

CHOOSING EQUALITY: SCHOOL CHOICE, THE CONSTITUTION, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

JOSEPH P. VITERITTI, BROOKINGS INSTITUTION PRESS, 1999.

Reviewed by Lance D. Fusarelli

In *Choosing Equality*, Joseph Viteritti examines the plethora of failed reforms designed to turn the promise of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision into reality, including efforts at integration, compensatory education, school finance reform, and political empowerment via decentralization. In doing so, he finds that these efforts have fallen far short of providing equal educational opportunities or even a quality education to society's most disadvantaged members. Consequently, he offers school choice as one possible solution and rebuts the argument that choice will destroy democracy—and, by extension, that religion is somehow antithetical to democracy. Viteritti argues:

The presumption here is that private and religious schools do not have the capacity to convey those same democratic values, and, as the argument goes, the flourishing of private and religious schools would have a fragmenting effect on the body politic. (p. 183)

Drawing from extensive research in political science and sociology, Viteritti points out that there is no evidence behind the claim that public schools are the only effective means for political socialization in a democracy, or that the robust development of private and parochial schools is anathema to our aspirations as a free democratic society. In fact, the evidence is to the contrary. Research shows that adults who have attended parochial schools display high levels of patriotism, tolerance, and civic involvement (p. 183).

Viteritti asserts that providing the poor with vouchers to attend religious schools is consistent with Madison's conception of a pluralist constitution and is a common practice among contemporary democratic societies. Throughout the book, Viteritti explores our pluralist religious history and its interconnectedness with education, empowerment, and social transformation. Linking an argument based upon cultural congruence to redistributive social policy, Viteritti asserts that strict church-state separation is not consonant with the culture of many poor, predominately minority communities where the church is the most viable institution for social progress. Viteritti recasts the issue of separation of church and state as an issue of ethnicity and socioeconomic class rather than law.

Drawing from Delpit's (1995) cultural dissonance argument articulated in her book, *Other People's Children*, Viteritti states that, "Separation of church and state is a white, middle-class legal and social construct that is out of step with the ethos of the black community and undermines the black community's most significant local institution" [the church] (p. 20). He argues that policymakers have ignored the crucial role that religious congregations and faith-based organizations play in inner city neighborhoods: providing jobs, housing, and social services, in addition to helping create and shape the civil rights movement. The church, he concludes, "is the most significant force for social change available to poor people" (p. 20). Viteritti points out that in urban areas such as San Antonio, Catholic parishes are crucial organizational forces of community empowerment. Thus, under strict separation, policymakers have compromised the civic vitality of poor communities and undermined a key institution for progress in the inner city.

To the author's credit, *Choosing Equality* is not a neo-conservative diatribe against public education, nor is it simply another "vouchers for everyone" treatise. Viteritti argues for a particular type of school choice, a regulated voucher plan limited to poor families, as an instrument of liberal, redistributive social policy. Thus, choice is not about children leaving a public system for a private or parochial one. It is about giving poor families a mechanism of empowerment, however imperfect, that the middle and upper classes of society already possess and take for granted. Throughout the book, Viteritti explores the role of religious organizations (as cultural, community institutions) in the process of education and social transformation. The situation of education within a religious, cultural context serves as the unifying theme (and most interesting aspect) of the work.

Those working in parochial schools will find Viteritti's exploration of the virtues of Catholic schools particularly interesting. Here Viteritti reviews a number of sociological studies of Catholic schools, and contrasts their success at educating poor, predominately minority students with the largely unsuccessful efforts of public schools. He examines the characteristics that enable Catholic schools to succeed where others fail, with particular attention to such attributes as a spirit of community, an ethic of care, small school size, a more rigorous and untracked curriculum, and the belief that all students can achieve—reflecting a belief in the fundamental equality of all children, which he believes is often absent in public schools.

However, in his advocacy for school choice, Viteritti does not explore the impact of various choice options such as charter schools and vouchers on the parochial school system. School choice raises several legitimate areas of concern among Catholic school leaders. For example, in the case of vouchers, would the many strings inevitably attached to accepting public money outweigh the benefits? In an age of increased accountability, would governmental oversight negatively impact the freedom and autonomy enjoyed by

Catholic schools? Would the blurring of the line between public and private somehow destroy the characteristics that make Catholic schools unique?

In the case of charter schools, there is anecdotal evidence, although no empirical data, suggesting students are leaving parochial schools to attend charter schools. Low-income families struggling to make parochial school tuition payments may see charter schools as an attractive alternative—getting the benefits of a private school for free. After all, charter schools offer many of the benefits of parochial schools: small size, a caring community (particularly those created specifically to serve the needs of at-risk children), educational autonomy, and a rigorous curriculum. Another issue is the number of private or parochial schools that have converted to charter schools—at least 10% nationally (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). If this trend continues, the impact on Catholic schools could become significant, although it is by no means clear that charter schools have the staying power of parochial and private schools. More likely, as the enthusiasm for charter schooling wanes, the impact on parochial education will be minimal.

REFERENCES

- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- U. S. Department of Education. (1998). *A national study of charter schools. Executive summary*. Washington, DC: Author.

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