education policy analysis archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,
open access, multilingual journal

Arizona State University

Volume 31 Number 1 January 17, 2023 ISSN 1068-2341

Charter Schools After Three Decades: Reviewing the Research on School Organizational and Instructional Conditions[1]

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Citation: Dallavis, J. W., & Berends, M. (2022). Charter schools after three decades: Reviewing the research on school organizational and instructional conditions. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 31*(1). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.31.7634

Abstract: Charter school policies have focused on improving three aspects of schools—autonomy, innovation, and accountability—with the intention of promoting advances in curriculum, instruction, and learning that lead to better student outcomes. However, most research on charter schools tends to neglect school organizational and instructional

[1] This paper was supported by the Center for Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington and by the Center for Research on Educational Opportunity (CREO) and the Institute for Educational Initiatives at the University of Notre Dame. All opinions expressed in this paper represent those of the authors and not necessarily the institutions with which they are affiliated. All errors in this paper are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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Journal website: http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/
Facebook: /EPAAA
Twitter: @epaa_aape

Manuscript received: 20/12/2021
Revisions received: 28/04/2022
Accepted: 17/05/2022

conditions. Overall, reviews show that charter schools have inconsistent effects on student achievement scores, a finding that masks heterogeneous effects among different types of charter schools, operators of charter schools, and authorizers of charter schools and the organizational and instructional conditions under which they operate. This systematic review of the literature focuses on what we know about the organization of charter schools and the resources—material, human, and social as well as professional development and teaching practices—within them. We end by identifying gaps where more research is needed.
Keywords: charter schools; school effectiveness; school organization; education policy; instructional practices; learning environments

Escuelas chárter después de tres décadas: Revisión de la investigación sobre la organización escolar y la instrucción

Resumen: Las políticas de las escuelas chárter se han centrado en mejorar tres aspectos de las escuelas: autonomía, innovación y responsabilidad, con la intención de promover avances en el currículo, la instrucción y el aprendizaje que conduzcan a mejores resultados para los estudiantes. Sin embargo, la mayoría de las investigaciones sobre las escuelas chárter tienden a descuidar las condiciones organizativas y de instrucción de las escuelas. En general, las revisiones muestran que las escuelas chárter tienen efectos inconsistentes en los puntajes de rendimiento de los estudiantes, un hallazgo que oculta los efectos heterogéneos entre los diferentes tipos de escuelas chárter, los operadores de las escuelas chárter y los autorizadores de las escuelas chárter y las condiciones organizacionales y de instrucción bajo las cuales operan. Esta revisión sistemática de la literatura se centra en lo que sabemos sobre la organización de las escuelas chárter y los recursos (materiales, humanos y sociales, así como el desarrollo profesional y las prácticas docentes) dentro de ellas. Terminamos identificando brechas donde se necesita más investigación.
Palabras-clave: escuelas chárter; eficacia escolar; organización escolar; política educativa; prácticas de instrucción; entornos de aprendizaje

Escolas charter depois de três décadas: Revisando a pesquisa sobre organização escolar e ensino

Resumo: As políticas de escolas charter têm se concentrado em melhorar três aspectos das escolas – autonomia, inovação e responsabilidade – com a intenção de promover avanços no currículo, instrução e aprendizado que levem a melhores resultados dos alunos. No entanto, a maioria das pesquisas sobre escolas charter tende a negligenciar as condições de organização e instrução da escola. No geral, as revisões mostram que as escolas charter têm efeitos inconsistentes nas pontuações de desempenho dos alunos, uma descoberta que mascara efeitos heterogêneos entre diferentes tipos de escolas charter, operadores de escolas charter e autorizadores de escolas charter e as condições organizacionais e instrucionais sob as quais operam. Esta revisão sistemática da literatura enfoca o que sabemos sobre a organização das escolas charter e os recursos materiais, humanos e sociais, bem como o desenvolvimento profissional e as práticas de ensino dentro delas. Terminamos identificando lacunas onde mais pesquisas são necessárias.
Palavras-chave: escolas charter; eficácia escolar; organização escolar; política educacional; práticas instrucionais; ambientes de aprendizagem

Charter Schools After Three Decades: Reviewing the Research on School Organizational and Instructional Conditions

Charter schools have been a part of the educational landscape for three decades, following the opening of the first charter school in Minnesota in 1991. Charter schools are tuition-free, publicly-funded schools authorized by the state. They exist outside of traditional public districts and enjoy greater autonomy than traditional public schools. The school choice movement in general, and the charter school movement in particular, have focused on improving three aspects of schools: autonomy, innovation, and accountability. Central to advocates' argument for charter schools and choice is that these aspects of reform will result in innovations advancing curriculum, instruction, and learning, which in turn will lead to better student outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Walberg & Bast, 2003). Moreover, the argument goes, practices and conditions related to autonomy, innovation, and accountability will differ across schools (and school types), thus responding to parental and community preferences and further promoting student achievement (Walberg, 2011). Charter laws vary from state to state, and charter schools range from independent stand-alone schools to those organized within systems or networks, known as non-profit charter management organizations (CMO) or for-profit educational management organizations (EMO). As a result, there is considerable variation in charter school operations. Yet research on charter schools tends to neglect school organizational structure and processes (see Austin & Berends, 2018; Berends, 2015, 2020; Oberfield, 2017).

Over the last 15 years, rigorous research on charter schools has grown considerably, especially with the advancements in experimental and quasi-experimental methods applied to charter schools with student-level longitudinal data from state and district administrative data. In addition, there have been several recent reviews of charter schools that focus more on the impact of charter schools on student outcomes than on what we know about what leaders, educators, students, and parents in charter schools do to establish these effects (e.g., Austin & Berends, 2018; Berends, 2015, 2020; Betts & Tang, 2019; Epple et al., 2016; Ferrare, 2020; Gamoran & Fernandez, 2018). Overall, these reviews show that charter schools have inconsistent effects on student achievement scores, finding mostly positive but also some negative and null outcomes. For example, in their meta-analysis, Betts and Tang (2019) found that, on average across the rigorous studies of charter school effects on achievement, the effects on mathematics achievement were positive in elementary and middle schools, but not in high schools. In reading, they found that students in charter schools outperform traditional public school students in middle school, but not in elementary or high school.

