



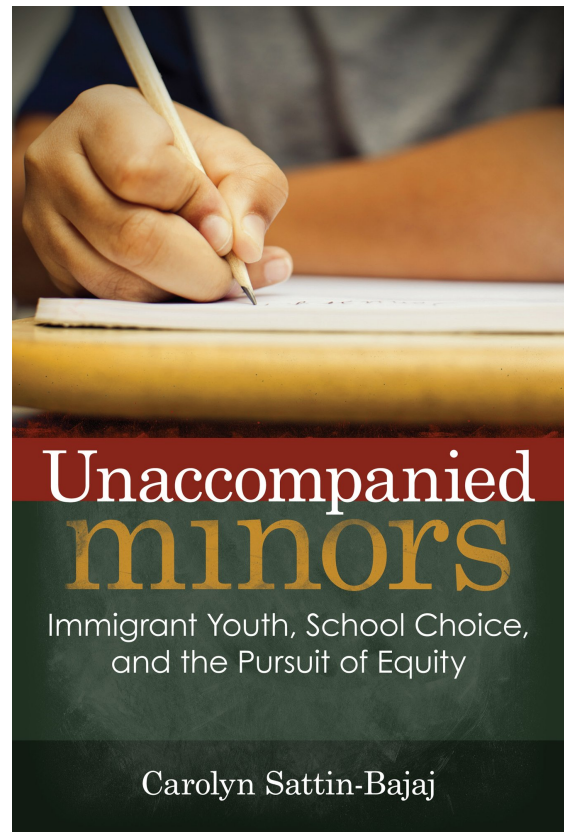
Sattin-Bajaj, C. (2014). *Unaccompanied minors: Immigrant youth, school choice, and the pursuit of equity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Pp. vi + 209

ISBN: 978-1-61250-709-5

Reviewed by Stephanie Burch-Bynum
Indianapolis, Indiana
United States

The New York City public high school system has offered a school choice program since 1963 (Sattin-Bajaj, 2014, p. 19). Yet, only 45% of New York City students are attending the school of their choice (Rosenbloom, 2009). In the book, *Unaccompanied Minors: Immigrant Youth, School Choice, and the Pursuit of Equity* (2014), Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj examined the reasons why. She argued that the lack of accountability for middle school guidance counselors, the limited availability of translated materials, and the inadequate participation of parents hinders the opportunity of low income Latin American immigrant students to attend the high school of their choice. As a result, New York City public high schools remain segregated based on class. Sattin-Bajaj supported these arguments using the findings of a two and half year study that she conducted in 2008 through 2010 in public schools throughout New York City. Data was gathered using observation of school choice events; document analysis of school choice materials; ethnographic observations of middle school guidance counselors and the principal at one



middle school; and interviews with administrators, parents and students.

The book was divided into two parts. Part 1 was a critique of district policies, school practices, and the expectation of parental participation in the school choice process by school administrators. Part 2 focused on how students and their families select high schools in the school choice process. Strategies to overcome the disparities in school choice practices were also included. There was also a discussion of white privilege in the endnotes. One of the major themes of the book was the lack of accountability among middle school guidance counselors. Sattin-Bajaj asserted that school district officials were explicit in describing the pivotal role that middle school guidance counselors were expected to play in the high school choice process, but there were no standards in place or a process to enforce them (pp. 38, 41, 52-53). One school district official stated, "Well, we can't really see what each guidance counselor is doing. It has to happen at the school level. The AP [assistant principal] or principal, if that's part of the rubric that they use to evaluate the guidance counselor than maybe it can show up there" (p. 41). School district officials relied on principals and assistant principals to provide oversight in the high school choice process. However, a district official commented that principals "are not given any incentives to be more engaged in the process...." (p. 42). Moreover, one assistant principal declared, "I'm not involved in that process...I help if the guidance counselor asks me to intervene, but it's really up to the guidance counselor who is in charge of it" (p.55). Sattin-Bajaj concluded that the lack of accountability among middle school guidance counselors was one of the reasons that students were placed into their neighborhood high schools to which they would have been assigned had there not been a school choice program (p.63).

