Charter Schools as Postmodern Paradox: Rethinking Social Stratification in an Age of Deregulated School Choice

AMY STUART WELLS
ALEJANDRA LOPEZ
JANELLE SCOTT
JENNIFER JELLISON HOLME
UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies

For the last two-and-a-half years, authors Amy Stuart Wells, Alejandra Lopez, Janelle Scott, and Jennifer Jellison Holme have been engaged with a team of researchers in a comprehensive qualitative study of charter schools in ten California school districts. They have emerged from this study with a new understanding of how the implementation of a specific education policy can reflect much broader social changes, including the transformation from modernity to postmodernity. Given that much of the literature on postmodernity is theoretical in nature, this article invites readers to wrestle with the complexity that results when theory meets the day-to-day experiences of people trying to start schools. In their study, the authors examined how people in different social locations define the possibilities for localized social movements, and how they see the potential threat of greater inequality resulting from this reform within and among communities. They started with a framework that questioned how charter schools came into being at this particular time that is characterized by global economic developments and demands for a more deregulated state education system. This framework allowed the authors to examine the particularistic nature of a reform that defies universal definitions. Their purpose was not to definitively state whether or not charter school reform is "working," or whether or not it is leading to greater social stratification across broad categories of race, class, and gender.

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Rather, the authors focused on understanding how modern identities and postmodern ideologies converge and, thus, for whom charter school reform is "working," under what conditions, and on whose terms.

> Modernity is the era of differentiation. Postmodernity is typified by dedifferentiation, blurring of boundaries and disintegration of separate domains. (Wexler, 1990, p. 168)

It would be difficult to live during these waning days of the twentieth century and not acknowledge the highly significant social, political, economic, and cultural shifts taking place all around us. Established ways of measuring and describing social phenomena seem ever less adequate, as these traditional methods of categorizing people and their conditions fail to capture the blurring social boundaries of a postmodern world.

Familiar concepts of "equity" and "equal opportunity" are taking on new meanings, as more members of historically excluded racial and ethnic groups, after years of struggle for access to the "mainstream" through state-regulated reforms, now choose to focus on building programs within their own local communities. These are often the same communities that have been disadvantaged for years within an industrialized economy, which now stand to benefit the least from the post-industrial economy dominated by powerful transnational corporations (Jameson, 1991; Wilson, 1996).

Meanwhile, more privileged members of society are becoming richer in the new economy and are able, in this post–civil rights era of shrinking government spending and growing privatization, to keep more of their resources in their own communities. Thus, at the same time that members of disempowered communities are embracing localized social movements, the physical, economic, and political distance between these communities and more powerful, richer communities grows greater. This takes place within a global economy in which governments are pressured to meet the demands of advanced capitalism by cutting back on social services and privatizing their once-public institutions (Tarzi, 1995). In other words, we live in an era in which political conflict is more focused on recognition of group identity than on the redistribution of economic resources (Fraser, 1997). Such a shift in emphasis from a politics of distribution to that of recognition may reflect, in part, the end of modernity and its hope for greater equality.

Critical to the work of educational researchers is our ability to understand and document the impact of these fundamental societal and political changes on the education system. In this article, we explore the ways in which our research on charter schools can capture the complex relationship between local communities struggling for recognition and broader economic shifts taking place around the globe.

Charter school laws, now passed in thirty-four states and the District of Columbia, allow groups of people to come together to start autonomous

schools that are free of much of the governmental oversight that exists within the public educational system yet still receive public funds. While state charter school laws vary, the central ideal of the reform is to grant groups of school founders a charter that spells out what they hope to accomplish in their schools. Once a charter is granted — either by a local school board, a state board of education, or other entity — the schools operate with much less oversight and regulation than traditional public schools. In exchange for their freedom they are, in theory, supposed to meet the goals stated in their charters. If they fail to do so, they can lose their charter. In this way, charter school reform offers an alternative to the bureaucratic and regulated public education system, opening the door for more variation in the delivery of educational services, greater local community input into how schools are run, and, in theory, more market-based competition between schools. Also, because charter schools in most states do not receive funding for their capital costs, the reform leads to an increased reliance on private resources to pay rent or a mortgage for the school facilities. The main political attraction of these popular schools is that they give people of various political, social, cultural, and philosophical persuasions who are discontented with the educational system an alternative to regular public schools. Demand for such options has led to the creation of more than one thousand charter schools nationwide in just eight years.