When considering impacts on high school graduation, college attainment, and labor market earnings, the findings have been more positive (e.g., Angrist et al., 2016; Sass et al., 2016), but not in all cases (Coen et al., 2019; Dobbie & Fryer, 2019; Place & Gleason, 2019). For instance, Sass and colleagues (2016) found, on average, that charter high school attendance increased annual earnings $2,300 up to 12 years following middle school (up to ~25 years of age). Although Sass et al. generally found positive results on educational attainment and labor market earning, Dobbie and Fryer (2019) revealed more mixed results. In Texas, they found the effects of charter school attendance on high school graduation, college enrollment (2-year and 4-year), and labor market earnings were not statistically significant.

These overall findings of inconsistent effects mask heterogeneous effects among different types of charter schools, operators of charter schools, and authorizers of charter schools (Berends & Waddington, 2019; Carlson et al., 2012; Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Zimmer et al., 2014). Moreover, although the studies above shed important light on the causality of charter

schools on outcomes, they do not specify the possible mechanisms to explain those effects. To understand the heterogeneous effects, several have called for examining the conditions under which charter schools are effective (or not), pointing to the importance of organizational and instructional conditions that support student learning (see Berends, 2015, 2020).

Because the majority of research on charter schools tends to focus on impacts on student achievement, we use a school organizational framework (Gamoran et al., 2000) to structure our review. Most extant research stops at presenting the impact of charter schools on students' academic achievement and attainment outcomes, providing a number of robustness checks to establish the causal effect and put boundaries on the magnitude of the effect. Although this research is helpful in establishing the causal relationship between charter schools and student outcomes, the charter school research base is weaker when attempting to establish the importance of specific organizational and instructional practices (amidst other school resources, practices, and professional development). At times, researchers have been able to establish the causal effect of certain charter school designs, such as KIPP (Angrist et al. 2012; Coen et al., 2019), but such studies are not common. Thus, our review of the charter school research focuses on what we know about the organization of these schools and the instructional practices they use, the methods researchers have used to advance knowledge, and the questions receiving more or less attention from scholars. We conclude with the areas where we believe more research is needed.

Research Questions

We focus on the following research questions in our review: (a) What aspects of charter school organizational and instructional conditions have been the subject of recent research and what methods have been used to investigate these topics? (b) What have we learned about charter schools from this research, particularly along different dimensions of school organization and schooling activities that promote student learning?

Schools and Schooling: A Conceptual Framework to Guide Review

Over several decades, researchers have attempted to better understand the process through which learning occurs. Bidwell and Kasarda (1980) made a helpful distinction between schools and schooling; that is schools set the organizational context for teaching and learning and schooling consists of the actual experiences students have in school with their teachers and peers that lead to learning. Yet, what elements make the organizational context of a school successful is still an open question. Previous "effective schools" research focused on successful schools that implemented a set of common practices associated with positive student outcomes (Bryk et al., 2010; Edmonds, 1979, 1982; Klugman et al., 2015; Purkey & Smith, 1983). These research-based practices have not been widely adopted, likely due to differing priorities at the district level and an inability of individual schools to implement large-scale organizational changes on their own (see Berends et al., 2002). As charter schools were created to provide greater flexibility and autonomy to design, conduct, and manage the school as an organization, we would expect to find that charter schools are better able to implement such practices but also to develop and test new ideas.

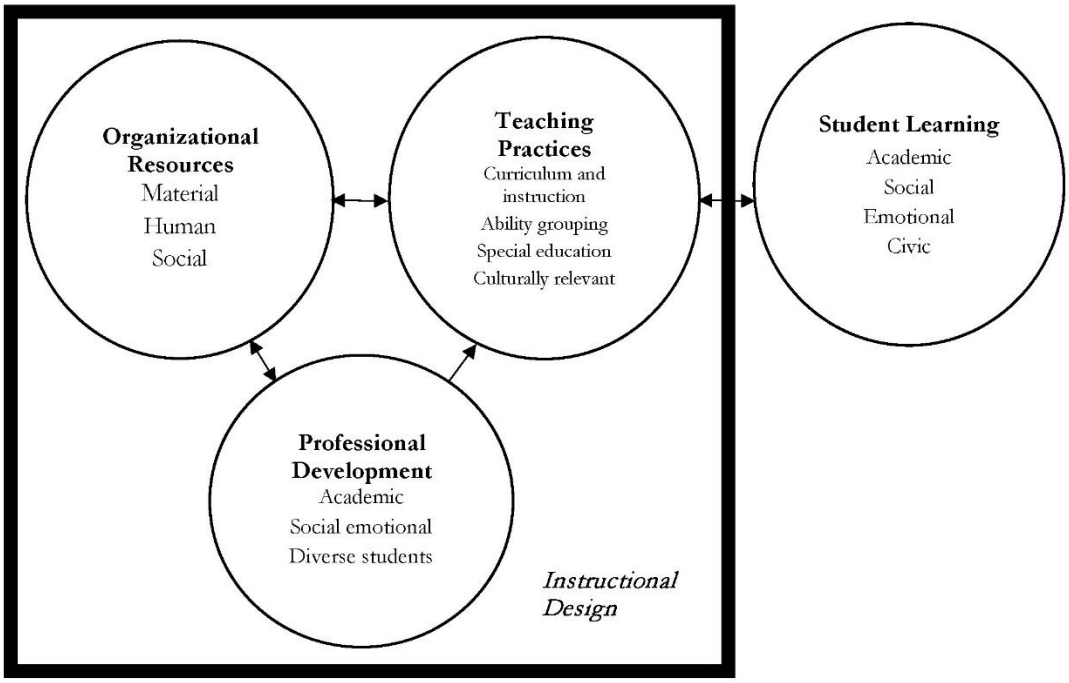
To examine what charter schools are doing, we use an organizational framework described by Gamoran and colleagues (2000). They specify more clearly the school organizational context, on the one hand, and schooling activities of teaching and learning on the

other. As replicated in Figure 1, they provide a dynamic theory of school organization, focusing on resources and conditions within the school context that relate to educational activities (e.g., teaching practices and professional development) and outcomes.

Organizational resources and teaching practices have a two-way relationship. Following Rowan (1990) and school perspectives that point to the loose-coupling of schooling activities (Bidwell, 1965; Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 1978; Weick, 1976), Gamoran and colleagues argue that teaching is "a complex, non-routine activity" and "organizational support for innovation and success requires an organic relation between teaching practices and school organization, a connection that involves feedback and growth in both directions" (p. 45). Furthermore, schools' organizational structures and teaching practices are likely to change in response to teacher learning through professional development. Effective teaching practices lead to student learning, which often is viewed as an increase in level and growth of test scores, but we would add positive social, emotional, and civic to the outcomes that teaching practices promote.

