restricted in scale, the policy shift was symbolically significant. Although the Government does not directly fund these new schools, they must comply with key national education policies. The configuration of school choice in Singapore suggests a confluence of deregulatory and regulatory policies, with all of the inherent tensions. Using the results of parental surveys and other material, the authors show how the Singaporean Government is strongly steering school choice, and simultaneously navigating both local and global education markets.

Finally, the chapter by Julian Dierkes examines two related aspects of choice in Japan. First, the chapter gives an overview of the recent introduction of choice within the public primary and secondary sectors. There, the moves towards choice that have occurred in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been designed mainly to diversify the system.
in order to promote a more individualistic and potentially creative workforce and to encourage poorly performing schools to reform themselves through competitive pressures. But the number of municipalities with choice programmes is still very limited, and it is too early to be able to assess the effects of the change.

In contrast, the second part of Dierkes’s chapter examines an area where there has long been freedom of choice – the private ‘shadow education’ system of the for-profit afternoon and evening juku. Within metropolitan areas, in particular, a whole system of supplementary ‘cram schools’ has flourished for more than thirty years. Drawing on his current research into the nature of these juku, Dierkes describes some of the diversity of the sector. He shows that the free market has not produced diversity of teaching approaches, but a minute differentiation of education offerings to target populations that remains wedded to the overall educational philosophy of the Japanese curriculum and examination system.

The Globalisation of School Choice?

So, what do the essays gathered in this volume show? Offering a thorough engagement with empirical realities in a range of geographical and socio-economic areas, they suggest that calls for choice in education are indeed global, but their spread has been uneven and assume forms and emphases that depend upon the local social, political, economic and historical contexts. While there is a general concern about increasing inequality in the wake of the reforms to the organisation of educational systems that have taken place across the globe in the past three decades or so, the book’s wide range of nations reveals differences and similarities in school choice reform and its effects on the organisation and practice of schooling. The collections suggest that globalisation is best understood through the prism of the local, and challenge any grand generalisations about the effects of the significant raft of policy developments that emerged from the Thatcher/Reagan reorganisation of public institutions. School choice reforms assume a wide variety of incarnations from country to country. The vocabulary of ‘choice’ provides a loose and malleable language for a variety of actors to pursue widely ranging goals. Importantly, choice frameworks can incorporate the interests of even those actors who otherwise have little affinity with market thinking in education (Davies & Quirke, 2005; Aurini & Davies, 2005). Beyond its neoliberal advocates, religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities in many countries are adapting the phrasing of ‘choice’ to suit their assorted interests. The strength of this collection lies in the close attention it pays to the ways in which choice ideals have to be adapted to fit more comfortably to local political landscapes. It also shows that choice is often not the most appropriate term to use when describing what has happened in recent reformation of schooling systems. While the movement towards private educational options can in theory open up educational opportunities in state
sectors that always operate in a limited financial environment, in practice it often results in further diminution of state-run schools. In other words, the options available to people have all too often become more limited in the new choice environments produced across the globe.

References


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