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Embracing Pedagogical Pluralism: An Educator's Case for (at Least Public) School Choice

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Abstract

Pedagogical and curricular beliefs and commitments are expressions of deeper philosophical and ideological worldviews that empirical research can sometimes modify but not ultimately eliminate. The pluralism these views produce is *reasonable* in that they all represent plausible interpretations of liberal-republican values and professional standards of practice; they should be granted some room to flourish under a system of carefully regulated autonomy and choice. Three objections to a conception of school choice grounded in a notion of reasonable pluralism among educational doctrines are addressed: 1) that it would undermine educators' efforts to secure status for themselves as professionals by admitting that "best practices" in education offer rough guidance at best; 2) that it would leave parents and students vulnerable to quackery; 3) that it abandons the common school tradition and its aspirations. I conclude with an examination of why the conceptual basis on which a society designs a system of

choice makes a difference.

Disagreement and debate within a professional community can be healthy. It sharpens thinking, stimulates inquiry, and expands knowledge. A community without such stimulative controversy would be moribund. At the same time, too much disagreement about too many fundamentals leads to schism. Education is characterized by both kinds of controversy. Competing hypotheses about how children learn have spurred wide-ranging research that has converged on some core principles to guide professional socialization and practice, at least roughly. On the other hand, the broad consensus about purposes and processes has done little to abate the internecine battles over what these principles imply for practice. The last two decades alone have given us the “reading wars,” the “math wars,” and the “culture wars,” as well as fierce battles over standards, what constitutes a “qualified teacher,” and more broadly, continued skirmishes in the Hundred Years’ War between various types of educational “traditionalists” and “progressives.” These battles have been engaged by educators and non-educators alike, and a staggering amount of time and energy have gone into waging them. I don’t know how to measure the impact of these perennial conflicts on children, communities, and the teaching profession itself. But I do know that civil wars are never healthy, and have wondered for a long time now what might be accomplished if these passions and energies were channeled in more productive directions.

The differences that set educator against educator are intractable, and all the research in the world will not settle their disputes. This is because the most important questions that divide them are normative rather than empirical. These divisions go deep. Pedagogical and curricular beliefs are extensions of more comprehensive philosophical doctrines that are in turn colored by ideological ones. In other words, educational doctrines reflect metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments conditioned in part by identity and a certain understanding of history and society. They constitute what John Rawls (1993) has termed “comprehensive moral doctrines,” that is “conceptions of what is of value in human life, as well as ideals of personal virtue and character, that are to inform our . . . conduct (in the limit of our life as a whole)” (p.175). As such, differing pedagogical belief systems ought to receive the same treatment as other forms of pluralism under liberal-democratic regimes—that is, tolerance within reasonable bounds. And given the depth of educators’ commitments to competing and mutually incommensurable conceptions of their vocation, it would seem that educators have much to gain in terms of satisfaction and effectiveness from an arrangement that gave them greater freedom to create schools according to their ideals with like-minded colleagues—perhaps enhancing, rather than diminishing, their status as professionals. Such an arrangement would entail a degree of autonomy for educators to assemble for purposes of creating schools that realize their ideals within broadly established political and pedagogical limits. It correspondingly entails *choice* on the part of both educators and families, because the different kinds of schools created under such an arrangement would correspond to the values and needs of different students and parents. In short, a system of school choice based on differing conceptions of good schooling would be a good thing for educators—as well as for families and communities—because it could foster the creation of more cohesive learning communities built on common beliefs about teaching and learning.

The argument proceeds in three steps. First I review, in a schematic and oversimplified way, how pedagogical and curricular beliefs and commitments are expressions of deeper philosophical and ideological worldviews that empirical research can sometimes modify but not ultimately eliminate. I then argue that the pluralism these views produce is nonetheless *reasonable* in that they all represent plausible interpretations of liberal-republican values and professional standards of practice that they all share at a broad level, and therefore ought to be granted some room to flourish under a system of carefully regulated autonomy and choice. Next I address three objections to a conception of school choice grounded in a notion of reasonable pluralism among educational doctrines: that it would undermine educator's efforts to secure status for themselves as professionals by admitting that "best practices" in education offer rough guidance at best, it would leave parents and students vulnerable to quackery, and that it abandons the common school tradition and its aspirations. I conclude with a brief discussion of why the conceptual basis on which a society designs a system of choice makes a difference, and why a basis in pedagogical pluralism has certain advantages more common bases of choice.

This argument differs from other pro-choice arguments in two ways. First, in linking education and morality, I am not speaking simply about religion, or about marginal cases where religious or ethnonationalist extremists create endless legal headaches for a dominant liberal and secular mainstream. The disagreements that concern me fall well within the mainstream of political and professional thought in the United States. The struggles between competing educational theories and methods over the last century and a half do not test the limits of liberalism or the Constitution in the same way that faith-based and ethnonationalist resistance to common schooling do. Cases involving religious minorities and state-operated public schools have been well-considered by others, including Rosemary Salomone (2000) and Stephen Macedo (2000). These treatments have addressed very real and intractable problems created by the presence of illiberal minorities under a liberal-democratic regime, and the philosophical and Constitutional questions they raise are of the utmost importance to liberal-republican theory and practice. But as applied to the questions of schooling and school choice, the focus on Constitutionally challenging cases can misleadingly suggest that there's a well-defined and articulated consensus in the US over what should be taught and how, and that those who challenge this consensus are somehow unreasonable or even threatening to the liberal-republican order that the rest of us seek to preserve. The first suggestion can make school choice seem superfluous or distracting. The second can make school choice sound dangerous, conjuring visions of publicly supported schools that preach hatred, oppression, or anti-Americanism. I want to focus instead on the fault lines within the loose liberal and professional consensus where these specters do not present themselves so acutely.

