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The neurotic parent: affect, risk and school choice

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ABSTRACT

The original neoliberal policy design for school choice is quite straightforward: parents exercise school choice as rational consumers pursuing competitive familial advantage through cost-benefit analysis and self-interest. In contrast to these narrow, instrumental accounts of school choice, critical education researchers insist that school choice is characterised by complex intransitive preferences and emotions that are deeply personal and social. The idea being that school choice is shaped not only by calculation and clinical detachment but by anxieties and insecurities that evade the standard rationality presupposed by public choice and rational choice perspectives. Adding to this growing body of literature, this paper documents the dynamics of school choice as affectively organised behaviour. We draw on Isin's (2004) concept of the 'neurotic citizen' to show how school choice architecture, such as school websites, appear to overlay and encourage seemingly conflicting orientations to choice: rational calculation *and* affective insecurity. Through a case study of the South Australian preschool sector, this paper documents how schools create affective atmospheres that work to both soothe and intensify parental fears and anxieties. These insights point to strategies in the management of neurosis or 'governing through neurosis'.

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Affect; risk; school choice; governing through neurosis; neoliberalism

Introduction

The concept of choice has been central to neoliberal policy reforms since the 1980s, promoted globally as a driver of improvement and accountability (Vandenbroeck, Lehrer, and Mitchell 2023). International organisations such as UNESCO, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (WB), for example, advocate policy design that frames choice as a mechanism for maximising benefits while mitigating risks (S. Ball 2021; Boucher 2020; OECD 2019). Yet the implementation of school choice has been uneven across contexts. In Chile and the US, school choice has been linked to deepening inequalities (Cabalin, Saldaña, and Fernández 2023; Cohen 2025) while in countries such as Finland and Norway, it remains highly restricted with relatively few private schools and limited opportunities for parental choice beyond state provision (Haugen 2019). In contrast,

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Australia represents a mixed or hybrid system where free, universal preschool entitlement exists alongside a rapidly expanding private, for-profit sector. This provision mix makes Australia a compelling case for examining how travelling neoliberal policies are taken up (or not) locally.

Neoliberalism can be understood as a set of governmental priorities driven to compel individuals and organisations to prioritise the cultivation of 'human capital' for personal or institutional advancement, national economic growth and global prosperity. This market logic has profoundly shaped every level of education, including early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021; Sabine 2022). Research shows that the focus of ECEC provision has shifted away from play, exploration and socialisation and shifted towards school readiness and performance accountability, with significant effects on funding mechanisms, the daily practices of educators and the 'idealised' image of the child (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021). Increasingly, both children and parents are framed in these contexts as enterprising or discriminating subjects, with children situated as self-regulating, independent and autonomous learners, and parents as acquisitive consumers responsible for cultivating their child's future outcomes and success (S. Ball 2021; Wall 2010, 2018).

Research also shows that dominant discourses of school choice echo and redeems similar accounts of the self, namely a view of the self as active, self-sustaining, autonomous. These discourses not only frame parental responsibilisation through an appeal to neoliberal ideals of the discriminating or discerning chooser (A. Wilkins 2010) but also reproduce gendered expectations, with mothers positioned as the primary agents of educational labour (Campbell and Proctor 2014). Similar discourses can be found on parent forums focused on child development which routinely construct ideals of 'good parenting' on the basis of parents pursuing research or aspirations tied to early brain stimulation, school readiness and rational investment in quality interactions (Degotardi 2010; King et al. 2016; Wall 2004, 2014, 2018). At the same time, parents are continuously warned of the risks of 'poor' choices and implicit judgement facing 'bad parents' (Antony-Newman 2019; Olmedo and Wilkins 2017; Vincent 2017). In this framing, the spectre of poor parenting extends and intensifies the logics of a risk society where risk is understood as a reflexive confrontation with and management of the consequences and costs of technological-scientific and economic or political change (Beck-Gernsheim 1996). Parenting is organised as 'life as a planning project' in which individuals are compelled to manage uncertainty through meticulous planning, calculated research and risk management.

This paper adds to critical policy sociology and sociology of education literature (S. Ball and Vincent 1998; Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009) by documenting how school choice is organised around parental anxieties and fears about responsible school choice and 'good' or moral parenting. A key contribution of this paper to said literature is our theorisation of the parent as 'neurotic' owing to their dual position as: 1. individuals with unique emotional bonds and duties of care towards their child; and 2. individuals summoned by others to behave as consumers with responsibilities to be 'informed', discriminating and so forth. How the former is negotiated and realised in the context of the latter, and how these tensions contribute to the role of the 'neurotic parent', is a central focus of this paper. By this we do not mean that the figure of the neurotic parent is something natural or pathological. On the contrary, this neurosis, characterised

by tension, anxiety and fear, can be linked to the way parents are addressed and summoned within neoliberal governmental projects (A. Wilkins 2011).