Charter schools embody many of the contradictions of the so-called postmodern paradox. According to Hargreaves (1994), the major paradox of postmodernity is that the complexity and uncertainty wrought by globalization has led to a simultaneous search for meaning in locally defined identities. Thus charter schools are, on the one hand, fragmented and decentered localized projects that celebrate difference over uniformity and fight for cultural recognition, and, on the other, are conceptualized within and connected to larger global trends of less redistribution and more privatization, greater inequality between the rich and the poor, and of increased commodification of culture via images of mass marketing (Harvey, 1990; Kellner, 1992).

In this way, we see charter schools as being caught between the politics of modernity, in which the liberal project promised — often unsuccessfully — to provide more equal distribution of material resources along with universal rights and freedoms, and the politics of postmodernity, which are punctuated by fragmented social movements, identity politics, and the struggle for recognition (Best & Kellner, 1998). Because charter schools shape and are shaped by these complex social shifts, our study of this reform movement had to take into account these political shifts and the ways in which they change the meaning of "success" in education reform. In other words, the goals and purposes of education in some communities may be more about creating schools that reflect a particular cultural heritage than about im-

proved test scores. Education policy research often fails to acknowledge these distinctions. Through our in-depth research on charter schools in California, we learned that modern definitions of "social stratification," "segregation," and "equal education opportunity" are not as useful as they once were. For instance, groups of parents, students, educators, and community activists in low-income communities of color are using charter school reform to gain freedom from state-mandated curricula in order to embrace their own cultural heritage. After forty years of unsatisfactory progress with reforms designed to improve the unequal distribution of resources across schools or help marginalized groups gain access to mainstream institutions, members of these communities now seek to create schools of their own. Reforms such as charter schools help them redefine educational opportunities as the creation of separate spaces.

Yet these emancipatory efforts in local communities are circumscribed by highly unequal economic, social, and political conditions — vestiges of modernity that are in many ways exacerbated in postmodernity. In other words, the unfulfilled promises of equality that defined the modern era are still with us and are, in fact, becoming more pronounced in this postmodern era of global economic development.[1]

At the same time that disenfranchised communities are creating sites of resistance to the traditional state-run education system through charter school reform, more powerful and privileged communities are also breaking off from the public system via charter schools. Even in low-income neighborhoods, charter schools tend to serve students who are better off in terms of having parents who are actively engaged in their education.

In this article, we explore both the potential and inherent danger of charter school reform from an equity perspective.[2] At the same time, we explore the changing meaning of "equity" in a postmodern world. We begin with a broad overview of public education as a modern project and then discuss the contradictions or paradox of postmodernity. Next we discuss charter schools within the context of postmodernity and the California charter school law, followed by a description of our study and six composites of the most prevalent types of charter schools. In the last sections we write about both the liberatory potential and the exclusionary threat of the charter school movement.

[1] We are not, in this article, interested in the disagreements between social theorists who still believe in the modernist project and those who consider themselves to be postmodernists. Nor are we trying to align ourselves with either of these groups. We are simply interested in considering how the social and political changes taking place in the current era, at the end of modernity, relate to how and for whom schools are organized. In other words, we are interested in modernity and postmodernity as descriptions of social and political eras.

[2] Please note that in our effort to meld theory and data here, this article does not provide a detailed description of the overall findings from our study. A much more extensive discussion of our findings is presented in our final report, "Beyond the Rhetoric of Charter School Reform: A Study of Ten California School Districts" (UCLA Charter School Study, 1998).

Public Education and Modernity

While there is a great deal of debate among social theorists about the significance of the economic, social, and political changes taking place throughout the world today, there appears to be some agreement that certain fundamental social structures and belief systems that have characterized the modern era, or "modernity," no longer hold.