Second, my argument speaks primarily to educators themselves. It attempts to take seriously, and treat sympathetically, some of their deepest and most divisive professional convictions. Nearly the entire corpus of school choice literature focuses on why choice is good or bad for students, parents, and civil society. While I think my argument applies to all three, it is teachers who come closest to having articulated, informed, and deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning. And it is largely educators and their organizations that have fueled the "curriculum wars" of

the 20th century. (Note 1) Education is their vocation, and educators' identities tend to be far more deeply conditioned by a given conception of that vocation than other constituents; they therefore have too much at stake in the outcome of their struggles. Howard Gardner (2000) and Deborah Meier (1995) have written suggestively in this area, Gardner acknowledging that competing conceptions of good schools might require accommodation and Meier suggesting that school choice might actually be liberating for teachers. Like theirs, mine is a pro-choice, pro-educator argument motivated by a desire to realize conditions under which educators can do their best work on behalf of children, families, communities, and the republic.

I think one of the reasons educators are so hostile to choice is that so many proponents of choice tend to treat public education as a monolithic establishment to be resisted, or reduce what educators tend to see as a moral project to a system of "service providers" catering to clients, or worse, customers. More strident commentators have construed choice as a way of breaking up unions or the "educational monopoly," or as an escape hatch for "underserved" families neglected by the uncaring monolith. This characterization cannot sit well with working educators, most of whom feel beleaguered and hamstrung by policymakers and each other in their efforts to do right by their students. A conception of school choice—and policy in general—that recognizes educators' role as moral agents in the formation of good persons restores some honor to the vocation and emphasizes some of the ways in which educators and their constituents are allied, rather than opposed. It is time to reframe the choice debate.

The Philosophical and Ideological Sources of Educational Doctrines

This section makes what I hope is an obvious point: educational doctrines are not mere preferences or prejudices, but are expressions of belief systems informed by deeper philosophical and ideological convictions. For purposes of argument it will be helpful to identify some broad categories of commonly recognized educational doctrines. Observers who have surveyed the 20th century have settled on roughly four. (Gutek, 1997; Kliebard, 1995; Pulliam, 1995; Partington, 1987). Their classifications vary somewhat, but they cite the same key figures, movements, and permutations, so that these can stand for a rough consensus on a classification scheme that captures reasonably well the landscape of competing educational visions in the 20th and 21st centuries. Roughly speaking, these taxonomists have identified two kinds of "traditionalism" and two kinds of "progressivism." Among traditionalists are those who uphold the humanistic and liberal arts model of education focused on high culture and generally (though not exclusively) grounded in Western intellectual traditions, and those believe that schools should inculcate skills, knowledge, and behaviors that will enable students to become productive worker-citizens. Though they differ from each other in important ways, both kinds of traditionalist favor what might be called academic learning—classroom-centered, text-based, and largely disciplinary. They also share a tendency to maintain more authoritative, formal relations between adults and students, and to insist on common standards of comportment defined by prevailing cultural norms of civility. Progressivism also comes in two broad varieties. The first is what proponents like to call "student-centered," which tries to organize learning around the talents and

needs of each individual child. It tends to eschew the academicism of the traditionalists in favor of applied, hands-on, “real-world” experiences whose content is determined as much as possible by students’ interests. The second type of progressivism seeks to use schools as instruments for reconstructing society by socializing students to what adherents regard as more just and humane social norms than are said to be held by traditionalists and the society they represent. These two forms of progressivism likewise have their differences, but share an approach to adult-child relations that stresses negotiation and child involvement in codetermining rules of civility and comportment while giving as much rein as possible to individual and subcultural self-expression. These thumbnail descriptions are broadly sketched and oversimplify a messier reality, but I trust they look familiar enough to informed readers.

In his unusually slim and readable textbook, *Philosophical and Ideological Perspectives on Education* (1997) Gerald Gutek does the most explicit job among the taxonomists of tracing each educational doctrine to its philosophical, ideological, and historical origins, and so it is Gutek’s analysis I draw on here. What I’ve been loosely calling educational doctrine, Gutek calls educational *theory*, which is basically a set of normative beliefs about what should be taught and how that derives both from experience and its interaction with larger and more comprehensive bodies of thought. Each theory operates under certain philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality, human nature, human knowledge, and ethics, and carries with it certain assumptions about the nature of societies, their histories, and the experiences of people within them. They are, in other words, informed by philosophy and ideology. It is to Gutek’s credit that he recognizes the distinction. (Note 2) Where philosophy consists of abstractions and statements about metaphysics, epistemology, axiology (ethics and aesthetics), and logic, ideologies are the concrete and specific belief systems of specific groups interpreting their past, assessing their present, and attempting to enhance their status in the future. Where philosophy attempts to be universal, transcendental, and contemplative, ideology is partisan, historical, and activist. Together, Gutek argues, the two interact in a variety of ways with each other and experience to generate educational theories.