From a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault 2008), neoliberalism can be characterised as a bio-political project designed to reproduce the conditions for expansive marketisation through continually training and incentivising individuals to self-modulate on the basis that they may adapt to the crises inherent to (and demanded of) late capitalism. In the case of school choice, this requires parents to compensate for a 'reluctant state' (S. J. Ball 2012), where the state no longer insulates citizens from the crises or risks inherent to the capitalist organisation of society, by inhabiting and performing the sovereign role of the consumer: active, discerning and self-maximising (A. Wilkins 2010). Similar disciplinary processes in neoliberal subjectification can be traced to Lazzarato's (2012) commentary on the 'work on the self' initiative that followed the financial crisis of 2008; or Dardot and Laval's (2010) discussion of the use of applied psychology management techniques to introduce a new type of worker subjectivity. In both cases, the worker is not transformed through government by domination or oppression, but through the creation of incentives (and disincentives) that create individuals who are 'active in their own government' (McKee 2009, 469). Borrowing from these insights, our argument is not that there is a direct or determining relationship between parents and wider socially circulating discourse about school choice, in which parents (only) emerge as bearers of wider structures and powers. We need to insist on the instability and unpredictability of their appropriation and reproduction at the level of the parent. At the same time, we think it is important to observe neurosis as a site through which governing over others may (or may not) occur.

As we evidence in this paper, school choice architecture, from parents' forums to school websites, tend to feed into such neurosis and in turn intervene to manage it or guide it towards more 'rational' ends. These interventions can be characterised as strategies in the management of neurosis or 'governing through neurosis' (Isin 2004, 232). In this paper, we draw on the analytic of the 'neurotic citizen' (Isin 2004) as a helpful interpretive tool for documenting the way parental anxieties and fears are not only individually felt and lived but underpin so much of the wider messaging and nudging around school choice. According to Isin (2004, 232), 'when a subject is governed through neurosis, two conditions hold. First, the subject is always already recognized or recognizes itself under neurotic conditions. Second, the object of government is not cure or care but management of neurosis and the anxieties that are its foundations'. This paper therefore looks at how school choice functions as affectively organised behaviour. At the same time, it documents how rational choice models are positioned as risk mitigation strategies in the management of such behaviour. Parents, we argue, are guided by various school choice architecture which appear to overlay and encourage seemingly conflicting orientations to choice: rational calculation *and* affective insecurity. The result is a 'neurotic parent', someone who is compelled to manage their anxieties and fears by adjusting their decision making to fit with prevailing models of rational choice as risk mitigation. It is within this configuration that we locate the figure of the neurotic parent. This does not denote individual pathology or excessive emotion, but a form of subjectivity produced through contemporary neuro-developmental and risk discourses that cast early childhood as a critical site of irreversible cognitive and emotional futures. As Bradbury (2021) notes, the growing emphasis on early ability, readiness, and intervention

intensifies parental responsibility for managing developmental risk. Parents are thus incited to calculate through metrics, research, and expert knowledge while remaining affectively attuned to anxiety, fear, and the possibility of having made the 'wrong' choice. The neurotic parent names a mode of governance in which affect and calculation are co-constitutive rather than opposed.

To illustrate this paradoxical positioning of the parent, we draw on evidence generated through research conducted in South Australia which included a semiotic-discursive analysis of school marketing materials and parental responses, alongside a geospatial examination of the demographic patterns associated with Montessori preschool enrolments (Bertotti 2022). Although the school marketing material falls outside the scope of this paper, it informs our understanding of how schools and parents co-produce and activate the figure of the neurotic parent. For example, schools use promotional material to feed and construct parental fantasies of localism, excellence or tradition (A. Wilkins 2012), while parental affective investments in good choice reinforce such fantasies. In this paper, we focus on Montessori provision in Australia as a critical case through which to examine the figure of the neurotic parent. Montessori is a particularly instructive site for this analysis because it is consistently framed as an environment of order, control and academic rigour, while simultaneously reinforcing neoliberal values of parental autonomy, responsibility and discipline. Positioned as a fee-paying alternative within a system where free public preschool provision is widely available, Montessori appeals strongly to middle-class aspirations and fantasies of optimisation, distinction, and moral care.

While sociological research has long recognised that parental choice is shaped by both calculation and emotion (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995; Kress and VanLeeuven 2006; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011), this paper advances that literature by showing how affect operates not merely as an accompaniment to choice but as a governing mechanism in early childhood education. We demonstrate how parental conduct is organised through the interplay of metrics, branding and spatialised markets, particularly within preschool environments, a liminal policy space that sits between care and education, and at the boundary of compulsory and non-compulsory schooling. In what follows, we situate our analysis within the broader context of ECEC provision in South Australia. We then outline the study's methodological approach and present the findings, focusing on how rational logics and affective atmospheres are brought together to produce parental choices organised simultaneously through calculation and anxiety. In doing so, the paper contributes to critical education debates on school choice by showing how contemporary school architectures mobilise affect, rather than seek to eliminate it, as a central strategy for shaping parental decision-making.