Modernity is generally defined as the historical period between the Renaissance and the late twentieth century, a time when Western countries shifted from feudal agrarian to democratic industrial societies (Featherstone, 1988; Harvey, 1990; Turner, 1990). Yet the project of modernity — in all of its philosophical power — was most forcefully embraced during the age of industrialization, from the Enlightenment to the mid-twentieth century. While the complexity and contradictions of modernity should not be overlooked, it is clear that certain powerful ideas dominated the period and helped to shape social change (Usher & Edwards, 1994). For instance, Elkind (1997) writes that the seminal beliefs shaping the modern era were progress, universality, and regularity: "Every social institution, from government to commerce to science, embodied these convictions" (p. 27).

Clearly, the most far-reaching developments of this era were the massive industrialization of production and the rationalization of capitalism via a political and legal system designed to support capitalist expansion. "Progress" rested upon the Enlightenment ideal that nature can be transformed and social progress achieved by the "systematic development of scientific and technological understanding, and by its rational application to social and economic life" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 25).

Hand in hand with industrialization, modernity was also a project of social emancipation grounded in a commitment to the grand narratives or metanarratives of scientific rationality, individual liberty, justice, and equality (Usher & Edwards, 1994). In contrast to the pre-modern era of caste systems, little or no social mobility, and prescriptive religious doctrine, modernity promised individuals, in theory anyway, "equal freedom" from ascribed status such as class, race, gender, or religion, and thus more access to opportunities for mobility and success (Jameson, 1991).

Thus, the project of modernity was, in part, an intellectual effort to develop ideals of universal morality in order to pursue human emancipation (Harvey, 1990). At the same time, it was a political project that involved attempts to "discern basic human rights, the common good and universal values, and to provide institutional guarantees that allow democratic rights, discussion and consensus" (Best & Kellner, 1998, p. 4). Paradoxically, modernity was also defined by institutions that stood in stark contrast to the development of human emancipation, most notably slavery, colonialism, exploitation of workers, and denial of suffrage to women or men who were non-White or did not own property.

Wexler (1990) argues that these institutions were allowed to flourish within modernity because of an inherent contradiction between the capitalist industrialized economy and the ideal of social equality. Within a modern capitalist system, social stratification is legitimized in terms of the rights of democratic citizens to own property or to build on their economic success; thus the "principle of equality of opportunity" helps to secure the inequality of results (p. 164).

The U.S. public education system, and indeed mass education across the globe, has been characterized as a product of modernity (see Usher & Edwards, 1994). Various historians and social theorists, for instance, have described the U.S. public schools as modeled after factories, producing "human capital" in much the same impersonal and mechanical fashion that factories produce goods. Sociologists have described the industrial capitalist system and its differentiation of workers, managers, and owners as parallel to the education system with its separate schools and classrooms for students of different backgrounds (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy & Levin, 1985).

Yet the development of free, universal public education was also seen as an extension of the often naïve Enlightenment project of equality grounded in simplistic and narrow Western-based understandings of merit. Researchers have documented, for example, how in the push for "efficient" and "rational" processes of educating students for an ever more bureaucratic world, educators sought to create the "one best system" that relied on standardized conceptions of intelligence, appropriate behavior, and valued knowledge (Tyack, 1974).

This in turn led to a differentiation of student experiences within and between schools that correlated with race, ethnicity, social class, and gender (see Darder, 1991; Oakes, 1985; Ogbu, 1992; Tyack, 1974). Thus, a free public education for every child together with mandatory attendance laws symbolized modernity in that it prepared children of different races, ethnicities, social classes, and genders for their different places in the industrial workforce under the modernist mantra of equal opportunity (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Tyack, 1974). This differentiated system was and is highly stratified, with children from White and wealthy families receiving the most challenging education and poor students of color too often receiving an education that prepares them only for menial jobs (Kozol, 1991).

Efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to make the "common" school more common included policies such as school desegregation, bilingual education, special education, and Title IX. These civil rights–oriented policies guaranteed more opportunities for students who had been denied access to quality schools and programs. Still, the impact of these policies has been regularly undermined by more powerful and privileged families escaping the coercion of these laws and court orders by creating spaces — suburban and private schools — where they can control the prestige and value of their children's

education (Wells & Crain, 1997). Furthermore, these laws did little to change the cultural focus of most schools, which has remained grounded in rather narrow conceptions of valued knowledge.

As Tyack (1993) notes, educators rarely sought to preserve islands of cultural difference or to match instruction to the cultures students have brought to their classrooms. Citing Michael Olneck, Tyack writes that even when educators recognized group differences and pursued multicultural curricula, they generally wanted the final product to be the autonomous, prejudice-free individual, "a modernized free agent who escaped from, and chose not to employ politically, a sense of collective identity" (p. 13). This resistance on the part of many "mainstream" educators to deconstruct their understandings of valued knowledge or educational outcomes meant that marginalized groups, such as African Americans, were often left with difficult choices:

> To accept segregation was to ratify their status as non-citizens and to send their children to schools that were grossly unequal, but to enroll their children in desegregated white-dominated schools often meant denying teaching jobs to blacks, exposing their children to prejudiced whites, and failing to instill the self-respect that came from studying their own history and culture. (Tyack, 1993, p. 21)

Frustration with the hypocrisy of the so-called common school led to the demand for community-control strategies in the 1960s and 1970s, when grassroots coalitions, mainly African Americans in northern urban communities in the United States, demanded greater control of the schools in their neighborhoods. These movements targeted school boards and district administrators who were seen as unresponsive to the needs of low-income and minority students (Lyke, 1970; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). The community-control movement in education mirrored other War on Poverty efforts, as the federal government initiated policies promoting "maximum feasible participation" of low-income community members in federally funded programs such as Head Start and Community Action. In this way, the federal government used public policy and tax dollars to try to increase the political and economic power within poor, urban communities (Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995; Quadagno, 1994).

At the same time that these struggles for greater community control were taking place in urban areas, parents and educators in school districts all over the country were creating free or alternative schools with progressive and student-centered pedagogy that differed in form and content from the factory-like "modern" public schools (Wells, 1993). In describing the various "counter-culture" and "anti-modernist" movements of the 1960s, Harvey (1990) notes that they were "antagonistic to the oppressive qualities of scientifically grounded technical-bureaucratic rationality as purveyed through monolithic corporate, state, and other forms of institutionalized power" (p. 38).

Thus, the history of the modern project of U.S. public education is filled with its own set of contradictions. But the foundation of public education has

perhaps never before been shaken in quite the way it is today by various reform movements designed to undermine the bureaucratic structure and cultural hegemony of public education. Charter school reform, as one such movement, is rooted in various political struggles of resistance against the modern public school.

The Paradox of Postmodernity

While modernity was synonymous with industrialization, postmodernity represents an era of post-industralism characterized by rapid changes in modes of communication, as well as in production and distribution (Hargreaves, 1994). Aronowitz and DiFazio (1994) write that the "sci-tech transformation" of the workplace in a post-industrial economy destroys more skilled jobs than it creates through automation of production and the move toward a service and technology economy. These shifts enable transnational corporations to "deterritorialize" their production and seek out the cheapest and politically weakest labor markets, leading to lower wages and fewer benefits for the poor and working class (McLaren, 1997). Studies of income distribution in the United States, for instance, continue to demonstrate growing disparities between the rich and poor (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 1997).

Postmodernity is characterized by "late capitalism" or "global capitalism," in which wealth and power are aggregated in the hands of a relatively small number of transnational corporations engaged in "flexible accumulation" with respect to labor processes, labor markets, products, and patterns of consumption (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Harvey, 1990; McLaren, 1997). Symbols of transnational products, including Coca-Cola and Nike sneakers, are spread globally via electronic media. Thus, technology enables the creation of a homogenized consumer culture, as people across the globe are inundated with the symbols of Western core-capitalist countries (Barber, 1995; Marcus, 1986).

