

Book Review

Mercedes K. Schneider

School Choice: The End of Public Education?

New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2016

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Conservative *Washington Post* columnist George Will (2016) offers this pronouncement: “It’s time to stop with the false choices on school choice.” He continues: “promoting choice at the expense of quality isn’t an education strategy, it’s a political agenda.” He is right about that.

People who are neither Americans nor familiar with the peculiarities of American political culture sometimes find it hard to parse the paradoxes that regularly arise in American political debates. I have certainly struggled with the fact that the United States is, at the same time, arguably the most advanced society in the world in terms of scientific and technological innovation, but also the single liberal democracy to be trapped in patterns of religious fundamentalism and rejection of the most elementary scientific knowledge. More than any other country sharing the legacy of the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment and the only one to pay homage to the likes of John Locke and Adam Smith in its foundation as “the first new nation” (Lipset, 1965), the citizens of the United States are alone in their rejection of the “theory” of evolution and their literalist devotion to the Bible, including not only the Christian narrative, but also the antique mythologies of the Books of Moses with talking snakes, burning bushes and forty-day floods wiping out almost all the mammals on the planet.

Public schools ... brought together children of different races, languages, religions, and cultures and gave them a common language and a sense of common purpose. – Al Shanker

Please, do not misunderstand me. I am not mocking the religious faith of members of the Abrahamic religious communities. I do, however, distinguish between Judaism, Christianity and Islam as theological and moral systems on the one hand, and literal histories of human evolution, dotted with implausible instances of divine intervention including, for instance, the curious case of the Sun stopping in the sky—Joshua 10: 12-14—an event that would have violated the principle of conservation of angular movement of a rotating body and have had catastrophic consequences for the Earth as its kinetic energy would have resulted in terrestrial whip-lash of a (literally) incredible sort. Still, a sizeable number of Americans seem to accept this and other “miracles” and to resent the “elitism” of the bi-coastal “elitists” who dismiss the opinions in the “Bible belt” and, more generally, of the “heartland” of the country.

Why is this relevant to readers of *The Innovation Journal*? It is because, along with military expenditures, health care provision, and social assistance programs such as income benefits and subsidized housing and service provisions, education is among the most expensive items in national, subnational and municipal public expenditure throughout the developed and

most of the underdeveloped countries of the world. Not only is it a matter of immense importance as cost or, more accurately, an investment, but it also has tremendous consequences for future economic, social and cultural social stability and quality of life. What happens in schools matters immensely for the well-being of citizens and society — at least as much and often much more than most other responsibilities of government. And, since the United States remains—albeit somewhat precariously—perched atop the pecking order of global powers, what happens in American education has implications (if only as warnings) for the rest of the world.

I

Public education in the USA has a long and admirable history. Among the highlights are the “land-grant” colleges which are mainly public universities (the exceptions being the unique Tuskegee University in Alabama and somewhat anomalous Cornell University in New York). They were established pursuant to the Morrill Act (1862) which encouraged state-run universities to accommodate new educational needs in the context of the Industrial Revolution and the growing demand for democracy and equity in social relations. (Today, there are land-grant institutions in every American state which include some of the most prestigious institutions of higher education (not least Michigan State University, Ohio State University and Pennsylvania State University as well as the enormously successful University of California (and, speaking personally, the site of my own first graduate degree, the University of Hawai’i). A century or so later, the United States also introduced the unusually progressive Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (1944), which provided for the education of veterans of World War II, was a crucial element in the massive expansion of postsecondary facilities well into the 1960s and has been kept more or less up to date providing education and training support for armed service personnel after returning to civilian life today.

At the elementary and secondary school level, however, increasingly heated controversies that are much less common outside America are taking place. One focuses on “charter schools,” an innovation originally undertaken for putatively progressive purposes developed by University of Massachusetts education professor Ray Budde (1996) and American Federation of Teachers’ leader Al Shanker (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Larkin, 2016). In the 1990s, charter schools were introduced to enhance educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged children by recruiting dedicated teachers, reducing bureaucratic control, opening the way to new pedagogical methods, but keeping a close eye on performance and educational accountability. At the outset, the main hope was to reform education by giving teachers more autonomy and freedom to innovate in collaboration with local school boards and the communities they served. Almost as soon as they had opened, Shanker renounced them, for he saw immediately what they could and would become.

“There is no more reason to pay for private education than there is to pay for a private swimming pool for those who do not use public facilities.” – Al Shanker

By 2010, as in other places and circumstances, the term “reform” had been purloined by reactionary anti-government factions and turned to the purpose of privatization. So, charter schools lost the sheen of innovation and experimentation and acquired a thick veneer of right-wing rhetoric. They were increasingly seen as opportunities for religious zealots, segregationists,

“social conservatives” and assorted special interests to escape both what they conceived as “lefty-liberal” educators and also professional academic accountability—with the added advantage of doing so with funds appropriated from the public purse.