The marketisation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in South Australia

Neoliberal discourse has significantly reshaped education in Australia, with its emphasis on efficiency, competition and individual responsibility (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021; Savage 2022). These policy and institutional pressures are particularly visible in ECEC, where private provision has expanded rapidly and the education sector has become increasingly commodified as a result (Brennan 2007; Newberry and Brennan 2013). Large nursery chains, for example, govern themselves based on

market professionalised programs and outcome-based approaches that align with market values, in effect shifting attention away from play and community as educational philosophies and shifting more emphasis towards education understood through measurable performance and school readiness (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021). The South Australian preschool sector offers a compelling case study of these dynamics. On the one hand, families are guaranteed 15 hours per week of free preschool in the year before their child attends school. This is funded through national agreements between federal and state governments (Australia Government 2025). On the other hand, the steady growth of private and for-profit preschool providers has transformed the sector, creating a mixed economy in which universal entitlements coexist with highly marketised alternatives (Bertotti 2022). This produces a distinctive policy configuration in which formal guarantees of access coexist with heightened moral and affective responsibility placed on parents.

Government-run preschools once dominated early childhood provision in the state of South Australia, accounting for over 90% of enrolments in 2008. By 2024, however, this figure had declined to less than 37%, reflecting a marked shift away from public provision (ABS 2013, 2020, 2024; Dowling and O'Malley 2009). Over the same period, Montessori education expanded notably, with enrolments increasing by more than 28% in absolute terms between 2008 and 2021. This development, marked by the retreat of government provision and the rise of alternative models like Montessori, suggests a reconfiguration of the early childhood landscape, shaped by parental preferences, market dynamics, and evolving policy discourses (Bertotti 2024). Australian ECEC research consistently shows that parental choice operates within significant structural constraints rather than pro-market idealisations of individual choice and freedom, shaped by uneven availability, affordability and information, and patterned by socioeconomic and spatial inequalities that parents actively navigate rather than transcend (Bertotti 2025; Cloney et al. 2016; Pavolini and Van Lancker 2018; Skattebol, Adamson, and Blaxland 2023).

Recent education policy developments in Australia further underscore the paradox at the heart of early childhood provision. Under the 2021–22 Preschool Reform Agreement (PRA), the federal government and all states committed to universal, high-quality access by guaranteeing 600 hours of preschool in the year before school, aligned with the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Framework (NQF). Alongside these commitments, the Preschool Outcomes Measure (POM) was introduced and trialled to enable nationally consistent reporting of children's oral language, literacy, and executive function (Australia Government 2025). While framed as a universal entitlement, these reforms also intensified parental responsibilisation by embedding performance metrics, business ontologies and developmental benchmarks into the preschool experience, strengthening and reinforcing the conditions under which the neurotic parent is compelled to act. These reforms are significant in that they establish, at least in principle, a baseline of comparable preschool quality across Australia, regardless of provider type. Even private settings such as Montessori are formally bound to deliver the same minimum entitlement and adhere to the national curriculum frameworks as government-run preschools. Yet this supposedly level playing field is undercut by the persistence of consumer logics. Despite mechanisms for national consistency, parents continue to be positioned as discerning choosers within a competitive marketplace. Marketing materials, including brochures, websites, and open days, mobilise

emotional and moral repertoires that speak directly to parental anxieties about risk, responsibility, and the consequences of 'bad' choices (A. Wilkins 2010, 2011, 2012).

These discourses combine to generate an affective economy of school choice (A. Wilkins 2014), one that taps into profound parental concerns about care, competence and moral worth. Contrary to official policy rhetoric wherein parents are typically constructed as consumers and utility maximizers (see A. Wilkins 2010), our study shifts the focus toward affective dimensions as central to the construction of the parent-as-chooser (A. Wilkins 2014). Within this context, we argue, parents are encouraged to perform the figure of homo-economicus, yet this performance is not purely 'rational', meaning choices that are orderly, stable or reducible to a hierarchy of clear and predictable preferences, rankings and valuations. Affective and calculative modes of decision-making operate in tandem, and produce some strange alignments in which emotional insecurity and data-driven scrutiny complement and reinforce one another, a dynamic that crystallises in the figure of the neurotic parent. In addition, this paper brings into focus the geographies of preschool provision to sharpen this picture. Montessori preschools in Adelaide are disproportionately located in advantaged suburbs: more than two-thirds are clustered in areas ranked in the highest deciles of the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD). These suburbs are characterised by high household incomes, high rates of tertiary education, and strong access to cultural resources such as bilingualism and digital connectivity (reference). As Rowe (2016) argues, geography itself functions as a form of social class distinction in school choice, where proximity to 'good' providers becomes a marker of middle-class identity, reinforcing spatial divisions between families. The concentration of Montessori provision in Adelaide's eastern suburbs therefore illustrates how preschool providers flock to high-income catchments (Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021), making choice a privilege tied not just to money but to location.

