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# Review of Ben–Porath & Johanek. Making Up Our Mind: What school choice is really about

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## Author biography

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## On *Making Up Our Mind: What School Choice Is Really About*

### Michael S. Merry

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

From the outset, the authors underscore the point that ‘market-driven choices [in education] aren’t new’. Indeed, as they observe on the book’s jacket, ‘they predate the republic, and for generations parents have chosen to educate their children through an evolving mix of publicly supported, private, charitable, and entrepreneurial enterprises’. And for the first half of the book we receive a comprehensive – if understandably abridged – chronicle that spans roughly 300 years of American educational history.

The book then shifts to a ‘normative assessment’, and to demonstrate their appreciation for the inevitability of choice on the educational landscape, the authors acknowledge: the moral and legal right of parents to choose an education they think ‘best’ for their own child; the necessity of plural educational provision in a liberal democratic society; the legitimate concerns many parents have about the quality of education on offer; and even the (not occasional) success of copious educational alternatives, which may or may not foster innovation. So far so good. But a number of difficulties quickly come into view.

One difficulty is the authors’ decision to deploy a comparative frame that pits ‘advocates of school choice’ (or simply free market advocates) against ‘critics of school choice’. But this dichotomy is difficult to square with an observation the authors themselves make toward the end of the historical account, where they observe, ‘residential location still trumps all other ways to choose a school’ (*MM*, p. 81). Indeed, the suggestion that there is a bloc of people who are skeptical of school choice simply elides the ways in which school choice for many families simply operates by default. After all, so-called ‘anti-choice’ folks also choose the education they want for their child, even when they vociferously denounce non-public alternatives.

Another difficulty is the absence of a clear normative argument. Instead, we are left to infer the authors’ commitments lurking behind the comparative frame. And the bias is difficult to miss as the authors juxtapose a highly idealized public school – with its inspiring promise of fostering ‘civic equality’, ‘democratic accountability’, ‘diversity’, and all things necessary for the ‘common good’ – next to the well-intentioned, yet inevitably flawed and inconsistent successes of any kind of educational alternative, no matter how well it may be doing relative to the traditional public.

Indeed, the ahistorical tropes the authors enlist for the ‘common school ideal’ make it all too easy to extol a fictional public while holding educational alternatives to an impossible standard. And hence *regular public schools*, we are asked to believe, have ‘the common good as an educational aim’ (*MM*, p. 91), ‘serve all children from the [immediate] area’ (*MM*, p. 108), and enable ‘structured, prolonged, and constructive contact [with different others]’ (*MM*, p. 125). The authors attribute these remarks to ‘critics of choice’, but since they omit counter-evidence that was liberally provided in the case of charter schools, it is evident that they share this view.

When there is something positive to say about public charters, the authors offer reluctant acknowledgment (e.g. concerning representation on the school board, better cultural match between teachers and families, or better achievement), but then utilize the comparative frame to minimize these successes, opining that charters have a ‘narrow, uninspiring basic curriculum’ (*MM*, p. 101); or asserting that they are ‘exempt from taking on [students] with more significant disabilities’ (*MM*, p. 105); or reiterating sweeping claims about the inability of charters to ‘provide better educational outcomes’ (*MM*, p. 109) compared with schools serving similar populations; or else insisting that charters facilitate ‘an additional layer of inequality’ (*MM*, p. 111). ‘drain resources away’ (*MM*, p. 129) from other schools, and in any case, ‘frustrate any effort to scale’ (*MM*, p. 128).

Public charters serving poor and minority communities are further depicted as ‘self-separated’ (*MM*, p. 89), or as places that ‘educate for comprehensive beliefs or values’ (*MM*, p. 90), or which are ‘driven by market forces’ (*MM*, p. 91), ‘racially isolated’ (*MM*, p. 92), or simply are places unlikely to ‘promote public goals such as equality and integration’ (*MM*, p. 94). But these are precisely the charges a generation of scholars have leveled against non-charter public schools. There is widespread skepticism, for example, about public schools’ ability and willingness to provide robust services for children with severe disabilities.

Given the discernible tilt of the analysis, it unfortunately came as little surprise when the discussion turned to the choices that poor people make, and poor people of color in particular, who, the authors tell us, ‘have access to fewer resources and to information of lower quality when attempting to figure out their children’s educational options’ (*MM*, p. 95). And it is with this deficit mind-set that we read – in the very next paragraph – that the ‘capacity to decide rationally [. . .] is significantly limited by the bounded nature of human rationality’, or that we are told, on the following page, that ‘leaving parents solely in charge of decisions about the schooling of their children may be unwarranted’.

And thus to protect the interests of the poor, the authors call for careful monitoring of selection procedures, in order ‘to ensure that the public perspective is represented . . .’ (*MM*, p. 126). I confess that I do not understand what the authors mean by a ‘public perspective’, but some readers may wonder whether it will be one in which the stated preferences of the poor are included, let alone taken seriously. And they may wonder that, in part, because the authors express none of these worries about schools serving more educated and affluent concentrations – which, many historical and sociological studies have shown, are extremely effective at avoiding, if not actively excluding, the (minority) poor. Little concern is expressed *here* about ‘civic deficits’, or ‘racial isolation’, or ‘bounded rationality’, or a ‘need for oversight’ – to say nothing of ‘extra layers of inequality’ – even when there is abundant empirical evidence for it.

Readers will find much to like about this book, these criticisms notwithstanding. Both the historical and ethical overviews will be quite informative to those dipping their toes into choice debates for the first time. Yet there might have been much wider uptake had the authors not limited the analysis to a single country – a parochial feature that regrettably runs through the entire *History and Philosophy of Education* series. They briefly acknowledge a ‘wider international context’ (MM, p. 122), with Chile and Finland receiving a passing mention. But non-American readers expecting some new insights concerning the ethics of school choice beyond the narrow and highly politicized public charter school debate in the United States will be disappointed. Had both the conceptual and empirical lens been a bit wider, the authors might have avoided the dubious ‘pro- versus anti-choice’ frame; we also might have been invited to think about other pertinent facets of school choice that are a standard feature of state education systems outside of the United States.

### Author biography

Michael S. Merry, PhD (Wisconsin–Madison), is Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Child Development and Education at the University of Amsterdam. He is author, most recently, of *Educational Justice: Liberal Ideals, Persistent Inequality, and the Constructive Uses of Critique* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

## **Making Up Our Mind: A response to Ahlberg, Howell, Justice, and Merry**

### **Sigal Ben-Porath**

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### **Michael Johanek**

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We very much appreciate the thoughtful reviews offered by our colleagues, and of course, welcome both their critiques and compliments.

In *Making Up Our Mind*, we offer a primer on key phases and arguments surrounding school choice in the United States. We do not attempt a comprehensive historical or philosophical analysis, but rather aim to highlight some particularly informative moments in the evolution of choices available to some families in the United States over the course of its history, and the debates that surround these choices. We envision our readers coming away with greater clarity on the current state of school choice policy, as illuminated both by what it aims to achieve – equity, liberty, and the delicate balance between them – and by the ways that the shifting policies over time allow families varying levels of authority over the specific education available to their children.