

generation of nurses effectively, as well as those keen to learn how to be an 'expert' nurse, what a rewarding, but complex and challenging pursuit that is.

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School choice: the findings, by Henry J. Walberg, Washington, Cato Institute, 2007, 132 pp., £4.86 (paperback), ISBN 1-93-399504-1

This short, readable book provides an introduction to some of the key mechanisms through which the currently fashionable 'choice agenda' is being pursued in the US. It presents an overview of some of the empirical research literature on 'school choice effectiveness' to support an argument that it would be 'good public policy to give all families ready access to that choice' (110). Given that choice has become the watchword of current political discourse on public service reform in general, and schools policy in particular in the UK, the book is certainly topical for policy analysts here.

The introductory chapter positions the book's main discussion against a backdrop of failing public schools in the US and an assumption, itself questionable, that national economic growth is imperilled by educational under-achievement. In this context, the quest for policy instruments which might improve state education becomes public policy priority number one. Chapter 2 deals with charter schools, a US hybrid precursor of the new English city academies and trust schools, in which groups of parents, teachers, businesspeople or charities control schools which operate with relative autonomy outside of the usual constraints of the school district. Research is cited to demonstrate that these are more productive, costing less to achieve similar, or better, results than their public school cousins and that the competition generated by them spurs neighbouring public schools to raise their game. Other chapters report some interesting, sometimes counterintuitive, research findings. Private schools, half of which are Catholic, are attended by 11% of US children and are addressed in Chapter 4. We learn that they mirror more closely the ethnic composition of the population as a whole than do public schools, in addition to achieving better outcomes. Chapter 3 discusses voucher systems in which the parents of children in failing public schools are given vouchers which they may use to purchase a place at a private school. They appear to result in significant achievement gains for African-Americans to the extent, the author claims, that the race gap would be eliminated after seven years. Intriguingly, the same does not appear true for other ethnic groups. A fifth chapter examines how these three choice mechanisms – charters, private schools and vouchers – promote competition amongst schools and school districts which, in turn, leads to improved standards. This content might easily have been subsumed within the previous three chapters, since market competition is central to the overall analysis rather than a theoretical add-on. Throughout, the method is to present a meta-review of the literature on school choice policy programmes using outcomes of test performance, costs, parental opinion and social integration to calibrate their success.

The book uses the research literature to argue emphatically that academic achievement and productivity is better in both private and charter schools. In fairness, the author, Henry Walberg, a University of Illinois academic, does acknowledge some of the methodological difficulties of attributing findings to school choice since it is difficult to control for other factors. But this book does not convey the clinical deliberations of a dispassionate scholar. Rather, it is a highly politicised work of free-market advocacy. Given its provenance, this is unsurprising. Walberg is a distinguished fellow at the Hoover Institute, dedicated to the expansion of markets, privatisation and the minimisation of 'government intrusion' (Hoover Institute 2007), and has long campaigned for school choice. The publishers, Cato Institute, based in Washington DC, similarly seek 'to broaden the parameters of public policy debate to allow consideration of the traditional American principles of limited government, individual liberty, free markets and peace' (Cato Institute 2007). This book, then, along with the Indiana-based Friedman Foundation's (2007) latest edition of *ABCs of School Choice* is the latest volume from the US free-market neons which purports to present a consensus of the available research literature. Equally forceful and detailed rebuttals of Walberg's summary of the literature can be expected from activist policy analysts on the left at, for example, the Universities of Colorado and Arizona. Meanwhile, two overarching criticisms must suffice here.