In sum, the South Australian case is doubly instructive: it reveals how global policy imperatives around individual responsibilisation and marketisation are locally enacted and how parental anxieties are mobilised and incited even within systems that formally guarantee access and quality. Montessori provision, in this context, represents more than a pedagogical alternative: it exemplifies how promotional market strategies function as semiotic and affective assemblages that work to produce parents as neurotic subjects who calculate through both accreditation scores and the promise of structured, reassuring learning environments for their children. South Australia's preschool sector lays bare the contradictions of neoliberal reform. Despite the appearance of equity through universal entitlements and national standards, parents are positioned as discerning consumers navigating branded slogans, emotionally charged language and fictive fantasies concerning belonging, tradition and excellence. Montessori's rapid expansion illustrates how the logics of global governance are inserted and installed through local provision, where disciplined aesthetics concerning taste and distinction are marketed as scarce goods in contrast to public offerings. This case underscores how universal frameworks coexist with persistent consumer logics that incite parents to act through both metrics and affective insecurity.

This paper draws on a subset of findings generated through a larger research study conducted in South Australia which examined how parental choice, school marketing and policy frameworks intersect and overlap to shape education access and parental

subjectivities in early childhood education (Bertotti 2022). In this paper, we focus here on parents who chose Montessori preschools, using this empirical case study to theorise the figure of the neurotic parent, a subject compelled to navigate both rational metrics and affective anxieties within a marketised preschool sector.

Moving beyond the rational–emotional divide

School choice is increasingly recognised as a multi-faceted, socially embedded process, shaped by social class (Reay, Crozier, and James 2011), community belonging (Reay and Lucey 2003), gendered mothering practices (Campbell and Proctor 2014; Proctor and Weaver 2017), race and ethnicity (Brennan 2007), and intersecting dynamics of difference (Byrne 2006). In contrast, public choice theory and positivist traditions tend to frame decision-making through hierarchical preference orderings, presupposing the figure of the rational utility-maximiser, that is, someone with 'well-informed preferences which they can perceive, rank and compare easily' (Dunleavy 1991, 3). These models privilege logic and instrumentality while dismissing emotion as irrational or ephemeral (Finlayson 2003). The problem with this framing is its ontological flatness: it treats choice as an individual calculus, overlooking cognitive biases, heuristic traps, and relational dynamics (S. Ball and Vincent 1998; Sabine 2022). Moreover, it fails to account for how school choice operates affectively, not through the suppression of emotion but through its mobilisation. To move beyond this divide, we combine analyses of discourse and affect. Following Wetherell (2012, 2018) and Zembylas (2019, 2020), we position affect as socially and politically constructed, shaping identities and inequalities rather than residing solely in the individual as properties of private psyche. Wetherell's concept of affective-discursive practices is particularly useful here. For Wetherell (2012, 2018), affect and discourse are inseparable: feelings are mediated by language, routines, and histories, while discourse gains force through its circulation of affect. These practices refer to the patterned ways in which talk, text, gesture, and imagery become charged with emotional intensity and do social work, such as inclusion, exclusion, boundary-drawing, or validation (Wetherell 2012; Wetherell et al. 2015).

This discursive framing of affect avoids reducing affect either to inner psychology (private emotions) or to free-floating intensity detached from meaning (as in some post-Deleuzian work). Instead, it highlights how words like 'calm' or 'chaotic' may function as affective signifiers that successfully organise parental conduct and moral hierarchies. A focus on affective-discursive practices allows us to attend to patterns of language and emotion, such as lexical binaries ('calm/clean/ordered' vs. 'noisy/dirty/chaotic'), recurring marketing tropes (e.g. pristine classrooms, accreditation badges) and parents' emotion-words (proud, anxious, safe, validated). These expressions can be read relationally: not as isolated utterances, but as part of broader affective-discursive repertoires that position parents as vigilant, responsibilised and neurotic.

While Zembylas foregrounds the political circulation of emotion, Isin's (2004) work helps us theorise how these affective intensities are harnessed (or not) through practices of governance. By governance, we are referring to mobile political projects and programmes designed to work on/through subjects (in a general sense) to transform the autonomous actions of agents through new institutional or governmental goals and aspirations (see A. W. Wilkins and Mifsud 2024). Zembylas (2007, 2019, 2020)

demonstrates how emotions are not merely personal experiences but politically charged practices that sustain or contest power relations in education. Emotions such as fear, hope, shame, and pride are produced and circulated through discourse, for example, becoming central to how individuals are governed and how inequalities are reproduced. In the context of preschool choice, this means that parental anxieties about being judged a 'bad parent' or aspirations to secure the 'best start' for their child are not just individual feelings but are linked to, and productive of broader affective economies that work to regulate conduct. These economies tie parents to particular moral communities, positioning them within hierarchies of privilege and legitimacy.

Building on Zembylas (2007, 2019, 2020), our analysis treats parents' affective investments in Montessori education, characterised by a search for calm and order, a desire for independence and academic readiness, and a pursuit of distinction, as political acts that simultaneously reproduce middle-class privilege and reinforce boundaries and forms of belonging. Extending this affective-discursive lens, and drawing on Isin's (2004) notion of governing through neurosis, we conceptualise the neurotic parent as a subject produced through both rational calculation and affective self-regulation. School choice discourses mobilise fears of poor decision-making and anxieties about being judged a 'bad parent', while simultaneously promoting rationalised vigilance as the appropriate response. In this way, neoliberal governance (broadly understood) does not suppress affect but harnesses it, deploying emotional intensities such as shame, prid, and anxiety to (ideally) shape parental conduct. These dynamics further entrench middle-class norms of responsibility and distinction, reinforcing the affective economies and moral hierarchies outlined above (reference).