Yet, at the same time that the economy and consumer culture has grown more global, social engagement has, in many instances, become more localized. The postmodern paradox, therefore, centers on the simultaneous homogenization of different cultures through the marketing images of global products and efforts by localized, sub-national groups to engage in identity politics as a way to validate their experiences and reject the traditional "moral certainties" of modernity and the nation-state (Best & Kellner, 1998; Kellner, 1992). These simultaneous developments are likely to conflict because the actions and possibilities presented to localized groups are circumscribed by the broader economic context. Thus, economic and cultural globalization structures social relations within the "local" context in a multitude of ways (Marcus, 1986). Best and Kellner (1998) refer to this phenomenon as the dialectic of globalization and localization.

On the one hand, as Barber (1995) notes, the globalization of products such as MTV, McDonald's, and Reebok is the result of economic and technological forces pressing nations into one homogeneous global theme park. On the other hand, the social movement phenomenon balkanizes nation-states as localized groups search for local identities. Some postmodern theorists point to the emancipatory potential of such localized movements and the struggles of marginalized people for greater freedom from oppressive nation-states. They write about the fragmentation of nations along cultural lines as local groups' rejection of the totalizing meta-narratives of a national identity. "Post-modernism proclaims multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies. It promotes the 'politics of difference.' Identity is not unitary or essential, it is fluid and shifting, fed by multiple sources and taking multiple forms" (Kumar, 1995, p. 122). Bauman (1996) writes that if the modern "problem of identity" was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, "the postmodern 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open" (p. 18).

These social shifts affect education in multiple ways. One of the most visible ways in which postmodernity and its localized social movements have influenced education policy is through a renewed emphasis on devolution and school choice in hundreds of countries throughout the world. In their book on devolution and choice in education, Whitty, Power, and Halpin (1998) acknowledge that it is possible to see these postmodern turns through a positive lens of choice and diversity. From this perspective, postmodernity contrasts with "the oppressive uniformity of much modernist thinking — as a form of liberation, in which the fragmentation and plurality of cultures and social groups allow a hundred flowers to bloom" (Whitty et al., 1998, p. 41). Yet Whitty and colleagues found, when they examined school choice policies in five countries, including the United States, that however appealing the rhetoric of recent reforms may have been to groups who felt betrayed by earlier policies, the current alternatives do not appear to be delivering on their emancipatory promises. They argue that for the most disadvantaged students, the new policies and arrangements seem to be just a more sophisticated way of reproducing traditional hierarchical distinctions. In other words, Whitty et al. (1998) write that while choice reforms such as charter schools may have their progressive moments in terms of freeing some marginalized groups to start their own schools, they do nothing to address the material inequalities that are expanding in a post-industrial and global economy.

Charter Schools: Straddling Modernity and Postmodernity

The foundation of charter schools in the United States, while comparable to the policies in other countries, also reflects the complex history of school choice programs in this country. For instance, over the last forty years, advocates as dissimilar as civil rights leaders, Black separatists, progressive or

"free" school educators, and conservative free-market economists have argued for various types of school choice policies, including alternative schools, magnet schools, voluntary transfer and open enrollment plans, and tuition voucher programs that allow students to spend public money at private schools (Cookson, 1994; Henig, 1994; Wells, 1993). Members of these and other groups have been instrumental in bringing about charter school reform (Nathan, 1996; Pipho, 1993).

Thus, charter school reform offers autonomy to people choosing to design and run unconventional schools, but does not bind them to any shared set of principles regarding which conventions they shun or why. In a postmodern manner, charter school reform prescribes no meta-narrative of what these schools should look like, but provides liberation from the constraints of the bureaucratic and modern public education system. To the extent that postmodernity embraces a critique of hierarchy, moral certainties or grand narratives, unitary notions of authority, or the bureaucratic imposition of official values, charter schools are the consummate postmodern education reform (Turner, 1990). Some of the more autonomous charter schools, freed from many state regulations, promise to liberate community-based groups of parents, educators, and students who want to celebrate their own cultural heritage.