First, the ideological slant of the book means that the virtues of free market competition are taken as read, and so Walberg expects vouchers to improve school effectiveness because 'competition brings out the best in people and organisations' (104). Thus, he is opposed to interest groups and socio-economic models which get in the way of this and, throughout, there is disdain for those the author claims to have vested interests in maintaining the status quo. He talks of 'extricating schools from [the] stifling regulatory and contractual constraints' (31) of school district administrators, attacks the 'slackness of many practicing educators' (99) and, almost inevitably one feels, portrays education professors as out-of-touch mavericks whose madcap ideas conspire to frustrate the noble aspirations of the public for their children. One of the oddities arising from this approach is an inversion in which education consumers' views come to define reality, in contradistinction to the views of professionals who have worked in schools or studied education policy.

The second criticism concerns shortcomings in both the range and depth of analysis in the literature review. Some key international studies which do not support the author's ideological stance are ignored and, as the chapter headings suggest, the book is very much particularised to the American experience of school choice policies. Where international studies are cited, these are rarely discussed in detail and so the attempt to draw parallels within an international context is not convincing. This is exacerbated by the presence of cursory summaries of dubious accuracy. A section headed 'Charter Schools in England', for example, informs readers that families in England and Wales have enjoyed access to a 'comprehensive nationwide school choice program' (26) since the Education Reform Act of 1988. This is certainly news to this English reviewer! The reader is then rather sceptical of the veracity of the similar thumbnail portraits of voucher systems in Sweden, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Chile and Columbia which are used to bolster sweeping ideological points such as the claim that market forces 'may be the tide that indeed lifts all boats' (54).

The press release accompanying the book claims that Walberg 'sets aside policy and philosophical controversies about school choice, instead focussing on empirical results'. This is designed to imply both the academic purity of the book and the ideological contamination of those opposed to the choice agenda. It is also a spurious claim. The question is not just whether some schools which might be regarded as part of a choice programme produce better results but why this is the case; this is not adequately addressed. It is suggested that autonomy in school governance is a central factor, but this is not the same as either producer competition

or parental choice and the point is, in any case, insufficiently explored. Also ignored is the fact that the choice programmes discussed are almost always cited within a context of differential provision. If all parents within a school district were to be given access to choice – an aspiration Walberg claims to support – the focus of the discussion shifts to how pupils are to be selected in oversubscribed schools. Neither of these issues can be dismissed as merely abstract questions for the eccentrics of the education establishment, since they present practical and logistical problems which the neo-cons have consistently failed to address. Walberg unwittingly acknowledges this when he writes that ‘even if private schools did not yield superior achievement gains, it seems likely that many parents would like to have their children exposed to peer groups bound for prestigious institutions’ (63). In the choice mechanisms Walberg outlines, it is only because choice is, and can only be, unavailable to all that a small proportion of parents and their children are able to take advantage of such opportunities.

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Universities and strategic knowledge creation: specialization and performance in Europe, edited by Andrea Bonaccorsi and Cinzia Daraio, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2007, 462 pp., £95.00 (hardback), ISBN 1-84-720110-5

This wide-ranging edited volume arising out of two empirical transnational Euro-studies should be in the library of any university where research or teaching is undertaken in higher education policy, economics or strategic management. It provides some useful background reading for doctoral students starting their theses on these aspects of European higher education. However, few will want, or be able, to read it from cover to cover. The book will please most of its readers some of the time and few of them all the time.

The two Euro-studies are AQUAMETH (advanced quantitative methods for the evaluation of public research systems) and CHINC (Changes in University Incomes: Their Impact on University-Based Research and Innovation). The former comprises detailed quantitative case studies of the inputs to and outputs from university research in six countries: Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the UK. These provide the empirical material for a large part of the book. CHINC provided supplementary data from the same six countries plus another six: the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary and the Netherlands.

At the most basic level, this book is a useful source of information about higher education institutions and systems in the six AQUAMETH countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and university-level quantitative data across a wide range of European countries. One problem with the descriptive material, as the authors themselves acknowledge, is that higher education policy is evolving rapidly in all the countries and several details are already out of date. For example, in the UK study EU undergraduate fees are said to be £1000 per year (307), but the rise in the maximum to £3000 is acknowledged on the following page.