Methodology

This study draws on qualitative data generated through an online, open-ended questionnaire completed by 24 parents who enrolled their children in Montessori preschools in South Australia. Participants were recruited via five Montessori centres across metropolitan Adelaide. All had opted for fee-paying Montessori provision despite the availability of free, government-funded preschools nearby, making this a purposive critical case of choice under marketised conditions (Flyvbjerg 2006). The sample was composed primarily of mothers (20 out of 24), most of whom were tertiary-educated professionals residing in high-SES postcodes. While not representative of all parents, this group provides a nuanced and analytically rich lens on middle-class maternal responsibilisation, as participants' responses shed light on what drew them to Montessori, how they assessed competing options, and the emotional, reputational, and practical considerations that informed their choices.

Analysis combined critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003, 2010, 2015) with an affective analytic lens. Coding was inductive and iterative, attending to both content and affective tone. We traced lexical clusters ('calm/clean/ordered' vs. 'noisy/dirty/chaotic'), visual tropes (pristine workstations, solitary concentration), and routine descriptors as patterned affective-discursive practices. This foregrounded how words and images carried affective force and did social work such as boundary-drawing or moral distinction. To enrich this lens, we drew on Berg et al.'s (2019) 'reading for affect' to identify key emotion words (e.g. excitement,

anxiety, good, caring, proud), noting who or what they were attached to. This mapping illuminated how emotion-word attribution forged specific parental identities, including what we describe as 'Montessori mother collectives.' Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) work on language as affective force helped interpret how words themselves acted as emotional vectors shaping social relations. This framework highlighted how discursive formations and embodied flows of anxiety, pride and responsibility coalesced into distinct parental collectives. It also showed how parental practices reinforced some mothers' agency while constraining others, thereby reinforcing social boundaries and classed/gendered hierarchies.

Our framework rejects rational choice models and instead situates school choice as a classed and gendered practice. Middle-class mothers disproportionately perform the labour of benchmarking and securing options under moral expectations of 'good mothering' (Campbell and Proctor 2014; Proctor and Weaver 2017). Feminist post-structuralist perspectives show how mothers recognise themselves as 'good choosers; by occupying positions of vigilance and optimisation, while branding and consumption research highlight how pedagogical 'logos' such as Montessori function as affective brands (Cucchiara and Horvat 2009; Lubienski 2007). Accreditation badges, a sense of urgency and calm and ordered imagery thus become affective assurances of quality and distinction. We also want to acknowledge that this study is limited in scope. By focusing on Montessori parents (a relatively privileged, self-selecting group), the findings cannot be generalised to all families. Yet this narrow lens is analytically valuable: these parents had the resources to bypass free, universal preschools, making visible the mechanisms of marketisation, responsibilisation, and affective branding. The Montessori case therefore illustrates how global policy logics are refracted through local cultural and emotional dynamics, particularly within classed and gendered maternal choice.

Building on this methodological approach, the following section presents findings from the questionnaire responses of 24 parents who chose Montessori preschools for their children in South Australia. These accounts were analysed using critical discourse analysis with an affective lens, treating parental narratives as sites where feeling and logic interact and combine in strange ways to co-produce choice. Importantly, these choices were made in a context of free, universal and generally well-regarded public kindergarten provision. Montessori was therefore not the only option available, but a deliberate preference that invites closer scrutiny of the classed, gendered and affective dynamics through which choice is organised.

As outlined above, participants were predominantly tertiary-educated mothers residing in high-SES suburbs (IRSD deciles 8–10), with professional occupations and relatively small family sizes. Geography intensified these dynamics: Montessori provision clustered in affluent areas, meaning that access to these centres was itself spatially stratified. In this context, preschool choice emerged not simply as an individual decision, but as a classed and spatialised practice. Cost was deprioritised across responses – no participant ranked it as the most important factor influencing their decision – underscoring that these parents possessed both the economic and cultural resources to approach preschool selection as a site of moral and symbolic investment rather than financial necessity. Read through the lens of affective-discursive practices, these accounts reveal how parental choice was organised through interwoven logics of reassurance,

anxiety, vigilance, and distinction. From this analysis, five interrelated themes emerged, which are discussed below.

Findings

Emotional safety as a classed good

Montessori preschools consistently advertised qualities such as 'confidence,' 'concentration,' 'independence,' and 'discipline', reinforced through images of spotless classrooms and children quietly absorbed in individual work. These affective cues were routinely coupled with measurable assurances about school readiness, including access to 'formal curricula in literacy, numeracy, science, spelling and grammar' (Preschools A, B, E and F) and future-oriented promises to produce 'analytical thinkers, with life-long skills such as independent problem solving' (Preschool B) or 'autonomous, hardworking leaders of the future' (Preschool E). Together, these textual and visual elements positioned Montessori as both emotionally safe and pedagogically strategic. Parents' accounts closely mirrored this dual appeal. As one mother reflected, 'Seeing those pristine learning stations made me feel I'd found the right community' (Mother 11), while another emphasised the diligence of her decision-making: 'I had researched Montessori well before choosing the preschool, and I had decided it was the best environment for our children' (Mother 4). Calm environments did not stand in opposition to strategic choice-making; rather, they functioned as affective confirmations that the right calculations had been made.