Yet, to the extent that postmodernity is also shaped by late capitalism and its potential consequences for greater economic inequality and commodification of culture, so too does charter school reform threaten to reorganize the public system in ways that further exacerbate differential access to material resources. Such reform may lead to lower wages and less job security for educators and other school employees, similar to the unemployment, underemployment, and lower wages experienced by workers in private industry (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994). Furthermore, charter school reform may lead to a form of competition between schools that will allow those with the most valued cultural capital to commodify it in the educational marketplace, leaving those whose cultural capital is less valued with far less market power. What actually takes place within a charter school in terms of the day-to-day learning and instruction may become less important than the marketing signs and symbols that represent the types of students who attend the school and the culture and belief systems they hold dear. The schools with the most powerful symbols win in the educational market (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995).

According to Apple (1996), recent reform efforts designed to turn schools over to the market forces and to give educational "consumers" more choice may do little to espouse "heterogeneity, pluralism and the local" (p. xi). Rather, he notes, we may be witnessing the revivification of more traditional class, gender, and race hierarchies:

> An unquestioning commitment to the notion that "we" are now fully involved in a postmodern world may make it easier to see surface transformations (some

> of which are undoubtedly occurring) and yet at the same time may make it that much more difficult to recognize that these may be new ways of reorganizing and reproducing older hierarchies. (p. xi)

Because of these paradoxes of postmodernity, charter schools promise to be many things to many people and thus they are extremely difficult to understand and research. Rather than relying upon modern and universalistic conceptions of stratification and access or equity, and then asking whether or not charter school reform is a "success" or "failure" along these dimensions, we studied charter schools in a contextualized manner that allowed us to consider how what may be a liberatory reform for some people in some localized communities may contribute to greater inequality across the broader, or more "global," education system.

We were trying to capture the complexity of a "moving mosaic," which, according to Toffler, one of the first writers to conceptualize postmodernity, is "composed not on a flat, solid wall, but on many, shifting see-through panels, one behind the other, overlapping, interconnected, the colors and shapes continually blending, contrasting, changing" (cited in Hargraves, 1994, p. 66). For instance, we were attempting to distinguish between the "privileged" and the "disempowered" on two levels: one based on the local context and another based on larger, more national or First World benchmarks of privilege (by privilege, we mean social, cultural, economic, and political power, and not strictly membership in one or more broad decontextualized categories of race, class, and gender). Thus, one group of charter school founders — for example, a group of working-class African American families and educators — may be privileged relative to their local context but relatively impoverished compared to the larger society. Others, including White and wealthy families, may be considered privileged within their own context *and* within the larger society.

Furthermore, while different groups of charter school founders could share frustrations with the state-run public educational system, they will most likely have different reasons for their frustration and want to accomplish very different goals with their autonomy. For instance, members of a working-class African American community may want to turn their local public school into a charter to ensure that their children are exposed to a back-to-basics curriculum grounded in an Afrocentric approach. Meanwhile, members of a wealthy and mostly White community may want to apply for a charter so that they can open a school with fewer basics and more research-based curriculum via the use of technology. They may also want to participate more in hiring or firing educators and deciding whether parents should sign contracts guaranteeing that they will be involved in their children's education.

Still, despite the wide range of educators and parents who are engaged in charter school reform, this is not a reform for everybody. There are some communities that have a much more difficult time starting and maintaining charter schools than others (Scott & Jellison, 1998). We have met educators

so completely over-burdened by the struggle of day-to-day survival at their schools that they are unable to take advantage of this reform. Thus, we see charter schools in the same light that Hargreaves (1994) sees many recent education reform efforts, as more likely to establish "enclaves of experimentation (especially in more protected middle class communities) than to generate and sustain larger waves of system-wide change" (p. 33).

The following section of this article includes a brief discussion of our research methodology and the California charter school law, as well as a description of six charter school composites we created. Based on our research on charter school reform in California, and our review of the literature on charter schools throughout the country, we developed these particular six composites to best represent the range of schools being created via this reform. Through these six composites, we are able to illustrate how the themes of postmodernity manifest themselves in charter school reform.