Figure 1

Instructional Designs for a Dynamic, Multidirectional Model of School Organization and Student Learning



Material, Human, and Social Resources

To provide more specificity to the organizational resources of schools, Gamoran et al. (2000) identify three categories of such resources—material, human, and social—and consider how these resources can be combined for purposes of professional development and influencing teaching practices. Material resources encompass supplies and equipment related to curriculum, time used for instructional activities of planning, preparing, and teaching, spending related to

instructional personnel, and autonomy for spending decisions related to teaching and learning. Human resources include the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of school leaders and teachers that determine the quality of teacher instruction and student learning along with the school-wide goals that constitute the school's mission or vision. Social resources refer to levels of trust, common values, collaboration and shared responsibility, and collective decision making among the school personnel, including professional learning communities and networks both in and outside of school that support what goes on in the school.

Gamoran and colleagues (2000) argue that "organizational resources are the most essential aspects of the organizational context" and subsume most of the school "conditions examined in previous research under our concept of resources" (p. 58). Such previous research includes studies of school climate (Anderson, 1982); effective school characteristics (Bryk et al., 2010; Edmonds, 1979, 1982; Klugman et al., 2015; Purkey & Smith, 1983); school sector (Berends & Waddington, 2018; Bryk et al., 1993; Gamoran, 1996); classroom time and materials (Barr & Dreeben, 1983); class size (Nye et al., 2002; Stecher et al., 2003), and school restructuring, improvement or turn-around (Berends, 2004; Berends et al., 2002; Finnigan et al., 2012; Newmann et al., 1996; Zimmer et al., 2017).

Professional Development

Gamoran and colleagues (2000) discuss professional development as an "engine of change," a key mechanism for improving school organizational conditions (p. 52). Professional development is often situated at the intersection of material, human, and social resources. Material resources play a role in the types and frequency of professional development offered, and professional development opportunities influence the human and social resources of teachers, increasing teacher knowledge and skills and strengthening collaborative efforts among teaching staff.

Teaching Practices and Instructional Regimes

Teaching practices also factor into Gamoran and colleague's (2000) conception of school organization and have the capacity to more directly impact student learning. Of fundamental importance in teaching practices is the interactions among teachers, the student, and the student's peers to learn content. Some have viewed this interaction within instructional "regimes," not in the top-down prescriptive and authoritarian sense, but rather as "systematic approaches to instruction, in which the desired outcomes are specified and observed, and in which the intended outcomes are rationally related to consistent methods of producing those outcomes" (Cohen et al., 2003, p. 133). Raudenbush (2008) elaborates on this when he emphasizes the dynamic interplay between teachers and students in that teachers repeatedly assess students' skills and then tailor instructional activities in response to their appraisals to promote student learning. Raudenbush argues that such a conceptualization moves us beyond examining teaching as specific teacher actions and behaviors (Shulman, 1987) because teachers could conceivably use different strategies and behaviors but still be consistent with the instructional regime (see also Raudenbush & Eschmann, 2015).

Innovation in charter schools, in some cases, has involved the implementation of instructional designs or regimes, some more formalized and systematized than others. Although not in charter schools, an example of an instructional design is Success for All (SFA), which provides scripted reading materials, periodic assessment of student literacy skills, and regrouping of students in instructional groups who are then targeted for more specific modes of instruction (Cheung & Slavin, 2016; Slavin et al., 2009). Within the charter school sector, one example

would include the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) among others. KIPP has received a great deal of attention due to its design and positive effects on student achievement in lottery-based research designs (Angrist et al., 2012; Betts & Tang, 2019; Coen et al., 2019; Farkas, 2018). The KIPP instructional design emphasizes high expectations, character development, teacher and student development, and more time for instruction (e.g., longer days and school years).

Instructional designs also emphasize the dynamic relationships among teachers and students and the interplay between assessment and instruction, sometimes formalized and sometimes not (Raudenbush, 2008). We argue that a regime among individual teachers needs some form of coherence (Newmann et al., 2001) or design (Cohen et al., 2014; Glennan, 1998; Peurach, 2011), as shown in Figure 1, which encompasses organizational resources, teacher professional development, and teaching practices within instructional designs.

The key point is that teaching practices constitute interactions among teachers and students in a dynamic of instruction, assessment, and adjustment to individually address student progress (see also Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). It is these interactions that comprise the opportunities for learning and development among students and that historically have been so difficult to change in the core of classrooms (Elmore, 2004; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Important aspects of instructional designs include culturally relevant curriculum and instruction. In addition, instructional designs likely include some form of ability grouping or tracking—"the practice of dividing students for instruction according to their purported capacities for learning" (Gamoran et al., 1995, p. 688)—an aspect of schools that has been difficult to change (Gamoran, 2010; Oakes, 2005). Although ability grouping and tracking has undergone a great deal of criticism, the practice remains common in U.S. schools (Gamoran, 2010; Lucas, 1999; Oakes, 2005).

By focusing on school organizational practices, we expressly consider what charter schools are doing, taking a look inside of the "black box" of schooling (Berends, 2015). This limits the research examined to a school-context focus, and in some cases leads us to exclude studies that focus on the experiences, backgrounds, and contributions of the students, families, and communities that charter schools serve. It also restricts inclusion to studies that consider mechanisms related to how schools impact student outcomes, which means excluding some cross-sector analyses. Finally, it excludes more theoretical essays regarding why charters exist and some studies that seek to examine whether or not charter schools are considered innovative.

We review quantitative, qualitative, mixed method, and review studies that inform the school organizational framework. Due to the heterogeneity of charter models, there are few large-scale datasets that allow for the exploration of in-school organizational and instructional conditions. To date, the quantitative studies that examine these issues are relatively few. However, there is considerably more qualitative research on what goes on within charter schools in the form of case studies of specific charter schools and practices. Although not generalizable, these case studies provide initial avenues of inquiry into what goes on in charter schools that can provide the basis for theory building for future testing. Because this research is correlational rather than causal, we end our review by discussing paths for additional research to test the impact of charter school instructional designs.

Method

To identify research on charter schools, we conducted targeted searches in the spring of 2019 using the search term "charter schools" in Web of Science and ERIC as well as the top-ranking education, sociology of education, and education policy journals. We also conducted website searches of academic publishers using the same keyword to identify books published on charter

schools during this period (see Table 1). We limited the search to the publication years of 2014-2019 because of the number of reviews that covered research before that time (Berends, 2015; Lubienski, 2003; Wohlstetter et al., 2013) and because the U.S. Department of Education has shifted its emphasis toward examining the moderators and mediators of charter school effects (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, 2019). Because the targeted studies were published between 2014 and 2019, we subsequently refer to these as "recent studies" or "recent research." This process identified 1,070 sources. After duplicates were removed, 914 sources remained.

We then screened the abstracts and meta-data from each source to consider whether the text met the following criteria: (a) Does the paper focus or include charters in the text in a substantive way? (b) Is the paper empirical (i.e., is it a qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, literature review or meta-analysis paper)? (c) Is the paper peer-reviewed or a rigorous evaluation study? (d) Does the paper content fit within the school organizational framework guiding our review? Aspects of school organization could be discussed descriptively or used as mediators, moderators, or outcomes within the paper analysis. If the answer to all four questions was "yes," the text met the requirements for inclusion. This screening process resulted in 255 sources that met our criteria.

Table 1

Types of Searches

Databases	Web of Science ERIC
Journals	*American Educational Research Journal* *American Journal of Education* *Education, Finance, and Policy* *Education Researcher* *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* *Sociology of Education*
Publishers	Brookings Institution Corwin Press Harvard Education Press Palgrave MacMillan RAND Routledge Russell Sage Foundation Stanford Education Press Taylor and Francis Teachers College Press University of Chicago Press
Research Centers	CREDO NBER

Next, we reviewed the subset of included sources to confirm eligibility. Using the school organization framework adapted from Gamoran et al. (2000), we coded each source into one of the following categories based on the details of the study: material resources, human resources, social resources, professional development, teaching practices including instructional designs or regimes, or not applicable. We coded chapters within books as separate sources, and very few sources fit more than one category. When a source did appear to fit more than one category, we coded it according to which organizational element was considered a mechanism within the study. This final eligibility stage resulted in 200 sources coded for inclusion in the review. Next, we reviewed and coded these sources for subtopics within each dimension based on the descriptions provided by the framework as well as the research method used in order to answer our first research question. Finally, we reviewed the articles within each topic and subtopic to summarize and draw conclusions regarding what we know and still need to know regarding organizational structures and processes in charter schools in response to our second research question.

Findings

Coded Topics and Types of Research

Table 2 presents a summary of the coded subtopics and research methods within each dimension of school organization to provide evidence in response to our first research question. Just over one third of the corpus focused on instructional designs. Within this dimension, most articles examined "no excuses" type charter schools and specific school culture models, followed by online, blended learning models. Close to one quarter of the identified articles considered human resources, focusing on teachers, specifically recruitment and retention, autonomy, characteristics, and evaluation. Another 20% of the articles examined the dimension of teaching practices, with common subtopics related to characteristics of effective schools, the curriculum, and student-centered and culturally responsive instruction. Just over 10% of articles discussed social resources, with many examining school climate and conditions. We found few articles on material resources and even fewer—only five—on professional development.

More than half of the articles were qualitative, with many studies focusing on one or two schools as case studies. Close to 40% were quantitative studies. While there were 14 review articles written primarily on teaching practices and instructional regimes, there were very few mixed methods articles. With the exception of material and social resources, the dimensions were more often examined using qualitative methods.

Material Resources

We found only 12 sources that focused on material resources. Several of these studies consider instructional spending in charter schools with some studies tying per pupil spending to achievement outcomes, providing evidence that charter schools spend less per student on instruction compared with traditional public schools and yet outperform them academically (DeLuca & Wood, 2016; Flaker, 2014; Larkin, 2016; Reed & Rose, 2015; Weber & Baker, 2018). Other work ties this higher level of efficiency to the amount of autonomy, suggesting that when school leaders have the ability to make spending decisions, they are able to better monitor and focus expenses on identified needs (Flanders, 2017). Missing from the research was a consideration of time for instructional activities, including time teachers spend planning, preparing, and teaching in charter schools as well as other teacher personnel related expenditures, such as professional development.

Table 2

Coding of Sources

Dimension of School Organization	Coded Subtopics	Qualitative	Quantitative	Mixed Method	Review	Total
Material Resources (12 sources)	Instructional spending	0	6	0	1	7
	Incentive pay (teacher)	1	0	1	0	2
	Principal autonomy	2	1	0	0	3
Human Resources (49 sources)	Leadership practices	8	1	0	0	9
	Recruitment/retention	6	9	1	1	17
	School mission/vision	2	0	0	0	2
	Teacher autonomy	5	1	0	0	6
	Teacher qualities	6	0	0	1	7
	Teacher evaluation	4	1	0	0	5
	Governing boards	1	2	0	0	3
Social Resources (23 sources)	CMOs	2	2	0	0	4
	Climate, conditions	1	10	0	0	11
	Parental involvement	2	3	0	0	5
	Univ. partnerships	2	0	0	0	2
	Student trust	1	0	0	0	1
Professional Development (5 sources)	Miscellaneous	4	1	0	0	5
Teaching Practices (44 sources)	Culturally relevant	4	0	1	0	5
	Curriculum	5	2	0	0	7
	Effective schools	4	2	0	3	9
	Special education	1	4	0	1	6
	Student-centered	4	0	1	1	6
	Grouping/tracking	1	1	0	0	2
	Miscellaneous	5	4	0	0	9
Instructional Regimes (67 sources)	STEM focus	1	2	0	0	3
	Heritage, bilingual	3	0	0	0	3
	No Excuses/KIPP	11	5	0	4	20
	Online learning	3	5	0	1	9
	School culture models	16	14	1	1	32
Totals		105	76	5	14	200

Human Resources

A considerable number of research publications focused on human resources, specifically the roles and characteristics of principals and teachers within the charter school environment. Survey research based on the Schools and Staffing Survey finds that charter school teachers are younger, have fewer years of experience, are less likely to have a master's degree, and are slightly less likely to be licensed than traditional public school teachers. They are similarly likely to be teachers of color and they work for less pay and are less likely to be unionized (Epple et al., 2016; Oberfield, 2017) but are more likely to have graduated from selective colleges (Addonizio et al., 2015). Whether charter school teachers experience greater autonomy is still an open question. Some quantitative studies show that charter school teachers report greater autonomy than their traditional public school colleagues, but those who teach in charter schools run by EMOs or CMOS report more accountability (Oberfield, 2017). Findings from qualitative case studies also suggest that the autonomy granted to charter school principals does not reach teachers (Mavrogordato & Torres, 2018). Missing from these studies is research on the quality of instruction within charter schools as well as the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of charter school teachers.

Charter school principals in theory should have more autonomy in which to carry out administrative responsibilities, but a large gap still exists in the literature regarding whether and under what conditions this is the case (Oberfield, 2017). Charter schools have a higher principal turnover rate compared with traditional public schools (Ni et al., 2015; Sun & Ni, 2016), with some evidence that leaving the charter school principal role is more often an exit from education rather than a step forward on the career ladder. From a teacher retention perspective, management-operated charters have high teacher turnover, with one in three teachers choosing to leave due to unsustainable workloads (Torres, 2016) and working conditions (Roch & Sai, 2018). Research also suggests that recently hired charter school teachers are more likely to leave the profession and less likely to transfer schools compared to their traditional public school peers (Gulosino et al., 2019).

Social Resources

The majority of studies on social resources during this period consider school climate and conditions, including teacher working conditions as well as satisfaction along dimensions of trust, collaboration, and support provided to teachers in charter schools compared with traditional public schools, but find mixed results in multiple areas. Wei and colleagues (2014) found that charter school teachers report that their schools have more supportive teaching environments with higher expectations of students, a greater sense of responsibility among staff members, and stronger student engagement when compared with traditional public school teachers. Charter school teachers, however, report less professional development training, less collaboration with colleagues, and less fair teacher evaluations than do teachers in traditional public schools. Using a national dataset as well as a dataset from six states, Oberfield (2017) found that teachers in charter schools report having more time to collaborate compared with traditional public school teachers, but that they actually spend fewer hours doing so outside of formal meetings. Also using national data, Roch and Sai (2017) found that charter school teachers are less satisfied with their positions than traditional public school teachers, a finding that is driven by lower salary and the lack of union membership. By contrast, Oberfield (2017) demonstrated that when controlling for teacher-level characteristics including age, charter school teachers are more likely to work longer hours for less pay compared with traditional public school teachers, but charter schools teachers are no more likely to experience burnout, differences in satisfaction, or turnover.

Some evidence suggests that within the charter sector, teachers in EMOs have lower levels of satisfaction than independent and CMO charters (Oberfield, 2017; Roch & Sai, 2017). Although

being a part of a network does not ensure benefits (Woodworth et al., 2017), recent qualitative studies found some benefits related to curriculum adoption (Wohlstetter et al., 2015) and data use (Farrell, 2015) for teachers in CMO charter schools. More research is needed to consider the balance between individual school autonomy and network membership within the charter sector.

Teachers in charter schools report higher levels of parental and community engagement compared with teachers in traditional public schools (Oberfield, 2017; Rose & Stein, 2014) with teacher outreach to parents attributed to three mechanisms in charter schools: (1) parental involvement and influence, (2) home-school contracts, and (3) teacher beliefs about their own efficacy and relationships with parents (Rose & Stein, 2014). One gap within this research is an examination of shared values and trust among the many stakeholders and investigation into collaboration and collective decision making in charter schools.

Professional Development

We only found five research works that focused on professional development in charter schools. Four of these were qualitative case studies of individual charter school efforts with professional development, including Montessori teaching practices (Scott, 2017), effective literacy practices (Parsons et al., 2019), and schools' use of teacher evaluation data to inform professional development efforts at the individual (Radoslovich et al., 2014) and school levels (Kettler & Reddy, 2019). Kraft and Blazar (2017) examined the MATCH Teacher Coaching (MTC) model using a randomized experiment in New Orleans charter schools and found that participation in the coaching model resulted in improvement across a range of teacher practices consistent across subjects, grade levels, and schools. Some additional evidence suggests that successful charter policies and practices include teacher coaching and feedback within research on a number of school characteristics (Chabrier et al., 2016; Gleason, 2019). Missing from this research were the types and frequency of professional development experiences and opportunities offered to charter school teachers.

Teaching Practices

The second largest category—teaching practices—included subcategories of culturally relevant curriculum and instruction, effective school characteristics, special education, student-centered practices, and ability grouping, along with a range of classroom practices and curriculum.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Instruction

The ability to understand and critically examine the political, economic, and social forces influencing personal experiences has been found to provide a protective influence on marginalized students, resulting in increased resilience and engagement in academic, civic, and political engagement (Seider et al., 2018). Several qualitative and mixed methods articles in this period examine charter schools that are incorporating elements of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), specifically the development of critical or sociopolitical consciousness, in the school curriculum. Several case studies (Clark & Seider, 2017; Seider et al., 2018; Silva, 2016) suggest that some charter schools are able to focus resources on exposing students to social justice curricula.

Effective School Characteristics

One recent study (Maas & Lake, 2015) finds that successful schools in different sectors, including charters, exhibit many of the same elements. These effective school characteristics include a shared purpose and focused goals on student learning, use of student data, structured discipline, a student reward structure, coordination among teachers, use of time, and a culture of high expectations. Maas and Lake (2015) call for future research to consider "whether charter schools are more likely to implement, sustain, and scale these conditions" (p. 166). Many of the characteristics

now included in charter models were noted in the effective schools literature (see Edmonds, 1979, 1982) but have not been widely implemented in schools in other sectors (Gamoran & Fernandez, 2018).

A review of the literature on successful policies and practices in charter schools finds positive associations among student academic success and school characteristics that echo several elements in the previously mentioned list, including an urban setting, a comprehensive behavior policy, prioritization of academic achievement, more time in school, teacher feedback and coaching, the use of data to guide student achievement, and some limited evidence of the benefits of high dosage tutoring (Gleason, 2019). The replication of charter school models including these highly standardized practices has resulted in similar student test score gains when comparing the new replicated charter schools to the original model charter schools (Cohodes et al., 2019). These practices have also been effective in schools other than charters (Fryer, 2014).

In an exploratory study of principals and teachers in charter schools, Berends and colleagues (2019) compare a variety of innovative organizational and instructional practices between charter and traditional public schools. They find that charter schools tend to add additional requirements for students and parents, including school uniforms, parent volunteer hours, or student community service hours. In addition, charter schools were more likely to report relying on a values-based curriculum, instructional materials developed by teachers, student work focused on long-term investigations of compelling questions, cooperative learning strategies, instructional methods focus on complex/real-life projects that provide students with authentic learning experiences, and collaboration with outside experts when compared with traditional public schools. Although exploratory, these findings suggest that research examining specific practices in schools and classrooms provides a promising avenue to understand school improvement among different school choice options.

Special Education

Several studies examined school-administrative data to understand what has been termed the "special education gap" and to evaluate the claim that charter schools either remove or provide fewer services for students with special education needs. Examination of elementary school-administrative data in New York City and Denver suggests that the special education gap begins at school entry when students with speech or language disorders are less likely to attend charter schools. This gap grows because compared with students in traditional public schools, students in charters are less likely to be classified as having a specific learning disability. Students with special learning needs are also less likely to enter charter schools at transition points (Winters, 2015; Winters et al., 2017; Wolf & Lasserre-Cortez, 2018). However, in the state of Washington, charter schools appeared to serve greater proportions of students with disabilities with no evidence that schools play a role in pushing students with special needs out of charter schools (Tuchman et al., 2018).

From an outcome perspective, one quantitative study finds that although students are more likely to lose special education and English language learner status when they enroll in a charter school, they are more likely to pursue postsecondary education compared with traditional public school students (Setren, 2019). One exploratory qualitative study involving observation and interviews with administrators, teachers, and parents in 30 schools across the country considers the ways in which some charter schools have been successful in serving students with special needs (DeArmond et al., 2019). Most charter schools in the study used traditional approaches, but a few exhibited more innovative instructional and staffing models, suggesting that under the right circumstances related to policy, funding, and collaboration, charter schools can play an important role as a site for advancing work in this area.

Student-Centered Focus

Several recent qualitative studies come to similar conclusions regarding charter school success stemming from personalized learning environments that are characterized by flexible instruction and strong teacher-student relationships (Borup & Stevens, 2017; Hastings & Handley, 2019; Hung et al., 2014; Rickabaugh et al., 2017), suggesting the need for further examination of these elements. Intensive tutoring has been considered a key characteristic of the "no excuses" charter models, with high achieving charter schools more likely to offer high-dosage tutoring consisting of small groups of students meeting with teachers multiple times per week (Dobbie & Fryer, 2013). One lottery-based charter school study found a strong positive association between high quality tutoring and math scores in charter schools even after controlling for other charter school characteristics (Chabrier et al., 2016). Another quantitative study found that students with the lowest levels of achievement made the highest gains, suggesting some measure of focus or emphasis on meeting the needs of struggling students (Cohodes, 2016).

Ability Grouping

Although the division of students into a separate program of classes for all of their academic subjects—known as tracking—has become much less common in the U.S. over the past several decades, it has become more common for schools to use ability grouping, assigning students into classes on a subject-by-subject basis (Gamoran, 2010; Lucas, 1999). In comparing tracking in the public and charter sectors, Berends and Donaldson (2016) found that charter schools, when compared to similar public schools in a matched analysis, have a more even distribution of students across ability groups (high, average, low, mixed), whereas traditional public schools have many students clustered in the average and few in the high-ability groups. Beyond achievement outcomes, one qualitative study found that tracking in a mixed race suburban charter high school created racial boundaries and negatively influenced how students of color participated in honors classes (Modica, 2015).

Instructional Designs and Regimes

Sources that examined instructional designs or regimes in charter schools were the most prevalent in this period. Within this group of studies, the largest subtopics included school culture, language and curricular models, "no excuses" and KIPP schools, and online or blended learning charter schools. The majority of these studies used qualitative methods, although several quantitative studies sought to link organizational and instructional conditions with student achievement.

School Culture and Curriculum Models

Creating a college preparatory atmosphere is a top priority for some charter schools. Recognizing the lack of research on how a college preparatory culture impacts the students charter schools serve, Lamboy and Lu (2017) lay out a research agenda for evaluating the success of these schools. A few recent qualitative studies look specifically at Latinx students' experiences in college preparatory charter schools. One study underscores the need to prepare students for the possibility of college with emphasis on instructional interactions between teachers and students (Athanases et al., 2016). Similarly, ethnographic and qualitative studies find that social networks and supports from students' experiences in a charter high school are valuable resources in the transition to college (Martinez et al., 2019; Michel & Durdella, 2019).

Recent qualitative studies consider other school culture foci, including character education (Bond, 2016), social justice education (Banks & Maixner, 2016), and kindness (Nazareno & Krafel, 2017) in which school curricula orient educational endeavors around larger goals such as values,

equity, and care for others. Many charter schools have adopted specific curricular areas as the focus for their schools and school culture, such as science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), music, or language such as dual language, heritage, and bilingual schools. Some quantitative work finds evidence of higher academic performance in STEM-focused charters compared with traditional public schools (Sahin et al., 2017) and positive effects of transferring to STEM-focused charters compared with STEM-focused magnet schools (Judson, 2014). More qualitative work on language schools that include a focus on heritage language (Wu et al., 2014) and bilingual and dual language (Avni, 2015; Kangas, 2017) present the opportunities, tensions, and challenges associated with this type of work in charter schools.

"No Excuses" Instructional Designs

Considerable differences between schools and networks of schools exist in the charter sector. Of the different instructional designs currently implemented, charter schools that embrace a "no excuses" orientation are the most widely studied in this period, with many studies focusing on the model broadly and a few studies specifically examining schools affiliated with KIPP. The "no excuses" model has been characterized by schools that do not take poverty as an excuse for poor academic performance and exhibit intense focus on academics with high expectations for student behavior, serving a community of students primarily from low income and racial minority backgrounds with the intent to close racial achievement gaps (Cheng et al., 2017). The majority of urban charter schools in many American cities are considered "no excuses" schools (Angrist et al., 2012, 2013; Coen et al., 2019). "No excuses" schools include well-known school networks such as KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Achievement First as well as stand-alone, independent charters (Krowka et al., 2017). These models typically include previously mentioned characteristics of strict discipline, high dosage tutoring, additional instruction time, teacher feedback, and a commitment to each student (Chabrier et al., 2016), with some quantitative studies finding positive academic effects but other qualitative studies providing critiques of some aspects of the model. Because of the common instructional aspects encompassed by this model and because a number of sources (20) used this label explicitly, we include "no excuses" research as a separate instructional design rather than as a school culture model.

Recent research finds consistent evidence for these schools demonstrating a positive effect on academic achievement. Meta-analyses report that "no excuses" charter schools have large, positive, and statistically significant effects on student math and reading achievement and that these effects are greater than effects for charter schools in general (Betts & Tang, 2019; Cheng et al., 2017). Similarly, a systematic review of recent studies focusing on effects of "no excuses" schools on academic achievement supports the finding that the positive benefits of attending a "no excuses" school likely continue for three years (Krowka et al., 2017). An evaluation study focusing on KIPP network schools demonstrates positive effects on student achievement for students in elementary and middle schools and for those students entering a KIPP high school who did not attend a KIPP elementary or middle school (Tuttle et al., 2015). Other studies have considered whether student selection into, attrition, and replacement may be reasons for KIPP schools' success and find that students who select into and out of KIPP schools are similar to their counterparts in traditional public schools (Nichols-Barrer et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2017).

Other research is beginning to consider how attending a "no excuses" school may result in longer-term outcomes related to college enrollment and the labor market. Using lottery-based data from Noble Street Charter Schools in Chicago, one study found that those who won the lottery and enrolled in the charter school were more likely to go to college, attend selective colleges, and remain in college for at least four semesters (Davis & Heller, 2019). Another study found that "no excuses"

charter schools in Texas increased educational attainment, with students more likely to graduate from high school and attend a 4-year college compared with students in public and other charters, but that these schools had only a small and insignificant effect on earnings (Dobbie & Fryer, 2019).

Critics, however, suggest that these positive academic outcomes may come at a price within the school environment, with some opponents arguing that the KIPP culture is overly corporate and thus not focused on the communities they serve, although researchers find some evidence against these ideas (see Maranto & Ritter, 2014). The intense focus on academics may crowd out other purposes of education. One study finds qualitative evidence of a tension between an overemphasis on academics to the detriment of civic and citizenship education (Sondel, 2015).

How "no excuses" schools achieve these positive academic outcomes is also the focus of several recent qualitative studies, examining the highly structured disciplinary systems embraced by this model of schools. One ethnographic study finds that despite promoting social mobility through the desire to close the racial achievement gap, "no excuses" charter schools continue to reinforce social class norms, developing "worker-learners" who develop self-monitoring and control but may be more reticent to express opinions or challenge authority (Golann, 2015, p. 115). Another ethnographic study reports similar conclusions, finding that the emphasis on academics and the lack of culturally responsive pedagogy in a "no excuses" schools results in a "silent passivity" among students (Sondel, 2016, p. 171). However, one qualitative study finds that students in three "no excuses" charter schools, when compared with students from other charter schools, develop a greater ability to navigate situations and settings where they would be traditionally marginalized (Seider et al., 2018).

Online and Blended Curriculum Delivery

Online charter schools are publicly funded and governed by the charter laws in the state and involve online learning or teaching for some or all of its content delivery. The quantitative studies of the impact of online charter schools on student achievement are consistently negative, whether examining virtual charters nationally (Woodworth et al., 2015) or in specific states, such as Indiana (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020), Ohio (Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Zimmer et al., 2009), and Pennsylvania (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2019). These negative impacts across studies, states, and subjects range from one-tenth of a standard deviation loss in achievement for students who switch into virtual charter schools to one-half of a standard deviation (see Fitzpatrick et al., 2020).[3]

In a recent review of the literature that examines online charter schools, several concerns emerge, including accountability, use of funds, low student grade performance, and high dropout rates (Waters et al., 2014). A descriptive national study finds that most online charters serve high school grades, vary in size, serve similar numbers of special needs, and that White students are overrepresented and Latinx students are underrepresented in online charter schools compared to public schools (Gill et al., 2015). The curriculum in these schools is primarily self-paced and students in charter schools, on average, experience less instructional time than students in traditional public schools and higher teacher to student ratios (Gill et al., 2015). These schools have high expectations for parental involvement, primarily to ensure that students remain engaged in their studies.

[3] Not all recent studies find negative effects. Lueken et al. (2015) find that initial negative transition effects turn positive after three years in a matched sample of charter schools. However, this study is based on weaker methods than the other studies we review.

Blended charter schools combine some form of online delivery of content with traditional delivery in school buildings and researchers are beginning to compare these two forms of charters. One study compares blended versus online instruction and finds no differences in self-reported learning outcomes (Harrell & Wendt, 2019). Another study compares graduation and dropout rates in online and blended public school settings in Arizona and finds that Latinx students are less likely to drop out of a fully online school compared with a blended technology school (Corry, 2016). More qualitative work is necessary to understand how students and teachers experience the learning process in schools that rely on a form of online content delivery.

Discussion

Our review of the recent charter school research assesses what we know about what charter school leaders, teachers, students, and parents do in charter schools to make them effective and reveals, in short, that we need to know much more. Relying on a school organizational perspective (Gamoran et al., 2000), our review focused on material, human, and social resources, professional development, teaching practices, and instructional regimes in charter schools.

Research Methods and Considerations

Within the research we reviewed, we found the use of qualitative methods to be the most prevalent. This may be because focusing on what schools do often lends itself to fieldwork and case study. It may also be because charter schools are still somewhat new. As with any emergent area of study, new phenomenon are initially observed qualitatively in order to develop theories, which can then be tested. Ideally, a balance exists between quantitative and qualitative research, with each serving as a complement as well as a check on the other. In the charter school research, because of the emphasis on student achievement outcomes, quantitative studies have identified several organizational and instructional conditions that are associated with student achievement gains. However, we do not find many related qualitative studies that take a deeper look into these aspects of schooling to investigate when and under what conditions these practices are successful or to consider the mechanisms associated with these practices.

We do see some of this in the qualitative work related to "no excuses" charters, where fieldwork examines practices such as the discipline system and academic expectations and norms for which positive associations have been found. These ethnographic studies surface some negative aspects of these practices that complicate the positive relationships and suggest the need for further study. We see less of this complementary research related to other instructional practices and designs. Thus, the quantitative and qualitative work does not always appear connected or in conversation with each other and to date, qualitative research on charter schools has not pushed quantitative researchers to collect the data needed to consider additional charter school elements or conditions within larger scale datasets. More research that brings these two different modes of inquiry to bear on individual practices within charter schools will help to explain the impact of specific practices and instructional designs.

Areas for Future Research

Although we need to know more across all areas covered in this review, a few stand out over this period. First, perhaps the strongest area of current research focuses on instructional designs or regimes. As mentioned previously, in this area we see larger scale survey and evaluation studies as well as qualitative case studies that observe the different aspects of these schools in practice. Much of this work, however, focuses on one approach, specifically the "no excuses" model. This may be a result of the evaluation studies conducted on the model as well as the widespread publicity that

schools embracing the model, particularly KIPP, have received in recent years. Additional attention to a wider range of instructional designs will provide a better sense of the heterogeneity of the sector. Data on other successful and emerging designs may be available from CMOs, EMOs, and even charter authorizers who collect and manage data on the schools for whom they are responsible.

Although envisioned to have greater autonomy than traditional public schools, it is still an open question as to how charter schools experience autonomy in matters of material, human, and social resources and the resulting impacts. Few recent studies focus on charter schools' material resources—including curriculum supplies and materials, time used for instructional planning, spending on instructional personnel, and autonomy for spending decisions related to teaching and learning. We need to know much more about how charter schools dedicate funds to instruction, beyond teacher salaries and benefits. Although charter schools have more autonomy to reward and incentivize teachers, the limited evidence we have suggests that charter schools do not differ from traditional public schools in this aspect. What principals and teachers do with the autonomy provided to charter schools also needs further research. We need to know more about how the social context of teacher autonomy can vary within and between charter and traditional public schools. We also need to pursue research on whether increased autonomy for principals leads to greater instructional leadership. Teacher satisfaction in charter schools is another research area that needs continued attention since the findings to date are inconsistent, likely due to differences in the social contexts of the schools and other factors.

Few studies examine the heterogeneity of charter school effects by analyzing charter school operators (independent, CMOs or EMOs). We need to know more about how CMOs and EMOs operate in different environments and how being a part of a network of schools can benefit teachers and students within charter schools. There is some research showing that being a part of a network does not ensure benefits (Woodworth et al., 2017), but other work does find benefits for adopting curriculum and using data to inform instruction (Farrell, 2015; Wohlstetter et al., 2015). More research is needed to consider the balance between individual school autonomy and network membership within the charter sector, especially with regard to school organization and whether integrated instructional designs can promote positive student outcomes.

A glaring gap exists in the research on charter schools related to professional development content and opportunities. We know very little about the amount and quality of professional development that teachers experience in the charter sector. Because of the findings that charter school teachers are younger, less experienced, and working longer hours (see Gamoran & Fernandez, 2018), it is likely that such teachers would benefit from sustained high quality professional development. What that looks like in the charter school sector, however, remains an open question. Research on the substance and measurement of high quality professional development in the traditional public school sector (Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019) may serve as a model for researchers seeking to learn more about professional development in charter schools.

In terms of teaching practices, it is becoming clear in the research that reliance on online instruction for all of students' learning may be harmful to students because of the precipitous drop in achievement that occurs when students move from traditional public school instruction to full-time online instruction (Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2020; Woodworth et al., 2015; Zimmer et al., 2009). Much more research is needed on how charter schools use online learning or blend online with face-to-face instruction. The research to date suggests large negative effects of online learning in charter schools, but we know little about what this learning looks like, what the curriculum is, how instruction is delivered, and what relationships exist among technology programs, teachers, and students. Because of the attractiveness of online learning and its cost savings,

additional experiments with different models of delivery are needed. Research is also needed to see if blending online instruction with classroom instruction can be done in ways that engage students and improve student outcomes.

How charter schools use ability grouping, provide special education services, and incorporate culturally relevant curriculum and instruction are also important areas for further study. Recent research reveals that the distribution of ability groups differs between charter and traditional public schools but achievement effects resulting in greater inequality among groups does not. However, we need to know whether this pattern emerges on a larger scale across charter schools or whether charter school flexibility allows them to use ability grouping more effectively. In addition, it is unclear how charter schools classify students for special education services, what specific services are provided to students with varying special needs, and the effects of those services on student development. Charter schools are often criticized for their lack of high quality special education services, and we need additional rigorous research that examines these services across sectors. Further research should also consider whether charter schools effectively implement culturally relevant curriculum and instruction since recent research indicates that some charter schools promote awareness of racism, sexism, and classism and other social inequalities, but other studies suggest that overemphasizing achievement crowds out culturally relevant practices.

Innovation or Effectiveness?

In some ways, the teaching practices associated with charter school effectiveness may be related to the autonomy of charter schools to be more innovative. For example, many urban charter schools implement a "no excuses" approach, which has been associated with improved student achievement. Other innovative practices, such as charter school cultures that promote college preparation and character education, may also be practices more likely to be implemented in charter vis-à-vis traditional public schools.

In thinking about innovation, however, it is important to think critically about what innovation actually means (Austin & Berends, 2018; Berends et al., 2019). Is it innovation we are aiming for in our schools? Or is it effectiveness? Some of the characteristics of effective charter schools are the same characteristics that researchers have been pointing to for decades in effective traditional public schools (Edmonds, 1979, 1982). As Gamoran and Fernandez (2018) argue, it may be because of the high workload of teachers and principals in charter schools and the ways charter schools are able to shape their student populations (e.g., building a new charter school a grade level at a time and using board members to reach out to the community), that charter schools are more conducive to the implementation of effective school organizational resources and teaching practices than traditional public schools. It may be that the governance and funding structures of charter schools allows effective organizational processes to be implemented and sustained. Whether those are innovative or simply following current trends remains an open question for both descriptive and quantitative research comparing charters with other sector schools.

Truly innovative practices must begin somewhere and researchers should intentionally examine a wide variety of charter schools to look for additional examples of innovation that could be replicated and studied at scale. Although the heterogeneity inherent in the charter sector complicates quantitative study, to the extent that common practices can be identified, examined, documented, and replicated within the sector—as in the case of the "no excuses" charter model—the autonomy and flexibility of charter schools may allow for successful practices to be implemented in wide variety of school contexts and conditions.

Within all of these suggestions for further research, it is important to see the more complex organization of instructional designs in schools and the material, human, and social resources and professional development that support them. Although understanding how resources, professional development, teaching practices, and instructional designs vary within and between charter and traditional public schools is helpful in understanding charter school effectiveness, it is also important to avoid focusing on the specific organizational factors we point to above in isolation. Charter schools are not a panacea within the school choice movement, but charter schools may set the conditions for more effective organizational and instructional practices to occur (Hill, 2010). Further research on how charter schools incorporate different instructional designs may push knowledge and design developers forward. Establishing an evidentiary base for such instructional designs—in the charter and traditional public sectors—is worthy of further investment and investigation.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Paul Hill, Adam Gamoran, and Sarah Cohodes for their comments on a previous version of this paper.

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Volume 31 Number 1 January 17, 2023 ISSN 1068-2341