For many parents, this discourse was deeply reassuring. Several described their visits as 'pleasant and exciting' (Mother 12) or even 'thrilling' (Mother 7). Yet others recalled the process as 'quite stressful because of the uncertainty' (Mother 9) or admitted feeling 'slightly nervous' (Mother 6). Calmness, then, did not generate a single emotional response. Instead, it operated ambivalently – simultaneously soothing anxiety while intensifying the pressure to choose correctly. In Zembylas' terms, 'calm' functions here as a politically charged emotion that does boundary-work around good mothering (2007, 2020). Calm and discipline emerged as markers of responsible parenting. To embrace Montessori's ordered aesthetic was to align oneself with a collective of vigilant, attentive mothers who could demonstrate foresight, care and moral seriousness. At the same time, this alignment relied on the symbolic rejection of other settings, often described in contrastive terms as 'overpopulated', 'dirty' or 'rambunctious'. Emotional safety functioned as a classed imaginary: something imagined as scarce within public provision yet purchasable through private choice. These affective distinctions were further intensified by geography. Spatial analysis from the broader study showed that Montessori provision clustered in Adelaide's wealthiest suburbs. Calmness and safety were thus not only marketed ideals but geographically anchored privileges, accessible primarily to families with the economic, cultural and spatial resources to enter (and exit) these zones. Emotional safety thus functioned as both an affective reassurance and a classed entitlement.

The burden of optimal choice

Parents' accounts revealed that preschool choice was experienced less as individual freedom and more as an emotional and ethical burden. Mothers repeatedly emphasised

their diligence and vigilance: 'I read every accreditation report before visiting – those NQS scores mattered to me' (Mother 2). Another reflected, 'I felt proud of my careful planning and panicked that I'd missed something crucial' (Mother 3). Across responses, parents described a fluctuating mix of emotions: 'It was exciting for me' (Mother 7); 'pleasant and exciting' (Mother 12); 'stressful because of the waiting process' (Mother 14); and 'anxiety inducing' (Mother 9). Rather than resolving into positive or negative evaluations, these affects circulated and animated each other. As Ahmed (2004a) suggests, emotions here 'stick together', intensifying parents' attachment to choice itself and binding them more tightly to the very decision-making processes they described as stressful. In Wetherell's (2012) terms, vigilance and fear of missing out were not individual feelings but relational effects produced through practice.

Montessori marketing actively intensified this affective oscillation. Websites promised to 'cultivate self-sufficient, informed, and active young people' (Preschool E) and deliver 'formal spelling, grammar, maths and pure science' (Preschool B), mobilising parents' future-oriented calculations. At the same time, scarcity cues – such as 'only five spots remain for next year' (Preschool D) – heightened urgency and anxiety. Scarcity, however, was not limited to enrolment numbers. As shown earlier, calm, ordered environments were also framed as rare and desirable, reinforcing the sense that quality itself was scarce and had to be secured through careful, timely choice. Within this affective economy, the 'good parent' emerged as one who could both calculate and feel appropriately or responsibly: benchmarking options, monitoring reputational cues and remaining alert to risk. This burden was unevenly distributed. It fell most heavily on affluent, educated mothers already positioned as responsible for optimising their children's trajectories. Importantly, this burden was also geographically structured. Only families located within the catchments of high-fee Montessori centres were interpellated into these intensified regimes of vigilance and anxiety, illustrating how privilege and stress were co-produced through class and location rather than evenly shared across the preschool landscape.

Schoolification and the rejection of 'noisy' play

A third recurring theme was the displacement of play in favour of academic preparation, with school-like structure operating as a key source of reassurance for parents navigating uncertainty. Montessori websites promoted 'sequential learning in all the core curriculum areas' (Preschool C) and insisted that 'the children work with the materials, they do not play with the toys!' (Preschool A). Effort was framed as moral obligation: 'The harder I work, the smarter I get' (Preschool A), or 'such experience is not *just* play; it is important work he must do to grow' (Preschool B). One centre offered the mantra, 'Be nice. Work hard. Achieve excellence' (Preschool D). Parents' accounts closely echoed these framings. Three-quarters ranked 'learning to reason,' 'structured, school-like days,' and 'getting used to the school environment' as top priorities. One mother reflected, 'Play felt like a luxury; I worried my child would fall behind if they spent too much time on free-choice activities' (Mother 5). Another recalled raising questions about play, only to have 'the director steer me back to phonics lessons' (Mother 14). Structure, routine and academic orientation thus functioned as safeguards against imagined futures of delay or failure. Montessori was chosen not only for what it offered but for what it avoided or mitigated. As one parent explained, 'government kindy felt wild and dirty . . . Montessori

just felt calmer – more in control' (Mother 10). Another added: 'I didn't want chaos. Montessori felt structured, not feral' (Mother 12). Noise and mess were read not simply as pedagogical differences but as signs of risk, insufficient care or lack of discipline. In this sense, fears of 'falling behind' anchored a moral economy that privileged control, preparedness and order over play (Zembylas 2019, 2020).

