

Evidence, Values, and the Revitalization of Schools

Response to Raywid

I appreciate Raywid's critique of *Public Schools of Choice* but take issue with her analysis of the research on choice and her advocacy of choice as key to revitalizing the schools.

Mary Anne Raywid has taken an important step toward extending the discussion about "public schools of choice" addressed in the recent ASCD monograph of the same name. She and I agree on the importance of finding ways to encourage the ongoing revitalization of public schools and creating more democratic governance structures for them. But here I would like to address two aspects of the discussion about choice on which we do not agree. First, I look at Raywid's analysis of the research about schools of choice. Then, I examine whether choice by itself is sufficient for revitalizing public schooling.

The Research Issue

Raywid's analysis of the research poses two problems. First, no matter how large the database and sophisticated the analysis, correlations cannot answer any questions about cause. This becomes especially apparent when policymakers and others anticipate predictable results of the same policy across diverse community and school contexts. Second, even if choice is associated with certain effects in a stable manner, other concurrent, less desirable effects may also arise. For ex-

ample, if improved test scores are a consequence of a choice system but so is stratification, is choice worth it? Thus, we see that the values debate cannot be avoided.

The issue of "experimental evidence" is, as Raywid suggests, problematic, yet I cannot share her conclusion that we can infer a causal link between choice and student learning from the data available. I believe that in her critique Raywid has gone beyond the evidence, as the panel suggested the claims of choice advocates often do. For example, she states that "correlational studies begin to give us glimmers of more, however, and when subjected to sophisticated statistical treatment like multiple regression and path analysis, they can yield the kind of evidence often accepted as tantamount to having established causation." The data she cites, however, have been derived largely from evaluation, survey, case, and/or ethnographic studies. Causality cannot be established from the results of such studies, even if they do number in the hundreds (Asher 1976). The increase in achievement and the improvement in parent and student attitudes in schools of choice that she cites require examination of various possible contributing factors.

If public policy and institutions are to benefit from research and demonstrated practices, whether or not cause can be ascertained, we must engage in debate about fundamental values, concepts, and assumptions in research and in practice. All of these construct our sense of the world, of experimental, case, and ethnographic studies—indeed, of any practice. Thus, attention must be paid to these fundamentals so that they do not mislead the researcher, policymaker, or practitioner.

The values issue becomes both more apparent and more controversial as we note that Raywid's cited schools of choice, whether public or nonpublic, are homogeneous, "problem-free" schools (see, for example, Coleman et al. 1982; see also Chubb and Moe 1990 and Coleman 1977, pp. 3-4). These settings are not congruent with our attempts to prevent and reduce social class and ethnic stratification, which is a likely outcome of purposeful homogeneity.

It is widely conceded that certain ethnic, racial, and economic groups do not fully participate in or receive the benefits of schooling, the economy, and the society. No one plans for this stratification, but it happens. Hence, for

some of us, a value orientation toward full participation of *all*, irrespective of class and ethnicity, would make any tendency toward stratification unacceptable. For example, Braddock (1981) points out that in analyzing their data, Coleman and his colleagues did not consider the effects of tracking, another way of stratifying students within schools. When students who are in college preparatory or academic tracks in public schools are compared to students in private schools, the differences in their achievement is insignificant (p. 492). Schools of choice have great potential for further stratifying children in and among school(s), resulting in negative consequences for them and for society.

For these reasons of *value*, empirical data—even when claimed to be causal—are not sufficient to support a position for or against schools of choice. In *Public Schools of Choice*, we called for an attitude of public inquiry—one that would extend discussion of data *and* values and encourage skepticism about any one perspective.

Revitalization of Schools

The second point I want to address is that the revitalization of public schooling requires far more than introducing "choice" as an aspect of the system. After all, privately and publicly held corporations exist in a market system—the ultimate choice arrangement—and yet many of them are not succeeding in the global economy. Their future success depends upon renewing the internal culture and ethos of these corporations, not the market itself. In other words, the nature of the business, its values and norms, and how the workers are organized and do their work are the keys to transforming these corporations (Kanter 1989, Peters 1987, and Waterman 1987).

The nature of student and teacher work, the values and norms of the school, and the way adults and students are organized are aspects of schooling that seem to vary little from one locale to another (Boyer 1983, Goodlad 1984, and Sizer 1984). This point has two important implications for the debate about choice. Without

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variability across these critical dimensions of schooling, parents and students will have little meaningful choice among schools. Moreover, a fundamental restructuring of these dimensions may be the ultimate key to revitalizing public schooling.

The real challenge—the ultimate key to revitalizing the schools—is to create conditions in which student and teacher work is real and powerful, essential societal values and norms are reflected in practice, and students and teachers are organized for full realization of these conceptions. Variability may well *result from and become an important effect* of these conditions for revitalization rather than being *the cause* for them.

Finally, school revitalization is nested within a larger context of the transformation of democracy for tomorrow's world (Dahl 1989, p. 311). How society will govern itself without bureaucracy is an essential question. The creation of democratic governance structures that contend well with today's new realities of pluralism and ambiguity may be more important than using existing economic principles to change schools in a manner that only replicates current social structures.

Public Schools of Choice encouraged us to consider and try a variety of revitalization activities *in addition* to choice. The experiences of all these efforts ultimately would form the foundation for determining the nature of the transformation of the public schools and the democracy.

Postscript

I appreciate Mary Anne Raywid's response to and criticisms about *Public Schools of Choice*. The ASCD panel's intent, in developing the report, was to encourage dialogue and debate. Both are essential in creating public policy with respect to choice or any other aspect of schooling. □

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