Middle-class school choice in urban spaces: The economics of public schooling and globalized education reform, by Emma E. Rowe, New York, Routledge, 2017, 198 pp., ISBN: 978-1-138-12041-9

In recent decades, neoliberalism has transformed education systems worldwide through the privatization of education provision and the introduction of managerial logics into the public sector. Existing research puts emphasis on the global drivers behind neoliberal reforms and on the educational inequalities they generate. There is also research looking at the emerging educational movements trying to resist these reforms and promote a more equity driven approach to educational change.

The book 'Middle-class school choice in urban spaces: The economics of public schooling and globalized education reform', authored by Emma Rowe, offers a novel angle to the enactment of neoliberal education reforms, as well as a more complex understanding of who advocates, reproduces and resists neoliberalism in education. The book explores the main drivers behind ongoing global transformations in education, but focuses, at a more micro level, on the arising tensions and paradoxes that prevail within public schooling, pro-public education activism, and families' identities in the context of such transformations. Specifically, on the basis of a five-year ethnographic research in the city of Melbourne, Rowe shows that neoliberalizing education reforms rearticulate and resignify public education, as well as the roles and relationships between the State, its citizens and the market. Theoretically, the book is located at the intersection between sociological literature on school choice, class theory, urban studies, and social movements.

In a context of a global capitalist crisis and growing social inequalities, education plays an increasingly pivotal role as a positional value. As a consequence,

competition to access high quality public education intensifies, especially among the middle class, and many families organize campaigns for the creation of new public schools in their neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, as the book shows, there are lights and shadows of this renewed interest on public schooling. On the one hand, emerging parental movements demanding public education and the creation of new public schools are a *de facto* practice of resistance against education privatization, and have the potential of promoting more democratic, fair and diverse educational systems. On the other hand, these movements can also operate as a source of education stratification and social polarization, especially when the demand for brand-new local public schools becomes a 'class strategy' to access homogeneous middle-class educational spaces, where whiteness is the prevalent norm. Thus, as the book argues, despite the renewed interest in public schooling by middle-class parents, equality of opportunities and equity are compromised by the individualistic and competitive logics engendered by the performative school market.

Regarding the specific contents of the book, *chapter two* offers a global view of two different sociopolitical and economic contexts (the student movement in Chile, and the Occupy the Department of Education movement in the US) as a heuristic to understand under what circumstances collective action and social protests regarding education emerge. This chapter, which draws on social movement theory, also explores the narratives and ideologies of public schooling that circulate within the mentioned movements, and the role played by class in the articulation of contemporary educational conflicts. Although some scholars claim that the concept of class is becoming old-fashioned in sociological research, the examples presented in this chapter 'demonstrate the significance of class, but clearly in generative ways' (p. 31).

Chapter three presents the methodology of the study, and it does so in a non-conventional and rather narrative way. Methodologically, but also ethically speaking, the research behind this book is challenging, especially due to the identification and personal relationships that Rowe built with the pro-public school campaigners. However, the chapter shows that the steps and procedures followed by Rowe to overcome both methodological and ethical challenges are very rigorous and transparent. Despite the centrality of the ethnographic approach, the book triangulates different methods and data sources, including quantitative data, which denotes the ability of the author to put together a coherent argument on the basis of quite different sources of evidence.

Chapter four adopts a glocalization approach to examine the social imaginaries of the participants around the concepts of community and neighbourhood. The chapter analyzes the sociocultural dynamics that occur within urban spaces and the role of local community schools in the reconfiguration of class and race divides within the local education market. Here, according to Rowe, whiteness prevails among pro-public school campaigners 'as an essential constituent for leveraging advantage and collectively evading differences' (p. 71). Despite romantic discourses about the community and the local space articulated by the campaigners, the 'neighbourhood tends to be imagined in homogenous ways, captured as an "educated" community with shared values. This is […] rooted in an evasive sense of whiteness' (p. 79).

Chapter five presents quantitative data that shows that, all things being equal, private schools are not better performers than public schools. However, public schools, especially in countries with a relatively big and expanding private sector such as Australia, tend to concentrate the most disadvantaged students. Many middle-class families try to avoid public schools that concentrate disadvantaged and working-class

students, but also tend to avoid private schools that charge high fees and that embody religious and/or conservative values that do not share. The economic pressures faced by families under 'post-welfare policy conditions' favours that important factions of the middle-class choose to repopulate certain types of public schools, as the next chapters make clear.

Chapters six and seven present the main results of the ethnography. These chapters reflect on the arising tensions between the campaigners' left-leaning narratives to justify their choices, and their will to distinguish themselves from stigmatized working-class schools' options. Rowe illustrates the implications of these pro-public school campaigns in terms of class power, democracy and inequality. Drawing on Hirschman's concepts of 'voice' and 'exit', Rowe points out that, in the education marketplace, two apparently opposite figures, the passive consumer and the active citizen, meet. The 'consumer-citizen' uses effectively both 'consumer rights' and democratic participation to ensure the achievement of their individual and collective goals:

> The campaigners are drawing on citizen rights and speaking about the nobility of public education, whilst simultaneously utilizing their leverage as consumers and voters. These strategies could be read as a reaction and a form of resistance towards the significantly decreased funding and mass-closure of public schools; yet, the strategic avoidance of nearby public schools and agitating for your 'own' could also be argued as class entitlement and class power (p. 132).

As a result, the public schools that are created as a response to these parental movements are very different to conventional public schools, to the point that some interviewed parents qualify these public schools as 'hybrid' (in the sense that are in the middle of typical public schools and much more marketized institutions). In fact, as Rowe illustrates with great clarity, these new public schools have many similarities with

elite private schools in terms of architecture, symbology, discourse, resources available and even in terms of the discriminatory practices they enact against students with especial needs.

The final chapter, *chapter eight*, synthesizes and discusses the struggles, dilemmas and tensions described in previous chapters, and explores potential scenarios and limitations for public schooling in the neoliberal era. In this context, parental networks act as both economic brokers and political actors that try to influence policy-making processes in complex ways. The interaction between these parental networks and segmented local education markets reproduces social inequalities and race-based urban segregation, and strengthens class-based identities. As a culmination of this analysis, Rowe identifies several paradoxes behind school choice and reflects on how the competitive pressures of the education marketplace 'affects' school choosers and generate feelings of disempowerment and anxiety among them. The campaigners' choices are usually driven by social democratic values and aspirations, but also configure risk-averse and instrumental strategies for maintaining their distinctiveness and settling new social and geographical boundaries.

To conclude, 'Middle-class school choice in urban spaces' is an essential piece of research to understand how market-driven policy principles are transforming not only education provision and the logics of action of schools, but also the rationalities, political actions and choices of new generations of citizen-consumers within the education marketplace. This book pushes us to think beyond the binary categories of public and private education by showing how segmentation dynamics (on the basis of school location, composition and financing) make the configuration of public education increasingly similar to the stratified nature of more privatized education systems. Overall, this book is crucial to understand the changing meaning of public schooling in

post-welfare societies and in increasingly fragmented urban spaces. Rowe's work is an invitation to explore emerging dynamics of endogenous privatization and segmentation within public education systems worldwide, as well as to analyze how these dynamics are irremediably mediated by class, race and space.