Play was thus recast as indulgent or risky time, while discipline and structure were valorised as protective strategies. The affective appeal lay in reassurance that children were being prepared and kept on track, but the symbolic effect was to position government preschools, where play-based curricula remain central, as inattentive or insufficiently serious. These distinctions were spatially patterned: the 'noisy' preschools from which parents sought distance were more often located in mixed or lower-SES suburbs, while calm, ordered Montessori environments clustered in affluent areas. Geographic imaginaries of disorder were therefore mapped onto classed geographies, reinforcing the sense that calmness and school readiness were not universal goods, but privileges secured through vigilance, resources and location.

Exclusionary boundaries at the edge of privilege

The symbolic boundaries drawn by Montessori parents were pronounced and consistently affect-laden. Parents praised their own preschools as 'small, clean and cosy', with teachers described as 'calm, cohesive and skilled,' while other centres were characterised as 'overcrowded', 'dirty' or 'a chaotic mess.' One mother admitted that 'the noise level made me anxious' (Mother 4) when visiting a childcare centre, while another contrasted Montessori's 'structured and controlled environment' with public services where 'children looked disengaged' and 'teachers seemed rambunctious' (Mother 16). As noted earlier, the calm/clean versus noisy/dirty binary recurred and echoed across parents' accounts, but here it hardened into an explicitly moralised contrast that positioned Montessori as a refuge from perceived disorder.

These contrasts did more than express preference; they enacted moral and social hierarchies. Aligning with Montessori functioned as a way of claiming the identity of the attentive, vigilant and responsible mother, while public provision was implicitly associated with neglect, chaos or lowered standards. This boundary-making was both classed and gendered. Only affluent families could reject free government provision in favour of fee-paying alternatives, and it was overwhelmingly mothers who carried the emotional and moral labour of making, defending and narrating these choices. In this sense, 'clean/calm' versus 'dirty/noisy' operated not as neutral descriptors but as affective-discursive sorting devices that classified families, spaces and parenting practices.

Calmness and cleanliness accrued to Montessori as signs of moral virtue and responsible parenting, while disorder and dirt were displaced onto imagined 'others,' subtly marked as inattentive or less caring. Importantly, this boundary-work was sustained not through overt claims to superiority, but through expressions of anxiety, concern and the desire to protect one's child. Here, the figure of the neurotic parent becomes visible: a parent who is acutely aware of inequality, yet compelled to act defensively within and against it, prioritising their child's security while displacing structural critique onto individualised judgments of other settings. These dynamics were intensified by the suburban geography of provision.

Montessori centres were clustered in postcodes of concentrated affluence, while government preschools serving more socially diverse populations were more readily cast as spaces of risk, disorder or neglect. Spatial location thus amplified affective distinctions, reinforcing how parental anxiety, moral judgment and classed geography converged to stabilise exclusionary boundaries within an ostensibly universal preschool system.

Redefining quality through affective-discursive practices

Finally, the findings show how Montessori parents' affective-discursive practices reshaped what counted as 'quality'. Across the questionnaires, quality was consistently tethered to measurable inputs: small ratios, teacher credentials, structured routines, and early academic preparation. Accreditation badges, references to ratios that met or exceeded guidelines (Preschools B and F), and mentions of NQS scores circulated as more than informational cues; they operated as affective assurances that soothed uncertainty and stabilised parents' sense of having made a responsible choice. As one mother noted, 'The teachers looked in control and cohesive; I felt reassured that learning would happen' (Mother 13). Another valued continuity with later schooling because it promised 'a strong academic foundation from the very beginning' (Mother 10). In these accounts, quality was not simply recognised but felt through signs of order, professionalism, and future-readiness.

This redefinition gained force through contrast. Qualities long associated with early childhood education – play, creativity, responsiveness to children's interests – were rarely invoked as indicators of excellence. As the earlier discussion of schoolification showed, play was displaced by concerns with structure, discipline and preparedness. Parents' definitions of quality thus echoed Montessori marketing's emphasis on calm order and 'work,' aligned with a broader shift in which early childhood environments are evaluated through adult-facing signals of control and measurable progress. Metrics and atmospheres worked together: badges, ratios and credentials came to feel like guarantees.

Geography shaped how these quality signals were accessed and interpreted. In high-income suburbs where Montessori provision clustered, professional credentials and accreditation markers functioned not only as regulatory requirements but as signs of distinction – evidence of having secured a scarce form of 'good' provision. Quality was experienced as both verifiable and unevenly available. Parents outside these zones were implicitly positioned as lacking access to the 'right' options, while those within them could narrate vigilance and discernment as moral achievement. In this way, affective investments in quality did not merely organise individual decisions; they reproduced geospatial inequalities by attaching reassurance, legitimacy and belonging to particular postcodes and provider types.