Another major theme was lack of translated materials, which contributed to the inadequacies in the ways that information was disseminated particularly among low income immigrant Latin American students. Many Latino students relied on the *High School Directory* as their primary source

of information about high schools in New York City but it is only printed in English (pp. 31-32). Only students with internet access were able to use the electronic version which was translated into other languages. Non- English speaking students, who were not able to read the printed directory or had no internet access to it, were placed at a disadvantage when it was time to complete the application. When students could not name schools where they wanted to apply, guidance counselors entered their local zoned high school which was usually low performing and in a low income neighborhood (pp.62, 74).

Sattin-Bajaj argued that immigrant Latin American parents were less involved in the school choice process than any other group. She wrote, “Regardless of a students’ academic track, achievement level, nativity, or country of origin, if a student interviewee was born to an immigrant mother from Mexico, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, or other parts of Latin American, he/she was considerably less likely to report receiving any home-based support in identifying schools and completing the application than Asian-origin gifted and talented-track students, African American, or third-generation-plus students” (pp. 91-92, 96, 100, 131). She concluded that the minimal involvement of immigrant parents in the high school choice program was because of cultural differences in parenting styles (p. 137). According to her observations, Latin American immigrant parenting styles granted middle school students more autonomy to make decisions regarding their future based on the research that the student conducted independently (pp. 132-137). She also discovered that immigrant parents believed that all high schools were the same and that they did not rely on school personnel for advice (pp. 132, 134, 136,140).

I disagreed with Sattin-Bajaj’s arguments regarding the minimal involvement of immigrant parents in the high school choice process. Immigrant parents are playing an interactive role by providing guidance and assisting their child to use the *High School Directory* to make decisions rather than assuming an authoritative role by conducting research, completing the application, and ultimately

making decisions on behalf of their child. Immigrant parents are allowing their children some autonomy in making school decisions, but this freedom is couched in their belief that all high schools are the same. Therefore it does not matter to them which high school their child chooses as long as it is not too far away (pp. 132, 136). Since the teaching profession is highly regulated, it did not seem unreasonable to me that immigrant parents would assume that the teachers employed at one school should be just as competent as the teachers working at another. I also thought Sattin-Bajaj's comparisons of immigrant parents to native-born United States Citizens involvement unfair. Immigrant parents did not go through the New York public school system as students themselves and as a result, they lacked insider knowledge about it especially in regards to the roles of school personnel and the resources that are available to them. It was not just to attribute this lack of information to cultural differences and immigrant parenting styles. Furthermore, Sattin-Bajaj's recommendations to reform the school choice process should have included suggestions to make the *High School Directory* more comprehensive and accessible because the directory was the only source of information about the school choice process for many immigrant parents.

Sattin-Bajaj (2014) differed in her approach from other studies on school choice because of her focus on the factors that influence school choice in New York City public high schools. New York City allows eighth grade students to select up to twelve public high schools that they would like attend. Previous research studies examined school choice in the form of school voucher systems and tax credit scholarships that are used to attend private schools. For example, Fleming (2008) determined that school vouchers increased support for public school funding but decreased overall support for public schools in Milwaukee.

Other researchers also focused on the outcomes of school choice to determine its impact on socioeconomic stratification and racial segregation in schools such as Carlson (2014) and Farrie (2008). Carlson's study (2014) of Colorado

Public Schools found that school choice increased socioeconomic stratification and decreased racial segregation. Like Sattin-Bajaj, Carlson also examined factors that contribute to school choice such the lack of transportation, the limited number of seats in high-performing schools, and policies which allow schools to reject applicants. Unlike Sattin-Bajaj, Farrie (2008) examined how the racial composition of schools impacted the decision to attend schools in school choice programs. She found that in Philadelphia white flight increased in urban public school choice programs but decreased in suburban public schools school choice programs. Sattin-Bajaj did not state that the racial composition of high schools was a factor in school choice decisions in the New York. Instead, factors such as low academic performance or safety concerns were listed as the primary reasons that certain schools were avoided by students and parents participating in the New York City's school choice program. It is unknown whether or not Sattin-Bajaj asked race or class related questions. It would have been interesting if the questions that were asked in the interviews of students, parents, and administrators were included in the book. Moreover, Nathanson, Corcoran, and Baker-Smith (2013)'s report on the high school placement of New York City's low - achieving students found that low and high-achieving students both selected high schools that were close to their homes as the first choice. Low-achieving students typically lived near less selective high schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The focus of Nathanson, Corcoran, and Baker-Smith's (2013) quantitative study was not to determine why students and families selected particular high schools over others but to examine the patterns of students' high school choices and placements. Whereas one of the goals of the book was to examine the processes involved in school choice in order to determine how they influence students' choice. Sattin-Bajaj used qualitative data to fill this gap in the research.

