HOUSING, SCHOOLS, AND THE MAINTENANCE OF INEQUALITY: HOW UPPER-MIDDLE CLASS PARENTS CAN AFFORD TO BE NONCHALANT

ANNETTE LAREAU
Stanley I. Sheerr Professor
Department of Sociology
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract:
America is the land of inequality. Despite the discussion of school choice, about three-quarters of children attend their local, neighborhood school. These schools are highly unequal. Although we know there are differences in the public schools children attend, we know less about the mechanisms through which parents sort themselves into neighborhoods and schools. Drawing on a qualitative study of in-depth interviews with 90 white and African-American parents of young children, this paper highlights the powerful role of informal social networks in guiding parents to neighborhoods. Even highly-educated parents in our study, who worriedly endlessly about small aspects of childrearing, selected (elite) suburban neighborhoods in a relatively rapid fashion. We did not find evidence that highly-educated parents systematically collected data before selecting schools. Urban middle-class parents, however, had a different pathway; they were frantic as they sought to find a school. Given research showing class differences in many aspects of child rearing, it is striking that working-class and upper-middle-class parents followed similar mechanisms in making this important life decision. But, since the social networks of parents are socially stratified, parents ended up in different locations. The structure of residential segregation, and the existence of relatively homogenous school districts, appeared to be a powerful force in allowing suburban parents to be relaxed and confident about their decisions.

Biosketch:
Annette Lareau is the Stanley I. Sheerr Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. Before moving to Penn in 2008, she taught at the University of Maryland and Temple University. She is the author of Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life which won a distinguished publication award from the Sociology of Family, Sociology of Childhood, and Sociology of Culture sections of the American Sociological Association. A second edition of Unequal Childhoods, with 100 new pages, was published in 2011; it provides a follow-up of the children into adulthood. She is also the co-editor (with Kimberly Goyette) of Choosing Homes, Choosing Schools (forthcoming Russell Sage Foundation). She has been a residential fellow at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York. Her work has been discussed many journalists including David Brooks and Malcolm Gladwell. Annette Lareau is currently is President of the American Sociological Association; she will preside over the 109th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco in August 2014.