Quality, thus, emerges as a category governed through feeling as much as calculation. The same signs that invite comparison (ratios, badges, credentials) also function as emotional anchors in conditions of uncertainty, helping parents manage fears of risk, responsibility and having made the 'wrong' choice. Rather than opposing rational evaluation, affect is mobilised alongside it, organising parental choice through the oscillation of reassurance and vigilance that runs across the findings.

Conclusion

Central to official discourses of school, especially those espoused by governments seeking to recalibrate parents as autonomous, self-seeking consumers (A. Wilkins 2010), is an instrumental understanding of choice that places decision-making within a hierarchical model or set of preference orderings that presupposes a standard of rationality (Dunleavy 1991). The sovereign figure of the rational chooser or rational utility maximiser is at the heart of this discourse, namely someone who chooses on the basis of self-interest and optimises their competitive self-advantage through cost–benefit analysis and research. This behaviour is often celebrated and encouraged as the best route to achieve the biggest possible benefits and minimise the least costs in decision-making. It is typically equated to behaviour that is perceived to be logical, instrumental or economistic; that is, behaviour that lends itself to higher order behaviour that can be easily ranked or compared against behaviour judged to be intransigent, ephemeral and therefore inconsequential or ineffective, namely behaviour driven by emotion (A. Wilkins 2011).

The main problem with this formal rational model of behaviour is that it fails to account for real-world complexities and imperfections, further compounded by its reliance on asocial, acontextual frameworks that disregard the nuanced, often competing rationalisations shaping practices of choice (A. Wilkins 2010). Moreover, it overlooks how school choice functions on the basis of an appeal to emotion rather than its eradication or recalibration to suit more rational ends. To avoid the kinds of ontological and epistemological trappings presupposed by these official discourses, we combined concepts of discourse and affect to better understand how parents navigate the field of preschool choice. Drawing on the work of affect theorists like Wetherell (2012) and Zembylas (2019, 2020), this paper positions affect as both an individual and collective force, something is that socially, politically and historically constructed, and which shapes emotions and identities across various contexts. This means avoiding scientific psychology, cognitive psychology and other approaches which reduce affect to something internal and properties of a privately owned psyche. Further, using Wetherell's concept of 'affective-discursive practices' (Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018), this paper provides a useful framework for analysing how affective and rational modes of choice intersect and combine to produce some strange alignments that exceed the kinds of active-passive, rational-emotional distinctions and dynamics that pervade through official accounts of school choice.

Moreover, through extending Isin's (2004) work on governing through neurosis, we introduce the concept of the 'neurotic parent' to capture the dual constitution of parents as rational and affective subjects, subjects who occupy a liminal space between competing discourses of calculated and emotional reasoning. Our central argument is that school choice discourse fosters (and exploits) socially affective parental anxieties and fears – such as the fear of making a 'poor choice' or being labelled by others as a 'bad parent' – while at the same time celebrating the sovereign figure of the autonomous, rational chooser to control and manage such anxieties and fears. A corollary of this is that parents are simultaneously swayed by affective appeals to mitigate risk while at the same time discouraged from decision making considered too emotional. This contradiction highlights how neoliberal governance functions to utilise, rather than alleviate affect as a strategy to promote risk mitigating behaviour or rational choice among parents.

This paper has shown how, in contexts of highly marketised early childhood education provision, preschool choice can produce parents as neurotic subjects: people who are compelled to calculate through accreditation scores and metric assessments while simultaneously governed by pride, panic and the fear of 'bad parenting'. Calm and order become classed goods, vigilance fuses with anxiety, schoolification displaces play, boundaries are drawn against 'other' families, and branded metrics are redefined as quality. In this way, neoliberal governance reinforces inequality while inscribing moral hierarchies around what it means to be a 'good carer'. Extending Isin's (2004) 'neurotic citizen' and drawing on Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington (2009) and Preston (2018), we demonstrate that affect and rationality are not opposites but co-constitutive of each other, shaping the fragile identity of the neurotic parent.

Montessori exemplifies how these dynamics circulate within a wider privatisation movement in which educational logos (Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Steiner) operate as 'affective brands' that soothe parental anxieties while signalling cultural distinction. The case is revealing precisely because parents opt into fee-paying alternatives even when free, high-quality public provision exists, underscoring the moral and affective weight of neoliberal responsibility and distinction. The contribution of this paper is therefore twofold. First, it demonstrates that neurotic parents' choices are shaped not only by rational calculation, but also by deep-seated anxieties and insecurities. Second, it highlights that while these parental subjectivities are locally situated within Australia's hybrid preschool system, they are in fact shaped by global patterns governed by marketisation, responsibilisation and affective governance. Any future policy work aimed at promoting universal, equitable and high-quality early childhood education must contend with how limited access, combined with marketing and branding strategies, tends to intensify parental anxieties. It is imperative to resource existing and new play-based, community-anchored programs in ways that resist reinscribing moral and economic hierarchies in society.

Disclosure statement

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