


Education Review Reseñas Educativas
Resenhas Educativas

December 8, 2021

ISSN 1094-5296

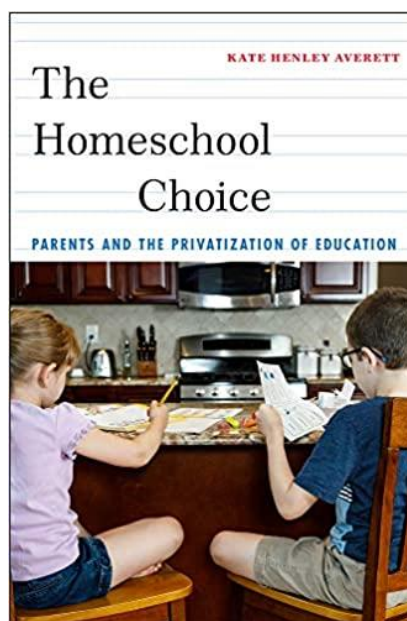
Averett, K. H. (2021). *The homeschool choice: Parents and the privatization of education*. New York University Press.

Pp. 257

ISBN: 9781479891610

Reviewed by Michael W. Apple
University of Wisconsin, Madison &
University of Manchester
United States

Over the past two decades, in a number of books and articles I have paid particular attention to homeschooling (M. W. Apple, 2006, 2020). Homeschooling is already one of the fastest growing movements in the United States and a number of other countries. But the COVID-19 pandemic has created the conditions for an even greater acceptance of homeschooling as a legitimate and seemingly necessary choice. At the same time, homeschooling continues to be a contentious subject and has been justifiably at the center of substantive debates (see, e.g., M. W. Apple, 2006; Lubienski & Brewer, 2015; Peters & Dwyer, 2019; Rothmel, 2015).



What started out as a movement largely dominated by conservative religious parents and activists and committed child-centered “unschoolers” has now spread to a much larger population. It has also become a site of a rapidly expanding for-profit publishing universe of “how to” manuals, curriculum materials, books aimed at psychological counseling for hard-pressed parents, and so much more. Indeed, typing the word “homeschooling” into the search function of one of the largest on-line book sellers gets you a list of materials that goes on for page after page after page. Homeschooling has become not only a growing “reform” but also quite a profitable one, as the home becomes a key arena for generating a lucrative market. This makes Kate Henley Averett’s book even more useful and timely.

The Homeschool Choice is important reading for anyone who wishes to understand the decisions that many parents make to homeschool their children.

It goes beyond the limits of previous research (viz., Stevens, 2001). It gives voice to a wide array of homeschoolers and uncovers a number of the tensions involved and the complicated and at times unpredictable reasons that parents choose to homeschool. It also can serve to interrupt some of the stereotypes that people may have of who homeschoolers are and what they supposedly “all believe.” Finally, it has a nice “edge” to it. Averett connects her descriptions and interviews with a cogent critical analysis of gendered realities, worries about children’s present and future, the role of the state in a time of the loss of legitimacy of public services, and the increasing acceptance of neoliberal policies and identities in our society.

The fundamental question that originally guided her research was “[In] an adamantly politically divided society, especially about topics related to sexuality and gender, how do these parents find themselves in similar positions, opting to homeschool their children?” (p. 3). Averett’s analysis is based on a nuanced set of interviews and observations of homeschoolers in Texas. Her decision to study homeschooling in Texas was quite a wise one. Texas homeschoolers are a diverse population: religious, secular, conservative, liberal, and unschooling as well as homeschooling. The state also enforces little accountability with very few regulations.

Averett also sees homeschooling as a social movement. This is a significant point. It has become increasingly clear that organized social movements play important roles in social and educational transformation (M. W. Apple, 2013). Drawing on social movement literature opens up ways of interpreting homeschooling and its genesis, tensions, contradictions, and possible futures in ways that highlight much of what can be missed if we simply ask about comparative achievement scores and similar things that are too often the only issues that are examined. The role of social movements is a point to which I shall return below.

One of Averett’s key foci is the existence of and changes and contradictions within the ideology of *intensive mothering*. This requires an extensive investment of time and money, an increasing reliance on “expert advice” (R. D. Apple, 2006), and a commitment by mothers to make their way through all of this to make an individualized private decision about their children. All of this is deeply connected to issues of gender and sexuality, different and at times competing understandings of childhood and what it means to be a “good mother,” and ultimately, beliefs about the purpose of education.

Motherhood and the gendered labor of educating “unique children” are crucial elements here. This creates a tension between mothers and public schooling. In a time of state disinvestment in public institutions under the mantle of neoliberal agendas, public schooling itself and the teaching and curricula that are standard fare in these institutions are increasingly seen as incompatible with meeting the unique individual needs of one’s child. This tension is paradoxically seemingly resolved through the discourse of “school choice,” a fundamental part of neoliberal policies and consciousness. Averett states this clearly.