Our Study of Charter Schools in California

In order to better understand the moving mosaic of charter school reform, we conducted case studies of ten school districts in California. This framework allowed us to study charter schools not as isolated institutions, but rather as schools that exist within and interact with a broader social context.

The California Law

As the second state to pass charter school legislation and the state with the largest number of students enrolled in charter schools, California was a good site for our research. The original California charter school law, which went into effect in early 1993, was popular with charter school advocates because it included several characteristics they considered important in the creation of large numbers of charter schools. In May 1998, the law was amended considerably to make the chartering process even easier for schools. Still, it is important to note that our research was conducted from 1996 through spring 1998, thus the schools and districts in our study were operating under the original legislation.

In terms of granting, denying, and revoking charters in California, the original 1992 law specified that only local boards of education could grant charters, although petitioners could appeal to their county board of education. The 1998 amendments, however, allow charter petitioners to apply directly to their county board of education and, if denied a charter by their local or county board, petitioners may apply directly to the state board of education for a charter. Even with these new provisions, a defining characteristic of California charter schools is that they remain local entities, generally granted through and governed by their local school district. This distinguishes California from many states, where other entities such as the state board of education or public universities can grant charters.

There are two routes to creating charter schools in California: the first is to convert an existing public school into a charter school — a "conversion" charter school — and the second is to create a new, "start-up" charter school. In the original legislation, charter proposals were to be signed by either 10 percent of the teachers in the school district or 50 percent of the teachers employed by an existing school seeking to become a charter.

California charters are valid for five years, at which time schools must renew their charters with the granting agencies. The original law included a cap of one hundred on the number of charter schools statewide, and a limit of ten per district. The 1998 amendments to the legislation, however, raised the cap to 250 charter schools for the 1998–1999 school year and one hundred more per year after that. The limit of ten charter schools per district was removed.

The charter school law waives most California Education Code regulations for schools, except for those related to non-discriminatory admissions based on race, gender, and national origin; basic health and safety standards; and participation in the state assessment program (which has gone through several transformations since the charter school law was passed). In these specific areas, charter schools are supposed to abide by the same rules and regulations as regular public schools.

Other aspects of the California law include a requirement that these more autonomous schools be nonsectarian and that private schools cannot be converted into charter schools. The law states further that charter schools should reflect the racial makeup of the school districts in which they are located. However, California charter schools are, as we mention above, able to set admissions requirements "if applicable." Such criteria could include anything from evidence of prior achievement to contracts requiring parents to volunteer for a specified number of hours to specific codes of conduct.

The 1992 charter law allowed charter schools to hire uncertified and nonunion teachers. The 1998 amendments, however, require charter school educators who teach the core and college prep courses to hold a valid teaching credential.

Public funds for charter schools are, in most cases, routed through the local districts that grant the charters. Charter schools are funded based on their average daily attendance (ADA) times the per pupil amount of general purpose state and local revenue their charter-granting school districts can receive. In addition, charter schools are entitled to receive state and federal categorical funds, such as Title I or special education, for their students who qualify for them. Charter schools are not, however, automatically eligible for any of the capital funds from the state or those generated by local tax revenues to pay for facilities. The extent to which charter schools benefit from capital funding depends on their relationships with their districts and whether or not they are able to use district-owned buildings free of charge.

Our Methodology

To capture the diversity of this reform, we purposely selected ten school districts that differed on several key factors, including size; racial and socioeconomic diversity; location in an urban, rural, or suburban community; geographic location in southern, central, or northern California; number and percentage of charter schools in the district; and the type of charter school — for example, independent study, conversion from a public school, a new start-up school, home school, as well as elementary and secondary charter schools.