To be fair, the range of charter schools was broad and no doubt some remain true to the original vision. Many others, however, have come under the sway of plutocrats with their own agendas or have been started up by the same small group of billionaires—not least Bill Gates, Eli Broad and the friendly folks who own Walmart (Rich, 2014). At the same time, it must be acknowledged that opinions on charter schools was and remains no mere partisan matter. As Diane Ravitch (2016: 58), an early “reform” supporter and now one of charter schooling’s most consistent critics put it: “if the privatization movement were confined to Republicans, there might be a vigorous political debate about the wisdom of privatizing the nation’s public schools. But the Obama administration has been just as enthusiastic about privately managed charter schools as the Republicans.”

II

In *School Choice: The End of Public Education?* Mercedes K. Schneider lays out a strong case that, however well-intentioned the founers of the charter movement may have been, the results have been ambivalent in terms of the qualitative results for students. While some of America’s approximately 7,000 charter schools apparently do an excellent job of educating young people, others fall below the norm and some have made frankly fraudulent claims of success where little or none exists. Moreover, the initiative has largely come under tight political control by individuals and interests that are not only primarily concerned with financial gain, but are also motivated by nothing less than a desire to undermine public education and replace it with a competitive market model drawing upon the insights of free-marketer Milton Friedman who later served as chief economic inspiration for Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet who took power on September 11, 1973 in a US-sponsored coup that resulted in the death of democratically elected President Salvador Allende. Friedman’s scheme was deftly deployed for the first time in the wake of the historic US Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* which guaranteed equal education to US citizens regardless of race and thereby created instant demand from segregationists who wished to have their children attend all-white schools.

In charter schools, teachers would be given the opportunity to draw upon their expertise to create high-performing educational laboratories from which the traditional public schools could learn. – Al Shanker

So, entrepreneurs who bundle the notion of philanthropy with the reality of a profit motive and a sometimes strident political ideology have managed to capture a sizeable share of the market (Walmart being involved to the level of about 25% of existing charter schools). The goal is plainly to make education into a commodity for purchase in a market unrestrained by legislative regulation and academic oversight. In the process, they intended to make schools free to accommodate the ideological preferences of any religious, political or social movement with the assets to establish an online or “bricks and mortar” presence. Charter schools are also the intended beneficiaries of the parallel campaign to permit “school vouchers” for individuals who

choose to enroll their children in either charter or private schools and to offset prohibitive tuition fees while simultaneously draining money from public education's lean and shriveling funds.

III

Setting aside concerns about overarching ideological inclinations, Schneider's argument is especially convincing on the question of the threat to public education. Not only are they very lucrative (especially when located in cyberspace), but they receive public funding which, of course, takes desperately needed cash from the public system proper. They make money from a variety of sources. Schneider cites examples of perfectly legal but ethically shady transactions. They may subcontract from public schools, selectively recruit students from those schools, take advantage of an array of tax credits and collect the public schools' full share of government funding. What's more, even (or especially) the biggest among them are rarely monitored and held accountable, whether financially in terms of what goes in as cash or educationally in terms of what goes out as graduates. Like their college and university analogs, they can produce abysmal results and yet amass fortunes. For example, K12 Inc., which is listed on the New York Stock Exchange cheerfully hands students a computer and, without the capital and operating budgets needed to maintain a physical plant, employ teachers and support staff at decent union rates, pay for the upkeep of buildings and grounds and maybe have funds left over for a few real books in the library or a soccer ball to kick around, still walks away with the full state-funded cost of a real education.

One thing that most of us know about philanthropies is that they have almost completely abandoned public education. They think that the public schools that enroll 94% of the children are hopeless. They don't like public schools. They don't like unions. They want public schools to operate like businesses. – Diane Ravitch

Schneider doesn't mince her words. Charter schools, she insists, are "parasites." Whether in the form of publically funded "prep schools," sanctuaries for subcultures which seek refuge from science and social justice, or side-rails for splinter groups (and despite the fraction that are trying their best a quarter-century after Shanker recoiled from the monster he'd helped create), their capacity to permanently disable public education is immense. Were I a wagering man, I would bet that the subtitle of her book will be answered in the negative; however, just because public education is not brought to an end, it doesn't mean it will flourish. This is especially so in light of Donald Trump's selection of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education. The daughter in law of the founder of Amway, a notorious American marketing giant which previously "settled" allegations of tax fraud for a cool \$25,000,000, Ms. DeVos is an ardent charter school supporter.

According to *Detroit Free Press* editorialist Stephen Henderson (Felton, 2016), "it doesn't matter that charter schools aren't giving any of the things they promised 22 years ago, DeVos ... and her family funds any effort to block any changes or accountability or standards that would perhaps produce better results for us." Mercedes Schneider would not be surprised and readers of her well-researched, well-written and thoughtful book will understand why.

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