So, for example, traditionalists are more likely to subscribe to elements of a realist epistemology that holds that humans *discover* how the world works through disciplined investigation and reason, whereas progressives hew closely to Dewey’s claim that humans *construct* models of reality as they encounter and solve problems in their environment. Likewise, traditionalism tends to stress the fixed and universal dimensions of human nature, especially the human capacity for reason, where progressivism emphasizes human plasticity under varying environmental conditions. (Note 3) And where traditionalists tend to follow Aristotle in thinking of autonomy as something one earns through disciplined mastery of essential knowledge and skills whose standards of excellence are prior to the individual, progressives follow a post-Rousseauian model where a person becomes autonomous by exercising autonomy early and often, and by cultivating a distinctive persona.

Ideologically one finds similar patterns. Traditionalism, as the name advertises, has overtones of Burkean conservatism, where tradition is an important social glue and source of collective wisdom, and where effective social change must be carried out

incrementally within the tradition to preserve continuity and social cohesion. Progressives, on the other hand, tend to subscribe to assorted 19th and 20th century ideologies that view inherited traditions as at best an encumbrance to social and intellectual improvement and at worst part of an oppressive apparatus of power wielded by elites seeking to dominate others.

Once again, this sketch is overdrawn, but recognizable. Needless to say, the alignment of particular philosophical and ideological frameworks with educational theories is not always as predictable as the rough sketches suggest. It is possible, for example, to be a postmodernist-traditionalist (e.g., Richard Rorty, 1992), a classicist-feminist-social reconstructionist (e.g., Martha Nussbaum, 1997), or a realist-progressive (e.g., Rousseau). Kliebard calls these “hybrids” (p. 179). Whatever the particular relationship, though, educational theory always and inevitably develops out of some broader philosophical and ideological frameworks. (Note 4) The philosophical and ideological underpinnings of their educational theories and commitments are not always fully articulated or even recognized by adherents. In fact, most adherents of a particular set of doctrines most often regard them as “common sense,” a straightforward description of the world (and ethics and knowledge) as it simply *is*, a state of affairs obvious to all but fools, knaves, and enemies of children. But the frameworks are their guiding thought and action nonetheless.

Whatever the particular configuration, educational theories reflect comprehensive worldviews and normative beliefs that profoundly condition persons’ consciousness, particularly their conceptions of a good life and just society. As with all comprehensive doctrines, secular and sacred, different educational theories are mutually incommensurable. And yet, they represent disagreements among *reasonable* people who all subscribe in one way or another to some aspect of post-Enlightenment, post-Romantic liberal and republican thought. This acknowledgment is crucial. Most educational theories/doctrines in the US share certain aims. They all seek to cultivate tolerant, just, reasonable, critical-minded, and autonomous persons who are productive workers, competent and informed citizens, and adaptive agents able to negotiate a complex and changing social, political, and economic environment. It is just that they interpret these broadly shared ends through different philosophical and ideological filters that lead them to construe their educative mandates in sharply conflicting ways. All sides sincerely value republican citizenship and equality for all students. But does equality mean equal access to Euro-American high culture, as humanistic traditionalists maintain, the equal representation of the literatures of oppressed peoples, as social reconstructionists believe, or equal opportunity to read what one is most interested in or choose to study films instead, as a child-centered progressive might aver? Likewise, does educating for equal democratic citizenship require that we all become facile in the traditions and discourse of the civilization that gave rise to citizenship as we understand it, that each subcultural group have its own traditions and discursive modes be recognized and incorporated into the academic and social life of the school and public life more broadly, or that children begin making collective and individual decisions about fundamental matters of curriculum, comportment, and dress as early and often as possible? Each of these positions has plausible arguments on its side, and represents a reasonable interpretation of equality and citizenship. But they are irreconcilable with each other.

One of the beliefs that all sides share to some degree is a belief in the benefits of pluralism to a robust public culture. If so, then why not accept pedagogical pluralism for what it is, embrace it, and find a way to grant it fuller expression within reasonable bounds?

Common Schools and the Profession: Embodiment of “Best Practice” or Established Church?

In coming to grips with this diversity of educational doctrine, the first thing to recognize is that this pluralism is OK. In fact, it is natural. As Rawls put it, “A plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime” (p. xviii). The proliferation of differing worldviews forms the warp and woof of life in a liberal republic, and suppression of dissent never works for long. So if pluralism of pedagogical doctrines reflects broader philosophical and ideological pluralism, the question becomes how best to manage it. Scholarly attempts to address pluralism in schools have focused on the cultural or religious identifications of students, parents and communities, and have largely been proposed within the paradigm of the common school. Crudely put, this scholarship can be cast as a debate between pluralists, who aver that schools should accommodate and even promote as broad an array of individual and group differences as fully as possible; and assimilationists, who argue that common schools should forge a common culture. In recent decades, the advantage has gone to the pluralists—“we are all multiculturalists now,” as Nathan Glazer (1998) famously put it.