These trends, when combined with the increased pressure for mothers to manage the individual needs of their children, effectively pit motherhood and public schools against each other. Mothers feel forced to take an oppositional stance toward public schools to ensure that their children's needs are met. When these needs are not met, the responsibility falls on the mother, not the school, to find an alternative solution. I argue that these narratives reveal how some mothers feel pushed into homeschooling, seeing it as a "choice" that they were forced into when faced with a lack of alternatives. (p. 14)

The ultimate effect is not only the growth of the numbers of parents engaged in homeschooling, but it weakens the collective political potential of these women. Indeed, if Averett and I are correct that collective actions of social movements are important parts of lasting social and educational transformation, the identities associated with democracy as "consumer choice" that are offered by neoliberalism act to interrupt collective action. They depoliticize issues in important ways, substituting a "thin" version of democracy for the thicker more participatory understanding and identities that produce lasting progressive effects (Apple, 2013; Apple et al., 2018).

These claims go to the heart of one of the book's underlying arguments. For Averett, the problem is not really homeschooling. The real problem basically is the issue of choice and the neoliberalization of schools and our consciousness. As she puts it, "Rather than asking ... whether homeschooling is a problem, I propose that my research indicates that a more fruitful question should be, is school choice a problem?" (p. 181).

This is an important point and is again one of the things that set Averett's book apart from a number of others. Her underlying argument is that homeschooling needs to be understood as an expansion of the acceptance of neoliberal ideologies and identities, something I too have argued in considerably greater detail in *Educating the "Right" Way* (M. W. Apple, 2006). However, here is one place where I wish *The Homeschool Choice* had gone somewhat further. While this is insightful, we need to be cautious of being overly reductive in our critical analyses. There is a danger of reducing homeschooling and the larger issue of school choice to only the effects of neoliberalism. As I document in my analyses of the complex ideological and cultural assemblage that stands behind the current emphases in education policies and their public support, this alliance and the range of identities it both produces and reinforces is not only a reflection of one tendency. Rather it is a complex and at times contradictory movement that sutures together elements of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, authoritarian populism, and particular forms of consciousness of fractions of the professional and managerial new middle class (M. W. Apple, 2006; Hall, 2017).

In this otherwise fine book, there is one other area where I wished Averett had dug deeper. It is not until the concluding chapter that she reminds the reader that much of the logic of school choice, and its justification in policies that emerged out of public choice theory, has its roots in the history of racist reactions against school integration. Racially inspired social movements – both seemingly populist and academic – thus played a key role here. This is made

very clear in Nancy MacLean’s powerful book *Democracy in Chains* (2017; see also Balmer, 2021). While it is surprising that Averett does not include MacLean’s work on this, it is worth paying attention to what she does say.

...[T]he logic of school choice emerged in the United States as an explicitly white-supremacist project, though these racist origins were obscured when the mantle of school choice was taken up by neoliberalism through the use of the race-neutral language of freedom and choice. Nevertheless...while the *language* of school choice has been made race neutral, the *practice* of school choice remains far from deracialized. (p. 183)

This is powerfully stated, and it is to Averett’s credit that she makes this visible. It would have made her book even more powerful if she had integrated these issues more directly into her interview questions and analyses throughout the book, since we cannot fully understand the specific history and current realities of some of the groups who now support homeschooling without considering this as well.

Do not misinterpret my suggestions for Averett to have gone further. *The Homeschool Choice* is a significant contribution to critical educational analyses, to the complexities of gender and sexuality in particular sites, and to the ways in which specific forms of “commonsense” become normalized. The fact that the book consistently asked me to think about what I might add to its critical analysis is evidence of Averett’s very real ability to stimulate me to think even more carefully about what needs to be understood if we are engage with particular social movements that are having profound effects on education in the U.S. and elsewhere. I am certain that after reading it, many of you will feel the same way.

References


- Apple, M. W. (2006). *Educating the “Right” way: Markets, standards, God, and inequality*. (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Apple, M. W. (2013). *Can education change society?* Routledge.
- Apple, M. W. (2020, April 29). Homeschooling, democracy, and regulation: An essay review of *Homeschooling: The history and philosophy of a controversial practice* by S. F. Peters & J. G. Dwyer. *Education Review*, 27. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/er.v27.2931>
- Apple, M. W., Gandin, L. A., Liu, S., Meshulam, A., & Schirmer, E. (2018). *The struggle for democracy in education: Lessons from social realities*. Routledge.
- Apple, R. D. (2006). *Perfect motherhood: Science and childrearing in America*. Rutgers University Press.
- Balmer, R. (2021). *Bad faith: Race and the rise of the religious right*. Erdmans.
- Hall, S. (2017). *Selected political writings: The great moving Right show and other essays*. Duke University Press.
- Lubienski, C., & Brewer, T. J. (2015). Does home education “work”? Challenging the assumption behind the home education movement. In P. Rothermel

- (Ed.) *International perspectives on home education: Do We Still Need Schools?* (pp. 136-147). Palgrave Macmillan.
- MacLean, N. (2017). *Democracy in chains: The deep history of the Radical Right's stealth plan for America*. Viking.
- Peters, S. F. & Dwyer, J. G. (2019). *Homeschooling: The history and philosophy of a controversial practice*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rothermel, P. (Ed.) (2015). *International perspectives on home education: Do we still need schools?* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stevens, M. (2001). *Kingdom of children: Culture and controversy in the homeschooling movement*. Princeton University Press.

About the Reviewer

Michael W. Apple is John Bascom Professor Emeritus of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and Professorial Fellow at the University of Manchester. Among his recent books are: *Can Education Change Society?*; *The Struggle for Democracy in Education: Lessons from Social Realities*; and the 4th edition of his classic text *Ideology and Curriculum*.



 *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas* is supported by 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.

Disclaimer: The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.

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