

Book Review: Brown, Bailey A. *Kindergarten Panic: Parental Anxiety and School Choice*. Princeton University Press, 2025. ix+208 pages. Hardcover, \$120.00. Paperback, \$29.95.

Brown introduces us to a world that is rarely spoken about unless you are a parent. The concept of school decision-making and persistent inequalities create a variation in how families develop and manage labor strategies. Brown highlights the multistep process of school selection and enrollment for kindergarten students. Through numerous case studies from mothers of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, Brown illustrates how the multistep process of school selection begins a year before the actual school year starts. The navigation of the process requires parents to make sense of a highly complex school choice system while managing the fears of school decision-making.

Brown dives into how choice-based educational policies have increased the school options available for elementary school parents. Conceptualizing how parents strive to make decisions on schools and form school preferences provides a unique understanding of the various paths' parents take on their journey to find a preferred school. Brown also illustrates how the system reproduces inequalities school choice policies were designed to reduce. Through her research, Brown offers a clear understanding of how advantages and disadvantages operate as parents make school choice decisions. Brown presents a very strong argument that school choice inequality is driven by parents' unequal decision-making effort as they search for schools.

The majority of Brown's research consists of interviewing working-class mothers who scouted schools outside of their neighborhood. Mothers spent most of their time traveling to different areas across the city to deliver their children to various schools. It was noted parental involvement varies for mothers and fathers. Mothers engaged in intensified labor to search for schools for their children amid an uncertain school context. By identifying similarities across

backgrounds, Brown investigates how working-class mothers engaged in additional labor to evaluate school and neighborhood safety. Brown notes that in spite of neighborhood structural inequalities and varying class backgrounds, mothers engaged in the same extensive decision-making process comparative to fathers. Per Brown's extensive research, fathers across a variety of social class backgrounds and marital status participate considerably less and invest in less energy in the search for school information. Intensive maternal ideologies push mothers to invest in detailed efforts to search for schools that are not aligned with how fathers approach the school decision-making process due to the development of new school choice systems. Brown notes educational policies as well as enrollment expectations have increased labor for families, and this burden has disproportionately fallen on mothers. Per a series of case studies, Brown notes working-class mothers depend on their ability to single-handedly navigate a multifaceted school choice process. This includes application procedures, networking with school officials and other parents, and campus tours. Societal connections are beneficial to middle-class mothers. Unlike some middle-class mothers, working-class mothers research school options to ensure their children will be safe and not have to worry about criminal activity outside the doors of the school. Per Brown, black mothers regulate their parenting strategies within the framework of neighborhood crime and these protective strategies become part of the school search process. For working-class mothers, questions of safety and security become a priority. In spite of class-based differences, Brown notes the ideology of "intensive mothering" encourages all mothers to sacrifice their time and effort in their school search. Married fathers shifted the intensive search to their spouses. Single fathers often minimize the amount of work required for the intensive school search. Brown relates gendered aspects of parental involvement create expectations for partnered fathers to be less committed in school matters and the decision-making process. Brown

interviewed fathers who had similar thoughts regarding school decision-making and frequently did not consider participation in the school search process reflective of their identity as a father. Based on the case studies, Brown suggests fathers of various class and racial as well as ethnic backgrounds feel less burdened by the school decision-making process than mothers.

The book is structured with research data and historical facts regarding parents from various social-economic, racial, and partnered backgrounds. Brown utilizes case studies with comprehensive interviews as core her research. The book presents data that support actions taken to address the identified concerns of parents as well as action taken in their journeys. The latter chapters of the book focus on segregation and how racially diverse schools are considered low performing. Schools that are considered well-performing have very few students of color. Brown explores how many parents of color and immigrants face the dilemma of wanting their children to receive a high-quality education but not being the only child of color in their classroom. Parents consider how their child may feel marginalized and the level of peer engagement while receiving a good education. Brown delves into the concerns of anti-Black racism that Black parents must contend with when making educational decisions. America's history of racial discrimination in educational settings define how Black and Brown parents engage in today's modern school system.

To further illustrate her point, Brown explores three types of racialized work parents contend with during and after enrollment. Racialized gauging, racialized auditing, and racialized resistance and deflection focus on the steps parents take during their journey. These steps include initial search for schools, monitoring racial climates, parents enduring their own marginalized experiences, and overcoming racialized treatment in schools. Brown discusses research that identifies white families consider the racial components of school as a method of excluding

certain schools for enrollment. The avoidance of pre-dominantly Black and Latino schools by white families helps intensify segregation levels across schools. The study also focuses on what happens after the enrollment in the attempts to cultivate neighborhood engagement. Parents want their children to have a stronger sense of community and strong neighborhood friendships. By having school choice options, many children rarely interact with children within their own neighborhoods. Brown examines how parents re-evaluate their relationships in the neighborhoods in the framework of school choice. Inequalities across neighborhoods define parents' access to connections and comfortability engaging with neighbors. Brown explores how school choice options may expand where children go to school; however, it predictably weakens local community ties for low-income families and low-income neighborhoods. Many families strive towards inclusion strategies and inclusion strategies with constraints. By exploring the labor of school decision-making in the area of school choice, Brown provides the reader with a wealth of knowledge and a challenge to engage in the improvement of school choice options while fighting for educational equity.

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