Paradoxically, the overwhelming cultural shift in favor of pluralism has been accompanied by an unabated attempt to impose a uniform educational theory (and practice) on the entire institution of schooling. Whether attempting to define national content standards or attempting to establish a uniform canon of “best practices,” each group of advocates believes it is trying to do best by kids and society, and therefore must prevail. Yet experience and research have shown that students can thrive in a broad range of schools, from Core Knowledge schools and KIPP academies to women’s leadership schools and expeditionary learning centers. All these types of schools produce graduates who are literate, productive citizens. As Larry Cuban (2000) observes, there are many different ways for a school to be “good.” As we saw with respect to political and social values, beneath the doctrinal conflict there lies a set of characteristics that all good schools have in *common*:

They have clear and shared purposes; they believe that all children can learn; each school staff has developed a working culture that embodies these common beliefs and enjoys collective action; and parents are deeply involved with the school. Thus very different concepts of schooling can be embraced without sacrificing the core purposes of public education. (p. 152)

Variations on Cuban’s list of attributes are found widely in accounts of successful schools. At this level, educators enjoy notable consensus. For example, in one way or another, TheodoreSizer (1997), Mortimer Adler (1982), and Paul Gagnon (1993)

have in different ways argued that “less is more”—i.e., that curricula should be selective, covered in-depth, and coherent. The problem is that the consensus erodes quickly as one begins to unpack their assertions: the criteria of selection, the meaning of depth, and the principles of coherence differ substantially among the progressiveSizer, the humanist-traditionalist Adler, and the disciplined-based traditionalist Gagnon. Where Sizer calls for thematic projects as the basis of curricular organization, Adler looks to the Great Conversation among classic Western authors, and Gagnon to the internal structures of the academic disciplines within the broad sweep of history. Though Sizer and Adler once collaborated for a time on the Paideia project in the 1980s, these three men could not together create and sustain a good, coherent school. Each by himself, in cooperation with like-minded colleagues, could.

The kinds of conflicts represented by these three figures play themselves out daily in schools and communities across the US. A great deal of the acrimony among educators, and the incoherence of American schooling generally, stem from adherents of incompatible doctrines being forced to compete with one another for dominance within the common school. In a typical school partisans coexist warily and resent each other’s influence. The traditionalists lament the lack of rigor, the progressives complain about the amount of required content coverage, and the reconstructionists sneer at the traditionalists’ easy absorption of women authors and black inventors. Everyone is dissatisfied.

How then to improve the likelihood that that educators in a school will develop a cohesive culture, collegial environment, and collective mission? A critical enabling condition for these qualities is professional autonomy within a system of choice. This is intuitive for many reasons, but the most relevant here is that one of the inhibitors of cohesive school cultures is disagreement over the best curriculum, instruction, and school culture. As noted, every zoned school is a mish-mash of progressives, social reconstructionists, and traditionalists, and each group further contains its own internal factions and fault lines. Genuine collegiality grounded in a set of shared standards of practice and shared normative understanding with regard to the work to be done is nearly impossible under these conditions. In a very real sense many teachers cannot even comprehend one another. One reason that comprehensive school reform is so difficult is that any attempt to impose coherence inevitably favors one educational doctrine over another, thereby galvanizing resistance among a plurality of faculty. Some resist out of sheer lassitude or intransigence, sure; but many do so because they sincerely hold contrary beliefs about their vocation as educators. To keep the peace, schools often resort to giving each teacher as much latitude as possible to do as he or she pleases—hence, the oft-cited isolation of teachers and the difficulty of forming genuinely collegial school cultures. Or alternatively, they engage in perennial rituals of “consensus-building,” which paper over the differences by temporarily retreating to the level where the consensus Cuban speaks of is possible. If educators could instead form around a particular educational theory, a common definition of citizen, worker, and lifelong learner, one of the chief barriers to cohesion and collegiality would abate. And the way to do this is to allow teachers (and parents and students) to choose those that best match their own philosophical and pedagogical convictions. [\(Note 5\)](#)

The argument that school choice grounded in a recognition of reasonable pluralism could benefit educators and other school constituents is admittedly speculative. But

there is a historical analogy that I think gives us some warrant for considering it. It is worth recalling how Western societies first came begrudgingly to accept pluralism as a fact of life and eventually to regard tolerance as a prime public value. Prior to the 17th century the notion that political authority and social order could exist without an established church was unthinkable. Clearly, secular authority required divine sanction, mediated through the offices of an established church representing a particular set of doctrines. It took the Protestant Reformation and over a century of bloody, destructive conflict to convince people that this belief and the policies that stemmed from it had become sources of political and social *instability*. Disestablishment and policies of religious tolerance emerged as pragmatic accommodations to political reality, a way to discourage people from killing each other over doctrinal differences. It was only later that intellectuals began to theorize tolerance as a positive good, something valuable in its own right and worthy of the strongest protections. Over time, most religious sects thrived as voluntary associations, and eventually came to recognize their common aims and interests. Catholics and Protestants, Anglicans and Baptists—not to mention Buddhists and Muslims—now coexist amicably in a way unimaginable to their 17th century predecessors. And all but the most extreme sects contribute to, rather than threaten, the common civic culture.

I don't want to press the analogy too hard. For one thing, common schools could be said to have achieved a *modus vivendi* among different adherents, and dissidents enjoy tenure protections that amount to something approaching an official policy of toleration in schools already. More fundamentally, the state has nearly opposite responsibilities with respect to religion and education—it is proscribed from supporting the one and obliged to support the other. On the other hand, I am not the first to observe the parallels between theological and educational doctrine. (Note 6) Insofar as the analogy does hold, it suggests that we may have less to fear from educational disestablishment than from a continual struggle among adherents of different education theories to establish their "faith" through the vehicle of the common school. And I do think it holds, at least to a point. Sectarian warfare among Christians obscured a great deal that competing groups held in common as *Christians*. Once again, beneath sectarian differences in education lies a great deal that most educators (and parents and the public) hold in common. It is quite plausible that as disestablishment paved the way for interfaith cooperation among religious sects, giving more freedom to educators to practice their sectarian creeds within the limits of the broad liberal-republican and professional consensus we do enjoy could heal current rifts among professional educators and enable greater professional solidarity. It could also prove energizing, as it did for religious sects, which thrived once their proselytizing energies were set free. After all, who among contemporary secularists feel the proselytizing impulse more strongly than educators?

Three Objections: Professionalism, Quackery, and the Common School Tradition

The claim that choice might be good for educators might provoke at least three objections, reflecting legitimate concerns among educators and the broader public. First, this argument implicitly denies that teaching is a profession on par with medicine, which has proved far more successful in establishing a tight canon of

professional knowledge and best practices. This will naturally raise concern among those attempting to raise the status of teaching by analogizing from medicine. Second, allowing a broader array of schools and practices could increase the risk of hucksterism or quackery—that is, it opens the door to crackpots and assorted extremists, putting families at risk and further undermining the credibility of teachers. And finally, school choice seems to repudiate the common school ideal on which the modern American public school system was built. The common school objection should matter to educators as educators for two reasons: first, because the civic dimension of schooling forms part of its moral dimension and *raison d'être*, and second, because public support for schools is said to rest in part on the sense people have that schools serve the public good.

School choice grounded in the recognition that pedagogical questions are as normative as they are empirical may prove difficult for professionalization advocates to accept. Educators have sought recognition as true professionals for the better part of the last century, a claim that has rested on the validity of the assertion that educators and educational researchers possess a scientifically-based professional expertise not available to laypersons. They have never succeeded in securing the legitimacy they desire, at least in part because the claim to be scientifically-based is spurious. And where the science is sound, the implications for teaching practice usually leave considerable latitude for practitioners. For example, research on learning demonstrates convincingly that the mind actively constructs knowledge through its interaction with its environment. These findings tell you something about how the mind works and point roughly to phenomena that teachers ought to keep in mind when planning and delivering lessons; however, it does not say anything about the relative advantages of “discovery learning” versus well-delivered lectures or other modalities. It only tells you that, whichever modality you choose, it needs to incorporate certain strategies and take certain characteristics of students into consideration (Hirsch, 1996; Bransford et al, 2000). (Note 7) Yet partisans of each modality claim the research for themselves, claiming implicitly or explicitly that the research discredits their rivals. This partisan appropriation of research hurts both the credibility of the research and the public reputation of educators by making the former look cooked and the latter half-baked. You just don't see this kind of persistent doctrinal warfare in mainstream medicine.

If these claims sound like the *hauteur* of a philosopher, consider the following statement by the National Research Council's Committee on Scientific Principles for Education Research:

A more global implication of the role of values in education research concerns the extent to which research in education is truly akin to an engineering science. The question of why education has not produced the equivalent of a Salk vaccine is telling. After all, medical research is something of an engineering science in that it brings theoretical understanding in the life sciences to bear on solving the practical problems of prolonging life and reducing disease. Education research is similar, with the key difference that there is less consensus on the goal. Medical research often has clearer goals—for example, finding a cure for cancer. Because values are so deeply embedded in education in so many different ways, education researchers do not have a singular

practical goal that drives their inquiry. (2002: 85)

None of this gainsays the legitimacy or value of educational research, or its relevance to practice. It simply urges modesty about claims that a given pedagogical practice is “research-based,” as well as greater candor about the degree to which values-based convictions drive what one does in the classroom with (or without) the research.

Nor should any of this be taken to deny that teachers require special skills and knowledge to do their jobs well. Quite the contrary; teaching requires considerable knowledge and skill. It just does not narrow the field of “best” education practices to a point where educators can declare a single best, empirically verifiable educational theory. In short, the research tells us what adherents of a particular education theory must take into account if they want to succeed under the terms of their doctrines, but it still doesn’t tell us which doctrine we should all subscribe to. Again, education simply isn’t medicine.

But the medical model is not the only professional model available to educators. Journalists, clergymen, and tradesmen all enjoy legitimacy as experts, and considerable respect from non-practitioners. And all hew to certain standards of vocational practice that permit a wide range of legitimate variation. Respectable journalistic styles range widely, as do the ideologies that inform them—from *National Review* to *The Village Voice*, and from literary journalism to Gonzo. Yet all honor a similar code of ethics with respect to standards of veracity, confidentiality of sources, and so on; and all hew to certain canons of rhetoric and style. Likewise with clergymen, tradesmen, and other practitioners of honored vocations. Each has standards of practice, but standards defined flexibly enough to allow highly diverse approaches. These standards are nonetheless tight enough to enable us to discern masters from quacks. Even modestly discriminating readers recognize the difference between *The New Yorker* and *The Weekly World News* (a supermarket tabloid). It is possible, then, that educational professionalism conceived more modestly could actually *enhance* teachers’ status by aiming for a more plausible standard of professional legitimacy; one that, like journalism or ministry, allows a range of approaches within a more parsimoniously defined set of standards where there *is* broad consensus among educators and between educators and informed constituencies.

Could a more flexible conception of professionalism nonetheless open the door to quackery? There are, after all, avid readers of *The Weekly World News*. Religious cults abound. Fly-by-night hustlers have cashed many a check just before the new roof collapsed. Worse, it is usually the least well informed who are most susceptible to quackery, and the children of the ill-informed who are most vulnerable. Society simply cannot tolerate the educational equivalent of *The Weekly World News* or the Branch Davidians. The individual and collective stakes are too high, especially for disadvantaged children.

These concerns may have force in an unregulated environment where persons share no core values to bind together and sustain a public culture, no rough consensus about desirable educational outcomes, no standards of justice or means to enforce them, or no way to judge good from bad teaching. But none of these background conditions obtains in the United States. Once again, rough consensus

on these standards does exist, despite differences with respect to how they are to be defined, codified, and instantiated.

In the trade and ministerial vocations, professional standards are maintained internally, *and* laws exist to protect persons from libel, fraud, or outright abuse. The regulatory bar could be said to be pretty low, especially for journalists or ministries, but there is no reason it cannot be set higher in education, in recognition of the higher stakes attached to it. Choice proponents have long recognized that choice requires standards and accountability provisions to help families and communities make good decisions (Finn, 2002). Defining standards broadly enough to accommodate legitimate differences among sectarians without undermining their value *as standards* poses both political and technical challenges. Figuring out how to assess student achievement of standards poses similar problems. But they are surmountable. Surely it is possible to strike some satisfactory balance between the need for meaningful standards and the accommodation of reasonable differences.

The common school objection poses the strongest challenge to the move toward a system of choice grounded in a recognition of reasonable pluralism. The common school by definition militates against it. It is an honorable institution through which Americans have expressed their liberal-republican ideals for the better part of two centuries. In it, children of varied ethnic and social backgrounds are supposed to mix and mingle and emerge as a unified citizenry with a common civic identity and equal opportunity for future prosperity. Some latter-day champions of the common school have even suggested that the common school serves as a sort of training ground for citizenship by acting as a goad to local political engagement (Gutmann, 1999). A system of choice is said to undermine all these aims.

Choice proponents have responded to the equity and civic challenges by pointing out that common schooling as it operates in practice in fact produces profound inequities, and that private schools have done at least as good a job forging the kinds of citizens we say we want—law-abiding, tolerant, engaged—as public/common schools. This rebuttal has some force. The common school simply hasn't lived up to its promise as equalizer of opportunity or forger of competent citizens and, furthermore, a system of choice does not require us to abandon either ambition. Constitutional law, liberalism, and republicanism provide fairly robust guidelines for ensuring that schools serve certain public, collective purposes and forge shared civic values robust enough to maintain a liberal-republican polity. And while Macedo and Gutmann are certainly correct in arguing that many of the political and social virtues we take for granted—such as tolerance and willingness to work together—actually require active cultivation or “conscious social reproduction,” there is no reason why baseline beliefs like these cannot form the criteria by which schools are to be approved, accredited, and evaluated. Even libertarian-leaning choice proponents have acknowledged that school choice does not preclude regulation to ensure that schools promote academic and civic standards (Moe, 2002).

But then the school choice critic can ask, with some plausibility, why we don't just draw on these resources to improve common schools? Choice advocates have an answer to this, too—that political control of schools will by its nature always frustrate the goals of reformers; a market-based system would deliver most of what we want from schools more efficiently (Chubb and Moe, 1990). I would like to take

a similar, but less market-oriented approach and suggest that, especially in an age of assertive pluralism such as ours, the common school actually works against its own best intentions by embroiling schools in ceaseless conflicts over the same sorts of normative questions that inhibit collegiality among educators, thereby undermining cooperation between schools and their constituents. I aver that perhaps school choice conceived as accommodation of persons' reasonable differences with respect to pedagogical doctrines, could actually enhance civic comity among American subcultures in the same way it could enhance professional collegiality among American educators, while boosting support for public schooling.

The problem with the common school is that it doesn't seem to produce the civic outcomes it strives for. Doctrinal conflicts about everything from math curricula to dress codes continually factionalize and polarize the very persons who most need to work together to make schools successful. Again, defenders of the common school argue that these conflicts are a good thing, because they represent direct democracy in action, from which students and adults alike learn how to be engaged citizens. What they tend not to note is that the process rarely generates satisfactory, consensual resolutions. Rather, disputes are decided by factional wrangling, power politics, and litigation. These means of adjudicating conflict have produced timorous, incoherent, mediocre schools and fractious, litigious school constituencies. These supposedly democratic practices have largely interfered with both good pedagogical practice and civic comity. In other words, the common school may have become a source of instability inadvertently subverting its own best intentions.

This claim makes sense when we pause to consider a basic precondition for citizen consent to state rule. As William Galston (2000) has recently rehearsed it, "Genuine civic unity rests on unforced consent. States that permit their citizens to live in ways that express their values are likely to enjoy widespread support, even gratitude. By contrast, state coercion is likely to produce dissent, resistance, and withdrawal" (p. 108). This truism holds at the local level, as well, where district policies and school practices inevitably alienate some group or another. Despite the best, most sincere intentions of school and district personnel, some constituents inevitably experience their actions as coercive. Conservative Christians are a good example. As Michael Apple and Anita Oliver (1996) have documented, their militancy is often *provoked* by their marginalization within the public school system. The same phenomenon has been observed among ethnic subcultures. Fears not just of unfair procedural treatment (e.g. disproportionately high assignments to low academic tracks), but also substantive fear of "deculturalization" and "linguistic genocide" have tended to galvanize ethnic self-assertion and resistance (Spring, 2000). (Note 8)

Similar alienation among professional educators (and parents) has given rise to a bevy of organized dissident groups, each of which feels itself oppressed by a dominant educational establishment. Members of the progressive Coalition of Essential Schools and traditionalist Core Knowledge Foundation, for example, each see themselves as virtuous minorities fighting the good fight against the educational establishment. And curiously, each sees each other and the point of view they represent as embodying all that's wrong with the establishment. Meanwhile, the field is rife with groups who militate for or against phonics instruction, multiculturalism, school uniforms, bilingual education, and so on, all

galvanized by real or perceived slights by a real or perceived establishment. The proliferation of these groups ought to strike us as odd: When a profession is at war with itself over whether young children should receive direct and systematic instruction in textual decoding *or* be immersed in “literacy rich environments,” something has gone terribly, dishearteningly wrong.

The liberal-republican state still has a prerogative ensure that its citizens are educated to achieve reasonable standards of intellectual competence, and to endorse understandings of justice, tolerance, and public spiritedness consistent with itself. It’s just that the usual mechanisms for coping with the demands of pluralistic constituencies in common schools— factional wrangling, litigation, dilutive accommodation—have proved unsatisfactory to nearly everyone. A system of public school choice that recognized a diversity of goods with respect to what’s worth knowing and how it is taught could defuse some of the acrimony and restore some of the coherence. The potential benefits are twofold. At the school level, it has the potential to enhance professionalism and collegiality among teachers by allowing them to form communities of practice around some core conception of the pedagogical good. This makes possible agreement on principles, practices, and strategies to guide the work of the school. It likewise provides a substantive basis for parent and student buy-in up-front. So right away, two key features of strong schools—quality teachers and engaged students and parents—can more easily gain a toehold.

At the community level, support for schools might actually be enhanced under a regime of public school choice, because fewer people would feel compromised, silenced, or alienated. Accommodation could certainly defuse a lot of conflict not just among educators, but between educators, families, and communities. Choice alone would not be enough. A spirit of tolerance would also need to be cultivated in localities so that certain kinds of schools were not prevented from opening because of local majority bias, which would only shift the current acrimony to slightly different terrain while continuing to hold children hostage to doctrinal zeal. If this spirit were achieved, however, choice could actually make it easier for local citizens to like each other and their schools, which would represent a significant step forward.

To make the conceptual shift to school choice, we don’t have to give up our commitment to basic fairness, common civic culture, academic standards, or certain common features of schooling. Nor should we. We simply have to find better institutional mechanisms for realizing them. If, at a certain level of abstraction, we all believe in problem-solving, literacy, and life-long learning; cooperation, justice, freedom, republicanism, patriotism, and tolerance; active student learning, curricular coherence, and authentic assessment; but let our ourselves get bogged down in doctrinal disputes about what kind of school best honors these, then we are all perhaps better served by allowing a reasonable pluralism to prevail. Paradoxically, a policy of pedagogical disestablishment could diminish sectarian rivalry and pave the way for greater interfaith cooperation, to the benefit of the common good. [\(Note 9\)](#)

Conclusion

My argument is not intended to imply that educators should exercise sole, or even primary authority over the kinds of schools that will be offered. The emphasis on

professional educators does recognize that educators (and parents/citizens-turned-educators) are more likely to have at least a semi-coherent and semi-articulate educational philosophy. They will largely determine the kind of schools available, and will continue to work to convert others to their pedagogical worldviews. The emphasis on pedagogy and philosophy also recognizes and honors the pluralism that exists among reasonable, well-intentioned educators. Nonetheless, parents, community members, and other educational constituents also have worldviews and interests that demand voice and accommodation. My argument is compatible with other values-based rationales for choice, such as those put forward by Salomone (2000) and Galston, which are grounded in parental values and children's differing needs. The eventual landscape of schools would over time be shaped by the ongoing negotiations among educators, families, and other constituents.

The pluralistic model of school choice grounded in educators' (as well as communities' and parents') philosophical commitments also has some compatibility with the market-based model. Student achievement and life outcomes would still be a chief criterion for judging school quality. Schools would, in effect, compete with one another for the loyalties of students and parents. But there are substantive differences, as well, with consequences for how we think about choice and frame education policy generally. The chief difference lies in the conceptualization of schooling itself. Where the market model tends to conceive schooling as a service commodity, with educators as "providers" and families (and businesses) as "clients" or "consumers," the model sketched here comes closer to John Davison Hunter (2000) and Robert J. Nash (1997) who conceive schools as moral communities. I think this model more accurately reflects both how constituents experience schooling and how we *should* conceive it. The problem with the market model is that it provides meager conceptual resources for schools (or their authorizers) to exercise legitimate normative authority or impose reasonable expectations on students, families, business, and other constituents—there are, after all, no consumer obligations, only rights. Social progressives as well as conservatives have good reason to preserve a conception of schooling that recognizes, affirms, and supports the formative mission of schooling.

At the same time, the pluralistic model in some sense gives more power to families in that it urges policymakers to consider a broader range of goods when ascertaining school quality than students' academic achievement. Charter proponents have been frustrated by how difficult it can be to close a low-performing charter school in the face of family and community protest. This attachment to low-performing charters—irrational from a market perspective—reflects the diversity of goods that schools provide for teachers, parents, students, and communities. By honoring these, a pluralistic model would make school accountability more complex—a potential downside from the point of view of school quality measured primarily in terms of test scores or college going rates, but a potential enhancement for those who believe there is more to schooling than academic achievement.

If my argument has merit, the next step will be to sketch policy implications. Suffice it to say for now that while I think it makes a substantive difference in how we frame and think through policy questions, it does not by itself solve any of the implementation challenges that other school choice models face. Academic and civic standards would still need to be established. (Do we permit schools that teach

Afrocentrism or give “equal time” to creation science?) “Reasonable pluralism” would have to be defined. (Is it reasonable for a school’s dress code to require girls to wear head scarves?) Assessment systems would need to be devised that preserved rigor without unfairly favoring some kinds of schools over others. Fair and adequate funding formulae would need to be developed. Public information and transportation systems would need to be established. Regulations and incentives would need to be crafted that ensured that *all* families and students—irrespective of special needs, home language, race, ethnicity, or income—had full access to high quality schools. Decisions would have to be made about where to draw the line on school features that seem designed to appeal primarily to a single ethnic or religious group. (Note 10) (Head scarves, creation science, and Afrocentric schools are unlikely to draw many students from outside certain very particular subcultures.) Labor and certification issues would need to be addressed, new organizational networks formed, new ways of delivering electives, sports, and extra-curriculars. And so on.

These and many other problems of principle and practice would remain to be solved. But if designed correctly, a system of choice that honored the convictions of educators (and other constituents) would take some of the most intractable issues off the table, especially those that touch us most closely—curriculum, pedagogy, and standards of personal comportment. The liberal arts school could coexist with the project-based school, the JROTC academy with the school for peace and social justice, the school that requires uniforms with the one that allows students to collectively renegotiate the dress code every six weeks. Once all sects feel secure in the practice of their faith, might better schools and stronger professional solidarity follow? We won’t know unless we call a truce in the pedagogical holy wars.

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Notes

1. See Kliebard (1995) and Ravitch (2000) for two of the more comprehensive accounts of this history.
2. Most commentators do not. They tend instead to regard the conflicts among educational theories as primarily “ideological.” Among partisans the ideological label is slur, implying insidious motives on the other side in contrast with the benign and virtuous motives of one’s own. It is always the other side that’s ideologically motivated. In scholarly treatments, where ideology is recognized as informing all sides, there is a tendency to regard ideology as a kind of false consciousness, a filter that interferes with consensus-building (Paris, 1995). Even Kliebard (1995), whose historical examination of the conflicts among different educational theories is admirably even-handed, reduces the conflicts to “symbolic politics,” something vaguely irrational and ultimately ineffectual.
3. This is illustrative, but overdrawn. Traditionalists recognize the influence of environment, and progressives the power of human reason. Nonetheless, differences in emphasis at the philosophical level lead to considerable divergence at the pedagogical and practical.
4. Despite appearances, origins, and the avowals of some adherents, no position on the square is innately more *politically* conservative or progressive than the others. Jesuit education, for example, tends to be pedagogically traditional; yet the social mission of the Jesuits is progressive. Likewise, multiculturalists tend to regard themselves as political progressives, and tend to ally with pedagogical progressives as well. But multiculturalism originates in the ethnonationalist desire to hold on to a reified cultural identity over and against a broader and more inclusive civic identity, which is characteristic of certain conservatives. Religious fundamentalists, who like the Jesuits tend to

- be pedagogically traditional, are simultaneously reactionary conservatives and social reconstructionists of a different stripe.
5. There is some suggestive literature on the possible benefits to learning of voluntary association within schools. See, for example, Bryk et al (1993), Powell (1996), and Hunter (2000).
 6. John Meyer (2000) actually defines educational theories as religions, using a set of criteria similar to those Gutek uses to define philosophy and ideology. Cuban (2000) likewise treats educational theories as quasi-religions: “By World War I, these competing progressive and traditional ideologies constituted different faiths in the best way of raising children. . . . This century-long see-saw struggle of ideas is, then a much deeper religious conflict over what role schools should play in society writ large and, more specifically, how children should be schooled” (pp.156-7). He draws here on several historical studies by Tyack and Hansot tracing the origins of different educational theories to religious sources.
 7. Nor does it settle the epistemological debate between realists and pragmatists, as the question remains open whether the mental constructs correspond to something about the way the world actually is or are simply useful fictions that help humans solve problems in specific contexts.
 8. I don’t mean to imply here that we should encourage a system of school choice based on religious or ethnic identification. At the same time, there is no denying that the pedagogical traditions and the philosophies and ideologies that inform them developed out of particular cultural milieux. In a culturally pluralistic society, especially one characterized by aggressive subcultural self-assertion, we could expect a degree of interaction between pedagogical creeds and cultural affiliations. Might pedagogical creeds be used as cover for cultural or religious ones? If so, might a system of choice predicated on differing conceptions of best curriculum and pedagogy provide ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic groups a pretext for self-segregation? It is certainly possible, but it isn’t as inevitable as it might at first seem. For example, in a recent case in Vancouver, British Columbia, Hong Kong immigrants’ traditionalist pedagogical values clashed with the local native majority whose values were more progressive. Despite the case study author’s attempt to characterize the conflict as racially motivated, it is noteworthy that the immigrant’ educational values—characterized as Confucian and “Chinese” in origin—converged with those of conservative Christians in the area (Mitchell, 2001). Meanwhile, contemporary progressives working in the urban core of cities such as Chicago, Providence, and New York are demonstrating that progressive pedagogy—once regarded as effective primarily with white, suburban, affluent students—can also work for disadvantaged urban minorities (Cotton, 2001; Wasley, 2000; Cushman, 1999). These examples suggest that the interactions among pedagogy, philosophy, ideology, and culture are complex and potentially serendipitous. They hardly point to school choice grounded in pedagogical pluralism as a panacea for segregation or balkanization; but they do suggest policy and recruitment strategies mitigating these risks through a diverse array of schools that appeal across ethnic and religious lines.
 9. These are empirically testable assertions, but as choice proponents are fond of saying, we have to try these policies in order to research their effects.
 10. See footnote 8 above.

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