In another study on New York City's high school choice program, Rosenbloom (2009) studied the attitudes of high school students who were not accepted by their schools of choice due to the

limited number of seats or the school policies more selective schools. She discovered that students who applied to more selective high schools but were not accepted felt that they were deceived by the high school choice program. Sattin-Bajaj's study examined the students who actively participated in the school choice program and those opted to attend their neighborhood schools. She did not include the students who were not admitted into their schools of choice. Her recommendations were intended to encourage students' and their families to become more proactive in the school choice program. If she included the group of students who actively participated in the high school choice program but failed to be admitted into their preferred schools of choice then her recommendations may have been altered.

Finally, Bloom and Unterman's (2013) study on the outcomes of students who were accepted to small high schools in the New York City's public high school choice program may have also altered Sattin-Bajaj's assertions about the relationship of attending selective high schools and college readiness. Bloom and Unterman (2013) found that students who attended small public high schools of choice did show an increase in the rate of receiving Regent's diplomas and preparedness in college level English as compared to students who attended other high schools. There were no significant differences between students attending small public high schools of choice and students attending other types of high schools in the rates of students receiving other types of high school diplomas or preparedness in college level math.

School administrators, high school counselors, and school district personnel interested in studying school choice in New York City public high schools should read the research studies on the outcomes of school choice in conjunction with the *Unaccompanied Minors* in order to have a more complete perspective on New York City's public high school choice program. School district personnel will be interested in learning how school choice policies translate into practice at the school level. School administrators and high school counselors would be interested in learning their role

in influencing school choice decisions. Both district and school level personnel would be interested in learning how a policy that was enacted to desegregate high schools by expanding school choice beyond the neighborhood schools served to reinforce class divisions. The concluding chapter offered suggestions for meaningful changes that should occur at the school and district levels in order to ensure that students are attending the high schools of their choice.

References

- Bloom, H., & Unterman, R. (2013). Sustained progress: New findings about the effectiveness and operation of small public high schools of choice in New York City. New York: MDRC.
- Carlson, D. (2014). School choice and educational stratification. *The Policy Studies Journal*, 42(2), 269-304.
- Farrie, D. C. (2008). School choice and segregation: How race influences choices and the consequences for neighborhood public schools. (Doctoral dissertation). UMI. (3319986).
- Fleming, D. J. (2008). Learning from schools: School choice, political learning, and policy feedback. *The Policy Studies Journal*, 42(1), 55-78.
- Nathanson, L., Corcoran, S., & Baker-Smith, C. (2013). High school choice in New York City: A report on the school choices and placements of low achieving students. New York City, NY: The Research Alliance for New York City Schools, Institute for Social and Education Policy, New York University Steinherdt.
- Rosenbloom, S. R. (2009). My so-called choice: The trappings of school choice for non-admits. *Urban Rev*, 42, 1-21. doi: 10.1007/s11256-009-0121-6.

About the Reviewer


Stephanie Burch-Bynum, Ph.D.
American College of Education
Indianapolis, Indiana
United States

Dr. Stephanie Burch-Bynum, formerly known as Stephanie Robinson, works as an adjunct professor in the Educational Leadership Program at the American College of Education. Her research interests include multicultural education, immigrant education, and issues of race, class, gender in education. She is the author of *History of Immigrant Female Students in Chicago Public Schools, 1900–1950* published by Peter Lang.

**education review // reseñas educativas**

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

editors: **gustavo e. fischman /
melissa cast-brede / gene v glass****Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University**

 *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview