



Education Policy Under Cultural Pluralism

by Bruce Fuller

Many policymakers are shedding essential tenets of modern statecraft. Few seek to sustain the monolithic one best system of schooling: herding students through large institutions, regulated by bureaucracy and guided by professionals under monopolistic conditions. Instead, distinctly unmodern forms of policy and institutional reformation are in ascendance: even when common aims of schooling are advanced, big and impersonal schools are yielding to small and communal ones; networks of alternative schools that offer options to diverse families are preferred over tightly coupled systems; and the meaning of equity is being recast along relativist lines of communities and kids simply being different. The de-centered arrangement of charter schools and preschooling illuminates these shifts away from modern tenets of policymaking, strongly powered by cultural pluralism and political demands from below. These policy cases prompt the long-term question of how government can effectively balance this press for particular forms of schooling and community building, against its modern impulse to integrate groups via large institutions.

Vivid signs of contradiction, even chaos, now surface from within education policy circles with uncanny regularity. Take the case of how conservatives now hope to regulate charter schools. Just before President Bush declared national charter school week last spring, his education secretary issued “non-regulatory guidance” to charter educators under the No Child Left Behind Act (Department of Education, 2003). Strikingly centralized NCLB reforms require governors—when it comes to regular public schools—to negotiate tough teacher quality standards with Washington officials. An equally strong mandate requires that local school boards take in children who decide to exit their neighborhood school. But the administration’s new guidelines for charter schools clarified that their teachers don’t necessarily need to be credentialed. Nor must charter schools import families that exercise choice. Garden-variety schools become more tightly controlled from Washington; charters remain liberated.

Bordering on schizophrenia, policymakers are simultaneously attempting to unite and tighten a newly nationalized school system while funding a thousand flowers to blossom via radically decentralized schools. Policy wonks seem torn between embracing Max Weber and engineering a tighter, mechanical system, or going with Adam Smith and blowing up the bureaucratic state. Underlying this tension is the steady crumbling of the modern foundations on which state action in education has been built

over the past 2 centuries. This article helps to explain how education policymakers have arrived at this intriguing juncture.

A Growing Tension: The State Confronts Cultural Pluralism

Let’s start with the word *policy* and its ancestral link to the modern ideal of a unified *polity*. We have assumed, since the French and American revolutions, that government should create common forms of schooling that advance universal moral and economic interests. These precepts, until about 3 decades ago, justified the expansion of public schools—to spread a shared language, unify secular faith in individual rights and democratic social relations, and award youths the skills and *chutzpa* necessary for succeeding in a capitalist economy. The modern state at times pushes to make society more fair and inclusive, encouraging those who are “different” to have a stake in civil society.

Yet the very idea of an integrated polity, unified by higher moral principles beyond material consumption, has become passe in some circles. One symptom is policymakers’ dwindling faith in the modern tenets of how to organize public schooling. And what’s truly *public*—moral commitments and forms of economic activity endorsed by diverse cultural, religious, and social-class groups—has become a slippery question. Many policymakers, sitting in Washington or on a local school board, have come to believe that the infusion of market dynamics, via vouchers or privatized management, will electrify reform more powerfully than the state’s clumsy hand, rendered arthritic by interest groups from this vantage point (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

What feels *postmodern* is how elite decentralists on the political Right are finding common cause with progressive bedfellows on the Left. This includes a rising number of teachers, parents, and ethnic community-based organizations (CBO) that now draw public funds to run charter schools, home schools, preschools, or sectarian schools (Fuller, 2000; Levin, 2001). These kindred activists and scholars have drawn strength from the “effective schools” research of the 1970s (Edmonds, 1979), arguing that school-level control is essential to professionalize teachers and motivate classroom gains. Critics of state-led accountability question whether the Weberian tightening of the system will motivate anyone beyond politicians. Instead, democratic localism will energize parents to invest in their neighborhood schools and demand sustained institutional change from moribund education bureaucrats (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1999). And why not move public funds to church-based schools, since premodern faiths might motivate children to learn more or learn differently (Glenn, 2000)?

At the same time, the modernists are battling back, often in classical Weberian form: narrowing the learning objectives that define the system’s “outputs,” efficiently testing children, allocating rewards and sanctions to teachers and principals in ways

that would make B.F. Skinner proud (Kirst, 2002). Equally odd bedfellows now sing out praise for “systemic reform,” narrowing the state’s role to definer and regulator of what children are to learn, even dictating mechanical forms of pedagogy through canned curricular packages. Then each school gains the flexibility to arrange resources and pedagogical practices in any way it sees fit—as long as it raises test scores (Vinovskis, 1999).

This essay illuminates one set of forces contributing to this heated dialectic, and how the modern state is struggling to respond. I argue that the challenge to modern-day systemic reformers is fundamentally *cultural* in nature, sprouting from a pluralist array of inventive educators, ethnic networks (including affluent Whites), and CBOs, which together now extract growing chunks of public resources to advance particular ways of raising and instructing children. They are united in their affection for particular forms of community, be they defined by ethnic membership, spiritual beliefs, or simply creating safe and human-scale forms of schooling for their children. They opt for small public squares, displaying little interest in the modern state’s struggle to advance a larger, more inclusive common ground.

Cultural Challenges to the Modern State

Let me be precise in my use of the word “culture,” a term now appropriated by a range of advocates and scholars, itself symptomatic of the attack on the modern order’s acultural character. At least three kinds of cultural forces are challenging how the state has organized common schooling. First, a variety of ethnic communities, having lost faith in urban school leaders and their bureaucracies, are creating their own schools, and government is now legitimating this liberation from the state in unprecedented fashion (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2000). Elites have long tried to capture the state and its public bounty. But now peripheral groups are being royally chartered and awarded public funds to pursue communal, *not* neoliberal, agendas.

The local politics of recognition and identity feed “its own autonomous logic” (Parekh, 2000, p. 2). These are not simply redistributive policies to aid assimilation of groups on society’s edge who are eager to join society’s sacred mainstream. This new agenda seeks to strengthen diverse groups, to pursue their differing languages, religious convictions, or child-rearing beliefs. Group interests have become more salient, even revered, sharply contrasting the modern state’s neoclassical desire to detach the individual from “backward” social memberships.

Second, the challenge of cultural pluralism is manifest in the idea that learning and child rearing are structured more powerfully when situated in a particular milieu. Rather than seeing the child as an autonomous creature with individual differences and naturalistic ways of developing (Locke, 1986; Rousseau as cited in Cress, 1987), many policymakers now side with the view that children best learn within particular cultures (Rogoff, 2003). From the ideals of neighborhood control in Chicago to small schools in New York and Oakland, the postmodern assumption is that students are better motivated when learning in close-knit communities.

Third, the new policy culture is becoming de-centered, radically pluralist in its sensitivities and wary of a dusty national culture that promised assimilation into an abstracted community, what some postmodernists call the loss of a “global meta-narrative” (Peters, 2001, p. vii). Some argue that the modern state’s incremental

demise stems from the rising force of worldwide markets and the individualistic ideals that feed them (e.g., Popkewitz, 2000), emphasizing the “premises of rationality, individual, and self-interest” (Peters). This is certainly manifest among international efforts to align schooling with the individual skills required for economic expansion, the political advance of parental choice, and the decentralization of school control (Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998).

Liberal Individualism or Community Building?

Yet the deeper story, I argue, is how diverse local communities differ in their preferred forms of schooling and child rearing. A range of colorful groups and private settings are gaining in their legitimacy, democratic influence within metropolitan areas, and drawing rising sums of public funds to pursue what used to be viewed as nonpublic agendas. Yes, the neoliberals are successfully advancing global faith in the rights of individuals and property owners, the alleged “autonomy” of persons and corporations. But in the school reform arena it’s the rise of ethnic, class-bound, and religious organizations that powers novel pressures on the state, not affection for atomistic individuals or commercial values.

My own field work inside charter schools, for example, revealed that few dissident educators articulate the competitive ideals or consumer orientation of movement leaders on the political Right. Instead, charter educators at the grass-roots level struggle to craft a new form of *community* that is more human scale in design, less alienating, and culturally energized by local hopes of how to best raise children (Fuller, 2000).

The politics of these diverse groups is not aimed at capturing elements of government, or necessarily weakening the central state’s ability to raise public revenues. These have been the classic struggles within federal systems of government, typically waged between economic elites and the working classes. Instead, charter school advocates, as with other radical decentralists, are attempting to advance particular learning communities that shake off the “governmentality,” to apply Foucault’s (1979) notion, which so vividly characterizes the bureaucratic state and its officialdom. Still, this is not a return to premodern government, for elements of the modern state remain pivotal: Government should progressively raise revenue and then target allocations for certain groups. Next, I clarify how policymakers are creating new forms of schooling and governance that depart from modern tenets. This shift toward unmodern organizational forms is illuminated by recent empirical work within the charter school and preschool sectors, two policy cases that I have been exploring over the past 15 years with colleagues at Berkeley and Harvard, along with friends inside government. I also examine how this tension between modern centralization and decentralized pluralism is yielding hybrid forms of schooling. The liberal-democratic state remains ill equipped to respond to cultural pluralism, but it is devising new policy tools and smaller scale organizations that may strengthen community without necessarily weakening the state’s capacity to address broader inequalities. This prompts a bundle of empirical questions.

Muddling Out of Modernity

News of modernity’s death may be premature. But we are certainly living in the wake of the Enlightenment, to paraphrase John Gray (1995), the British political theorist. As the tidal shift of modernity ebbs, after the past 2 centuries, treacherous crosscurrents are

tossing about the institution of public schooling. To argue that cultural pluralism is seriously challenging modern tenets of education policymaking, we must first identify *where* unmodern forms of schooling and policy are arising, *what* they look like, and *how* they depart from modern configurations.

Some of these policy shifts manifest *premodern* impulses, such as when government awards privileged groups public resources to pursue exclusive agendas. Tuition tax credits for families that benefit from private schools come to mind. But other trends appear to be *postmodern*, challenging the centralized state to support local organizations within poor or blue-collar neighborhoods, often infused with the progressive spirit of empowerment and closer human ties. These local demands, illuminated by the policy cases of charter schools and preschools, subvert modern notions of public authority and expertise that is bureaucratically arranged and enforced by old conceptions of social regulation.

The starting point for my thesis is local, not global. This is not to deny ascending faith in market rules and the globalizing drift of capital and mass culture. Yet we also see a strong reaction to the serrated, alienating edges of market rules, including the resurging interest in human-scale organizations (Hargreaves, 1994). The rise of identity politics, pushed by groups seeking to advance their particular ethnic, gender, or cultural interests—not simply the economic interests of classes—suggests a new role for the state in strengthening local mores and norms, not secular universals from on high (Alexander & Smelser, 1999). Indeed, unmodern, de-institutionalized forms of schooling, including the rapid growth of charter schools and community control of preschooling, may be a reaction to the *loss* of community, as Wells, Lopez, Scott, and Holme (1999) emphasize.

Resistance to the culturally homogenizing aims of modern institutions is far from new. The rise of ethnic-based power or resistance to impersonal, factory-like institutions arose long before the 1960s (e.g., Tyack, 1974). Yet the recent shift in how influential groups interpret the ideals of the common good, not to mention its institutional regulators, feels undeniably postmodern: What's fading is the supposition that the state can impose a common language, a single way to raise young children, or one legitimate form of schooling (Parekh, 2000). A state that narrowly grants rights to disconnected individuals and only job skills to graduates, offering no vision of fulfilling community, has become difficult to defend.

From Dwight Eisenhower to Bill Clinton, post-war political leaders have urged school reform to advance the nation's economic or geopolitical competitiveness. But this pallid conception of the school's *raison d'être* is losing appeal locally. Instead, we see a colorful array of commitments to community building such as forms of learning that place the child within a supportive set of social ties, and local political cultures more interested in creating human-scale schools that motivate families and teachers alike. From religious activists on the Right to communitarians on the Left, the agenda is *not* aimed at tearing down social institutions writ large, as premodern elites would have it. Instead, this culturally pluralist movement is searching for better ways to organize more fulfilling schools (Hargreaves, 1994; Wuthnow, 1999).

Fading Universals, Entombed in Schools

Who's the enemy of the rising cultural pluralists? To some extent it is the *organizational means* of formalizing economic and social life, what Meyer, Boli, and Thomas (1987) have called the

"great rationalization project." The constituent parts of this once revolutionary way of organizing children's upbringing and graduates' job skills include:

1. A vertical *division of labor* within school systems following classic bureaucratic principles, especially the routinization of didactic pedagogy, conducted by teachers who impart official knowledge. These semiskilled workers at the bottom of the hierarchy, those teaching inside classrooms, are expected to pass on the state's sanctified curriculum, advance faith in the national culture, and train skilled workers. The extension of public schooling to the bourgeoisie and then to the masses, spreads liberal sentiments throughout the secular polity (Giddens, 1986; Rothschild, 2001). Administrative progressives, early in the twentieth century, convinced policymakers that the industrial model of schooling would efficiently deliver instruction and civilize a diverse array of European immigrants and southern Blacks—the now infamous "one best system" (Tyack, 1974).
2. *Ritualized categories* within schools reinforce child and adult roles and divide knowledge into sacred subjects and social norms, offering a hidden curriculum that molds children to achieve as individuals along narrow dimensions of human expression (Dreeben, 1968). Children are separated by grade levels, expected to passively receive the state's knowledge, and then compete against each other to get ahead (Meyer & Rowan, 1978). These mechanics of the modern organization speak to the individual child, absent any consideration of his or her cultural background, language, or class-based understanding of "mainstream" opportunity.
3. As late-19th-century educators focused on delivering universal schooling through efficient means, *centralized management* standardized everything from the physical dimensions of classrooms to personnel rules to textbooks. American educators borrowed much from European modernists, such as Emile Durkheim (Catlin, 1938), who pushed the Parisian regime to incorporate tattered provincial schools. The proper form of French would be taught, inspectors would appear, and national texts would help to civilize backward villagers out in the hinterlands.

Much, of course, has been written about this historical rationalization of schooling, as well as counter attacks by progressives who tried to infuse schools with more engaging, experience-based forms of learning and teaching (Dewey, 1938/1963; Egan, 2002). Yet, as the "systemic-reform" movement now so vividly demonstrates, modern policymakers continue to assume that Weberian ways of organizing are optimal, or at least that they signal the state's responsiveness to voters who worry about the public schools. So, learning objectives are further narrowed to testable bits of knowledge, government doles out rewards and penalties, and teacher-proof curricula are pressed on teachers to standardize instruction.

Then, politicians, school managers, and union leaders are surprised when the forces of cultural pluralism and opponents of bureaucratic schooling rise up to demand public funds for quite unmodern schools.

The Rise of Unmodern Forms of Policy and Schooling

Three decades ago dissident policymakers began to invent new forms of schooling that shed these modern assumptions. With the

rise of magnet schools and then progressive alternative schools, many educators opted for smaller, human-scale communities of teachers and students—even parents (Wells, 1993). These new schools were formed in reaction to the intransigence of bureaucratic schools and the interest groups that reproduce them. They were not, however, energized by cultural pluralism. Only rarely was this earlier generation of nonmodern reform pushed by ethnic-minority or religious groups. Magnet schools grew out of the desegregation movement and were engineered from above; alternative schools of the 1970s sprouted mainly in White communities, energized by progressive ideals typically found in well-off suburbs.

In the 1960s, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations invested heavily in community-action agencies that were built on the postmodern assumption that the central state could energize and sustain progressive agendas of local Black organizations—by avoiding bureaucratic layers of government. This direct support of neighborhood groups, not seen since the settlement-house movement, was fueled by the civil rights and antipoverty movements and, in turn, was ignored or squashed by local elites. The CBOs that arose, and their larger cousins in the nonprofit sector, not only survived, but many have thrived by operating a range of programs, from health clinics, to housing agencies, to Head Start preschools. By the 1980s they came to provide the infrastructure in which alternative cultural commitments have taken root in many lower-income communities. The CBO movement's ability to host creation of many charter schools is a case in point (Shorr, 2002).

What do these *unmodern* forms of schooling and policy look like on the ground?

First, even when policymakers attempt to backstop the universal ideals of common schooling their reforms must be *situated within particular communities*. Governors and legislators have pushed hard for shared curricular standards, for instance, but then permit local tailoring by Mormon or Black-nationalist charter schools, or those found deep within gated White communities. This is not entirely new, of course, within federal republics. But it's the state's legitimization of these communities and the use of public funds to bolster them that is rare in the American context.

Policymakers also have come to understand that central mandates are frequently subverted by local cultural conditions, be it the classroom language that teachers choose to speak, or the daily disconnects that separate parents and teachers. Recent research details the power of peer groups and parental beliefs regarding their roles, across ethnic and class groups, which can undermine the school's official structure and its ability to motivate children to adopt pro-achievement norms (Mehan, 1979; Valdés, 1996).

Second, policymakers increasingly *think small*, moving away from large, impersonal forms of schooling. The formation of small learning communities, from charter schools to career academies, rejects the modern notion that differentiated and comprehensive schools will somehow be more efficient or motivating for students and teachers. When thinking small the qualities of schooling are no longer cast by the state: Now particular groups design their own school, obtain public dollars, enforce their own version of local accountability, governed by a school site council, ethnically rooted CBO, or church in the case of vouchers (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Shorr, 2002).¹

Third, policymakers are trying to nurture school options arranged as *networks of local organizations*, rather than advancing a unified institution with centrally set rules and ideals. The institutional example of preschooling is also illuminating, where an archipelago of ragtag organizations now struggles to coalesce under the umbrella of "universal preschooling." Child care and early education have risen up from the private sphere, deeply familial and local in its history, to become a public ground on which political battles now frequently arise.

The modern notion that citizens join voluntarily into "a political society to make one body politic" (Locke, 1986, p. 54) is giving way to plural incarnations of political community, as local activists extract public resources for their own version of schooling and child rearing. These networks of charter schools or preschools are held together by common commitments and shared symbols, not bureaucratic controls.

Fourth, how policymakers think about *fairness* is moving away from universal indicators along which schools or students can be compared. Whether an Afrocentric or Baptist charter school raises test scores higher than the nearby public school may never enter the minds of advocates. The two schools are just *different*, pursuing separate missions and ways of learning (Fuller, Gawlik, Gonzales-Kuboyama, & Park, in press). The irony could not be more striking: the apparent amorality of pro-market conservatives is blending with the identity politics of ethnic activists. Together and perhaps unknowingly, they are joining hands as the new cultural relativists.

These shifts in how the state advances community and schooling go well beyond earlier renditions of decentralization, often observed in federal political arrangements. The new, more culturally diverse advocates not only push to distribute power and resources across the system; they are, more fundamentally, "anti-system." To paraphrase Derrida, these decentralized organizational forms offer "conceptual resources for the de-centering of structure" (quoted in Peters, 2001, pp. 6–7). And they are lent political clout at the grass-roots level through dramatic demographic shifts and the rise of multicultural demands (Levin, 2001; Parekh, 2000). One example is that a majority of babies now born in California each year are of Latino parentage, at the very same time the state is pushing standard curricula and child assessments into preschools for 3- and 4-year olds—in English.

We are not so much seeing the "progressive disintegration of common consciousness," as Durkheim feared (Catlin, 1938, pp. 92–93). Instead, we are observing an uncertain interplay between political levels, where central agencies play a pivotal role in advancing particular communities on the ground. This vying for public resources unfolds somewhat independently of class-structured agendas. Not only gated communities are extracting public resources to create their own charter schools; economically disadvantaged groups, advancing their forms of child rearing, are being legitimated and awarded taxpayer support for their own agendas as well (Fuller et al., in press). It is this widening acceptance of using public funds for divergent child-rearing agendas that further distinguishes the new political culture.²

Postmodern enthusiasts are rightfully excited over the new possibilities that stem from leaving old precepts behind. But modern policy tools and their assumptions for how local actors' behavior can be changed have never been uniform or uncontested. Policy-

makers have long employed decentralizing devices to incentivize or cajole local organizational change (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). So, before we pronounce the untimely demise of modern policymaking, we should examine how the tension between the modernists and pluralists are prompting new forms of state action and schooling, and precisely how the state increasingly displays a rather postmodern spirit.

Next, let's examine these policy cases, bringing to life the dialectic between the state's modern impulses and the rise of grassroots cultural politics.

Unmodern Forms of Statecraft—Charter Schools and Preschools

Universals Versus Particular Communities

The American ideals of common schooling, early on, became fused with Durkheim's claim that government can advance collectively held beliefs and symbols—reified faith in the autonomous individual, a secular government, and single language—all acting to unify citizens across the republic. Such modern tenets were to bolster nation building and counter the centrifugal traditions of rural provinces and the atomizing effects of city life. A century earlier in Europe, Condorcet had forcefully argued that publicly supported schools would advance modern sentiments, prepare unindentured laborers, and unify markets—yielding the social foundations of commercial growth (Rothschild, 2001).

But the romantic ideals of common schooling, by the 1960s, had been eclipsed by the school's impersonal (rational) organization and the realization that not all families were joining the middle class. The modern school in many communities had become a disappointing symbol of ineffectual public authority, yielding for families a shallow stake in mainstream society. Intense policy action by central government, such as desegregation efforts and school finance reforms, yielded only modest results.

Charter schools, after enabling legislation emerged in the early 1990s, began to sprout in many poor and working-class communities. More than 2,200 charter schools now operate across a range of communities with aggregate enrollments approaching three quarters of a million children nationwide (Center for Education Reform, 2002). Most are small organizations; many serve less than 100 children each year. Charter schools pursue quite diverse missions, founded on distinct cultural foundations, ranging from Mormon-dominated schools in Arizona, to all Spanish-speaking charters in Texas, to Christian home-school networks in California. Overall, charter schools serve a higher proportion of Black and Latino children than regular public schools (Nelson et al., 2000; Fuller et al., in press).

The images of a coherent and supportive community were vividly portrayed by teachers and students alike in one study, situated within Amigos Charter Academy in Oakland, California (a pseudonym). One former student from this small middle school told Wexler and Huerta (2000):

It was just really like a community setting . . . like we were learning at home . . . with a bunch of our friends. They had really nice teachers who were, you know, mostly Chicano and Chicana . . . We could relate to them. They know your culture, your background. [They] talk to your parents . . . and your parents trust them. It's like a family. (p. 100)

At another charter organization—a publicly funded network of home schoolers—one parent said, “the main reason [for joining the charter school] was for religious reasons . . . different Christians take it from different viewpoints.” Another parent told Huerta (2000, p. 187), “I'm raising my kids the way I want to raise them, not the way government-run schools think I should. It's my right to pass on the values that I believe.”

The rhetoric of charter activists assumes that most universals pressed by the state are to be resisted: The center is a threat to each school's own commitments and form of pedagogy. Here, too, what we need to explore empirically is the extent to which only the surface structure of schools may manifest a rejection of modern bureaucratic forms; whereas, the deeper social relations found inside classrooms may look quite traditional, relentlessly modern. On the other hand, we see some charter schools that advance Afrocentric themes, move students into community service roles, encourage students to engage in Spanish, and unite conservative Christians through home-school networks, each involving locally crafted norms fused to a theory of child rearing (Wells et al., 1999).

The rise of child-care and preschool programs, outside any coherent institutional structure, offers a second arena in which to observe the state's unmodern drift from universals. The federal government now spends \$18 billion a year for preschool and child care arrangements, increasingly through vouchers that reimburse kin members and friends for their services (Besharov & Samari, 2001). The count of preschools and centers has grown rapidly over the past generation—from under 30,000 in 1982 to more than 60,000 in 1997—within a very mixed market (Blau, 2001).

This loosely defined sector is so fluid and unsystematic that even basic terminology is up for grabs: Are preschools the same as centers? What are the elements of “quality” that actually contribute to child development and should be regulated by state government? Is this sector providing “early education” or just “day care”?

California alone spends \$3 billion annually for public child-care and preschool programs, through 23 separate funding streams. So, would not the modern state want to rationalize these disparate pieces into one unified preschool institution? The Congress emphatically said, no, in 1990, when the first national child-care program was created, not to be confused with Head Start preschools. After the former President Bush introduced legislation in 1989 to expand child care through tax credits, the Democratic controlled House countered with a national program to be run by local schools, an option enthusiastically backed by teacher unions and education lobbyists.

The eventual compromise was distinctly postmodern. The Congress created what has become a \$2 billion block grant program, allocating funds to governors who must distribute the monies to low-income parents as loosely regulated vouchers (Fuller & Holloway, 1996). Public and private preschools, including those within churches, compete for parents who are awarded vouchers. Many families award their voucher to a kin member, babysitter, or boyfriend to care for their toddler.

This policy outcome is partly explained by institutional history: ethnic-rooted CBOs have operated preschools and child-care options in many communities since the community action heydays of the 1960s. These activists were not about to let public

schools, for which many ethnic leaders hold enormous distrust, take over the Bush program. They would rather try their luck with vouchers. In turn, this has created a vast, \$18 billion political economy that deflects attempts to move toward universal preschooling, for this would move public dollars to urban school bureaucracies.

So, the state has responded to and reinforced ethnically rooted political forces that mitigate against a centrally guided, universal educational agenda. On the one hand it's a little recognized triumph of the community action movement. On the other, a widely decentralized network of CBOs, churches, and local schools now has an economic interest in resisting anything universal, from centralized funding to symbolic or normative convergence around how to raise children. One prominent foundation in the preschool arena is now urging advocates to drop the adjective, "universal," as they regroup in their press for universal preschooling. Too much baggage is attached to this term.³

Thinking Small for Culturally Situated Learning

The rise of charter schools signals that small has truly become beautiful in the minds of many. The median charter school enrolled just 169 students and employed 12 staff members in the 1999–2000 school year (Fuller et al., in press). The modern commitment to large institutions—advancing specialization, variety, and cafeteria-like offerings to fit "individual differences"—is fading quickly. In its stead, the basic notion that small schools nurture stronger human relationships and collective commitments, pegged to a variety of pedagogical and moral ideals, has attracted broad legitimacy (Bryk et al., 1993). In some cities the rise of new small schools has resulted directly from the rise of charter school competition (Shorr, 2002).

This cultural shift toward smallness undercuts essential tenets of the modern institution building, from the structure of curricula and personnel rules to how we conceive of relationships between teachers and students. The smallness agenda is not a push to de-institutionalize, to disassemble collective forms of work and learning. Instead, the aim with charter schools (or pint-size preschools) is to sustain organizations in which culturally situated norms and commitments can be reinforced. It's the jettisoning of bureaucratic controls and the homogenous ways in which children have been awarded skills and abstract values that's notable about these new organizations. Instead, socialization is to be guided along culturally specific scripts.

The early education sector also includes actors who press for smaller units of human association. An earlier study of how low-income mothers negotiate preschool and child-care options, conducted along with Susan D. Holloway and our students, revealed that women do benefit from market forms of choice and vouchers (Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, & Eggers-Piérola, 1997). One study participant, Harriet, was leery of any form of child care that didn't involve her relatives:

I just don't trust day cares for infants. I'm too scared for that, because I think a loving grandma or loving great aunt . . . is better than day care for little babies. I figured there would be a lot of neglect going on you know. I trusted my aunt. (p. 163)

Beatriz, in contrast, wanted to move her 2-year-old son into a preschool program as soon as she found an open slot:

If I search for a person, like a family member or someone who doesn't have a license . . . they would just care for them. They would not do activities with them or teach them anything. It would only be baby-sitting. (p. 168)

Many parents do believe they should get their children ready for school. But this may involve small-scale social arrangements along the way, from infancy to preschool. On balance, the evidence suggests that it is better for young children to spend significant time inside a formal preschool, many of which serve less than 60 youngsters (Fuller, Kagan, Casparly, & Gauthier, 2002). And distinctly unmodern policymakers have funded a variety of CBOs, through Head Start and state-funded preschools, to operate these little collectives, situated in ethnically bounded contexts. The recent growth in child-care vouchers reflects an even more dramatic stride away from modern institution building: billions of public dollars now go to warm and fuzzy aunts or boyfriends, all because the state has ceded authority and public funding to individual caregivers in their postmodern wisdom. The state remains strong in progressively targeting public resources, while retaining the (subsidized) authority of parents.

The drift toward small organizations stems in part from the historically novel postulate that learning throughout childhood is culturally situated. The modern school can offer a mechanical set of social relations, transmitting skills or fractured knowledge between teacher and student. But the language, forms of social participation, and class-based views of literacy that children bring from home now appear to be far more influential (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The growing literature on the situated character of learning and participation in groups emphasizes that children can potentially stretch beyond their cultural milieu, what Bourdieu called the student's *habitus*, but that these cultural foundations should not be ignored (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Rogoff, 2003). As systemic reformers attempt to tighten the school's surface structure, decentralized reformers often focus on the child's underlying cultural setting and how to advance situated forms of learning. The majority culture's new-found realization that diverse children grow up in *legitimately* different settings is a postmodern shift in its own right.

Networks of Local Organizations

Under modern logic, once the state identified a public problem, it should build an institution or craft regulations to remedy the ill. Government has been preoccupied over the past 2 centuries with building hospitals, common schools, transportation systems, libraries, and the like.

Yet in just the past generation, government has stimulated the growth of CBOs and private firms that provide myriad neighborhood services. In California, for instance, the state education department contracts with more than 1,300 local organizations to run preschools. Most agree that many of these programs suffer from underpaid teachers and caregivers, inadequate facilities, and tuition fees that are unaffordable for many parents.

Still, it remains the idea that government would intervene and build a unified system of preschooling, governed by a central agency. Grass-roots cultural and organizational pluralism now mitigates against such old-style institution building. Instead, government treads lightly, setting minimum quality standards, encouraging preschool staff to engage in more training, and

enriching market information for parents via neighborhood agencies. Faced with a court mandate to offer preschool to all young children in New Jersey's 30 poorest school districts, the state education department has responded vigorously, creating slots for over three fifths of all 3- and 4-year olds in just 5 years (Hirsch & Applewhite, 2003). Yet just over 70% of these enrollment slots are situated in CBOs. The political economy of such human-scale organizations grows stronger, winning more public funds and dedicated to community differences set by ethnicity, language, and class.

We also see government attempting to aid networks of fledgling charter schools, many of which are building links with their local school board, foundations, or corporate benefactors (Huerta, 2002). States are allowing sets of schools to gain charter status, arguing that a more united set of schools can pool resources and become more sustainable. Revenues from school bonds are now made available to charter schools. In recent years, state governments have tightened the regulation of charter schools (Hill, Lake, & Celio, 2002). But this is a far cry from building a uniform institution along modern contours. Instead, we see loosely coupled networks of charters—bound by a common theory of action and shared distrust of the bureaucratic state—that are gaining public dollars.

Redefining Inequality: Addressing It Communally

Stalwart supporters of the modern state argue that when it comes to issues of fairness we must retain a strong central state, one that maintains the legitimacy to redistribute resources to equalize opportunity. Rousseau and Durkheim were essentially right, according to this view. No other institution possesses the public legitimacy and scale to offset the persisting inequalities inherent under market capitalism (Cress, 1987; Giddens, 1986). The decentralizing of public authority may mean that central agencies lose the political strength and tools necessary to help all groups assimilate into the mainstream, a shared conception of the good life.

Yet the pursuit of tighter communities can lead to the selection of similar families, departing from the modern ideal of incorporating diverse children under one roof. After spending several days inside the all-Black El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Academy in Lansing, Michigan, researcher Patty Yancey (2000) asked the school's "at-risk specialist" whether such charter schools were re-segregating children along racial lines. Mr. Hollingsworth vehemently objected, arguing that the family feel at El-Shabazz bred trust between parents and teachers:

Racial segregation means to be excluded, to bar or prevent someone from a right or privilege. Therefore, to conclude that the highly Black populated charter schools . . . were developed with the evils of racial segregation is highly inaccurate. These schools are not practicing exclusion, but simply offering choices. We are catering to our clientele. This is the school we never had, a school for the community. This is why many Blacks have flocked to these schools, because children who seem to have no place have now found a place. (p. 92)

Many charter activists on the ground retain little faith in the state's assimilationist conception of equity. These parents and dissident educators confront neighborhood schools that are mediocre or simply unsafe for their children. So, what comes to be seen as fair are orderly schools that manifest local cultural

identities. This direct sense of efficacy in shaping a charter school or a preschool, decoupled from distant school regulators, feels more fair to many.

The notion of empowerment—whereby central state actors grant decision-making power or resources to grass-roots educators—has gained strength in other pockets of the school reform movement. Bryk et al. (1999) advocate the ideals of *democratic localism*, a decentralizing political theory that assumes that local parents and educators, when awarded more authority, will demand the resources and express the technical wherewithal necessary in reshaping their neighborhood schools. It's reminiscent of the community action era, blending the central state's capacity to target public resources on poor communities, then stimulating very localized action. The results for children's learning appear to have been short lived in Chicago, suggesting that broader structural forces (including, family poverty) should not be ignored. Indeed, this is a ripe area for research, attempting to understand the capacity of diverse charter or preschool organizations to close gaps in children's development.

Important dynamics cut across these four ingredients of post-modern policy. First, the state is a key player in legitimating and funding these shifts away from modern, bureaucratic schooling. Public actors—including governors, education leaders, and scholars—help to engineer these innovations as they respond to cultural and political demands from below. This also re-balances political actors' own legitimacy at the center. Much of the raw energy powering these postmodern forms comes from below, but a range of elite actors mediate these pressures via decentralizing reforms (Handler, 1996; Huerta, 2002).

Second, the most innovative reforms often unfold within low-income and working-class communities, where resources from the state are essential. Well-off parents, for the most part, have fled to leafy suburbs, where they extract sufficient resources to protect their public schools, or buy into private school (or preschool) markets. Few advocates of postmodern forms are arguing that the state should regressively support innovation everywhere, or take over markets that don't require infusions of public resources. Extending universal preschooling to wealthy families, for example, hasn't gained much appeal politically.⁴

Bicultural States? Policy Under Pluralism

Research That Illuminates Policy and Culture

Scholars can aid policymakers and activists as they muddle through this thicket of cultural pluralism. Many researchers continue to work within modern parameters, often tracing the implementation of centralized policies. So, we go about studying how Title I reading assistance plays out within local schools. Or, we track whether schools within states exercising stronger accountability regimes display more robust test scores. This work remains important.

But we should dig deeper, first to understand how diverse cultural groups and their organizations are placing *new demands* on the state. Some of these agendas are far from new, even premodern in nature, as sketched above. Yet researchers have been slow to recognize postmodern forces within policy circles, including the rise of neighborhood organizations and national advocates for decentralization, as well as their success in moving the central state to legitimate and fund a bright rainbow of local schools

and preschools. We have little empirical work that traces these underlying political dynamics and whether the rise of these new organizational forms leaves children and parents any better off than before.

A related empirical question speaks to the novel dynamics of *policy formulation*. For example, why does the “strength” of charter school rules vary so dramatically among state governments? Or, why can some state governments move toward universalizing access to, and regulating the character of, preschooling, while centrifugal political forces characterize so many other states? I suspect that the extent of cultural pluralism, and the capacity of ethnic leaders, CBOs, and churches to translate their diffuse identities into concerted political action, help to explain the range of education policies that emerge among the states. But we have little empirical understanding of this intersection between local culture, multicultural politics, and decentralizing drifts in policy formulation (for exceptions, Fuller, 1999; Shorr, 2002).

We have just begun to define the *local effects* of postmodern policies. Scholars looking into Catholic schools have demonstrated that alternative outcomes can be studied, for example, showing that graduation rates tend to be higher, compared to youths moving through public high schools, perhaps the result of more supportive school communities (Bryk et al., 1993). But many, for instance, continue to judge an all-Latino charter school on its test scores, rather than pushing deeper to assess students’ motivation or civic engagement. Researchers continue to functionally assume that the state’s intentions still cast how local actors want to raise their children. This is a naïve starting point under conditions of cultural pluralism.

What Kind of Future for Education Policy?

This tension between diverse cultural actors and central policy-makers will likely persist and become even more unsettling for the modernists. The state will continue to debate what rules and resources best energize teachers and children inside classrooms, largely absent any consideration of the cultural settings in which teaching and child rearing unfold. Some will argue these are the best policy tools that we can hope for. Yet we have just examined two expanding policy arenas—charter schools and preschooling—where the state’s legitimacy is inextricably bound to decentralized groups and neighborhood organizations. Public forays into radical decentralization—from the community action movement, to the rise of preschooling and charters—have yielded a local political economy of organizations and ethnic commitments that the state cannot ignore.

Nor will the well-worn agenda of awarding kids job skills, or inculcating the drive to achieve as a lone individual, likely be seen as sufficient. The organization of schooling under conditions of cultural pluralism must speak to the new imperatives—situating learning in particular communities, thinking small, enriching networks of human-scale organizations, and addressing inequities through locally crafted remedies. Parts of the liberal-capitalist tradition will certainly persist in this wake of the Enlightenment. But the political force now attached to identity politics, the waning of acultural assimilation, and the demise of bureaucratic authority has already transformed the political bounds in which the organization of schooling is evolving.

Still, as these cultural forces de-center our notions of statecraft and the public interest, democratic institutions may continue to

structure the debate between modernists and pluralists (Lloyd & Thomas, 1998). When state legislatures decide to fund, say, local collectives of African Americans or Mormons who want to advance their own moral scripts, or Latinos who want their kids to be bicultural, policy leaders are endorsing and capitalizing cultural pluralism. Or, when members of the Congress agree to expand child-care vouchers so that mothers can hire their aunt to mind their toddler, the state is allocating public legitimacy and dollars to reproduce particular forms of child rearing. Such nods to local pluralism have grown more frequent and more costly over the past generation—whether these colorful policies truly advance the learning and socialization of children, or the integration and fairness of society writ large.

Importantly, these pro-pluralist policies have emerged from a *democratic process* that has changed only in terms of the players and their unmodern conceptions of how to organize schooling. The state remains at the center of this debate. And as governments provide the democratic stage upon which cultural battles are waged and mediated, the state may become more important (Offe, 1984). When an American president pushes to roll back women’s reproductive rights, tells poor mothers they must work a 40-hour week, or creates incentives to enroll children in Catholic schools, the central state, like it or not, has become a blinding beacon of moral practice. In turn, democratic institutions become more widely accepted as the forum in which such moral and economic conflicts should be *publicly* mediated.

So, perhaps what’s becoming universal is the democratic process by which culturally diverse societies debate and formulate their collective interests, and how the state organizes in ways that advance shared concerns—from advancing school effectiveness or equity however defined (Habermas, 1987). Less clear is whether interest groups that have historically supported the bureaucratization of public aims, under the old model of governing by rules and universal norms, will allow the state to articulate virtues and socialization outcomes (from curriculum standards to child-rearing agendas), and then trust a colorful array of decentralized organizations to implement these common goals.

Some policymakers, almost unnoticed, are becoming bicultural. That is, their new political culture has retained modern policy tools: progressively targeting funds, advancing quality regulations, expanding standard institutional forms. But when they form coalitions with ethnic activists, inventive educators, and religious enclaves locally, they clearly back the unmodern notion that balkanized community groups may be able to create more effective forms of schooling.

What’s most intriguing about this decentralizing shift—moving from one large public commons to small yet networked public squares—is how responses to cultural pluralism are often engineered by advocates and policymakers who sit in rather *central* locations. Despite all the recent work on pluralism and local politics in the education arena, we are just beginning to understand how centralized actors are redefining what’s public about policy and their new levers of organizational change. In turn, elites retain their authority by preaching decentralized difference.

We should endeavor to understand how policymakers are weighing—even how they grasp—the virtues of this dizzying pastiche of cultural communities against the persisting importance of shared and unifying values. A new generation of research

on the tension between the modernists and the pluralists could yield stronger policy tools and clearer knowledge of whether richer communities are indeed being built or sustained, for children, parents, and educators alike. We may find that the advance of cultural pluralism also brings greater inequality and legitimates advantage for dominant classes. But either way, this new line of policy research could enrich the deeply human dynamics of public action and democratic deliberation.

NOTES

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¹ The Greeks long felt that the democratic polis would work only if kept to a reasonable size, involving the approved citizens of the city. “A democracy also must be of modest size . . . in order that all citizens may know one another,” according to Dahl’s (1991, p. 16) analysis of this early government. “To seek the good of all, citizens must be able to apprehend the good of each and thus be capable of understanding the common good that each shares with the others” (p. 17).

² Class-based demands on the state have long been intertwined with cultural and ethnic identities, such as conflicts between southern European Catholics, their schools, and Protestant elites who advanced more secular forms of “public” schooling (Tyack, 1974). But contemporary forms of multiculturalism manifest a rising legitimacy and influence among ethnic groups, as well as the allocation of public funds to CBOs and churches that run charter schools, health services, housing programs, and local organizing efforts. These shifts represent “multiculturalisms that ratify and celebrate difference . . . challenging dominant ethnic, gender, and class based cultural constructs” (Anthias, 1998, p. 508). As Francisco Ramirez (personal communication, 2003) puts it, “everyone is potentially an ‘other’ and worthy of respect as such.” Not only are modern universals undercut, but class divisions may become less important relative to cultural distinctions.

³ In spring 2003, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, a major funder of policy activism in child care and early education, announced that it would support efforts to provide, “Preschool for All,” signaling a change in the language used to rally various constituencies around an institution that apparently had become not so “universal” in character.

⁴ Market advocates, such as those advancing tuition tax credits for children attending private schools, are indeed trying to capture elements of the state to regressively redistribute public funds, as in Arizona and Minnesota.

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