We ended up with a sample of five large urban districts, three that are mostly rural, and two that are suburban. The districts vary in size and character from very small, with less than one thousand students, to the largest districts in the state, including one with more than half a million students. While the smaller districts are more racially and socioeconomically homogeneous — for example, 70 percent or more White with a majority of middle- or upper-middle-class families — the urban districts are incredibly diverse, with wide ranges of wealth and poverty, several racial and ethnic groups, and more than thirty languages spoken in students' homes.

The number of charter schools per district varies from only one charter school each in four of the ten districts to fifteen charter schools in one of the large urban districts. All totaled, these ten districts house thirty-nine, or about one-third of all the charter schools in the state. In addition to several interviews with district officials and non–charter school educators in the ten school districts, we conducted in-depth data collection in seventeen of these thirty-nine schools. We selected these seventeen charter schools by once again sampling for diversity along various dimensions — for example, dependent versus independent relationships with districts; grade levels served; size and demographics of the students; type or format of the school, including home schooling and independent study charters; philosophy of the school; and duration of the charter. The final sample includes two suburban, five rural/suburban, and ten urban charter schools. Eight of the seventeen were "conversion" charter schools, and nine were new start-up schools. Three of the charter schools in our sample were home schooling/independent study schools that spanned grades K-12. Three schools were high schools serving students in grades 9-12, and four were middle/junior high schools with some combination of grades 5-8. One school was a K-8 charter school and six of the charter schools were elementary schools serving some subset of grades K-6.

From spring 1996 through spring 1998, we conducted three site visits to each of the eight larger school districts in our study and two site visits to the two smallest districts. These visits lasted three or four days and were conducted by two to four researchers, depending on the size of the districts and the number of charter schools studied. Data collection included 462 semi-structured interviews with district officials; charter school founders, leaders,

teachers, parents, governance council members, and community supporters; and educators at nearby public schools. We also conducted observations of district and charter school meetings and classrooms in charter schools. And, finally, we collected and studied hundreds of district and charter school documents.

All the names of the districts and schools in this study have been changed to protect the identity and confidentiality of the people we interviewed.

Charter School Composites

After two-and-a-half years of traveling, listening, observing, and reading, we emerged from our study with a deeper understanding of the range of diverse localized social movements that have started different charter schools across the state. Based on this knowledge, as well as information on California charter schools from other sources (for example, SRI International, 1997), we created a set of six composite sketches of idealized charter schools that capture the most prevalent themes, issues, and phenomena of this reform — for example, why people start charter schools, who becomes part of their school communities, and what they hope to accomplish through this particular reform.

These composites are by no means representative of every charter school in existence, nor is each composite necessarily mutually exclusive — some charter schools have characteristics of more than one of these composites. Thus, each composite is conceptual and fluid. They help to illustrate the major categories of charter schools we have found, as well as the diversity of charter schools within the movement. Additionally, they help illustrate the emancipatory possibilities that some charter schools offer, as well as the threats to equal student access and resources that some charter schools pose.

Urban, Ethnocentric, and Grassroots Charter Schools

These are charter schools founded by groups of parents, educators, and community members who wish to create a "safe space" or "homeplace" (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1990) for students of a particular racial or ethnic group who live in the surrounding community. Many of these schools are Afrocentric, Chicano-centric, or Native American-centric in their curricular foci and orientations. But whether or not they have such a focus, they are started by people within the local communities and thus represent localized social movements, people of color fighting for greater independence from what they see as a hegemonic state-run system.

These urban schools in low-income communities are seen by the parents and educators as safe havens from the nearby public schools, which they often perceive to be dangerous. They are also concerned with serving the specific needs of their student population in ways that large, impersonal public schools frequently are not. These charter schools are born of the frustration

that parents and educators in marginalized communities often feel toward an educational system that has failed to take their knowledge, their history, and their experiences seriously.

Three of the charter schools — all of which were start-up charters located in urban areas — in our study were created in part to serve students of a particular racial/ethnic group who the founders or operators thought were not being well served in the public system. In one of these schools, which is also a back-to-basics school, some of the educators said that part of their mission was to provide students with greater knowledge and appreciation of their own history. In the other two schools the central focus went beyond infusing more history of the ethnic group served and included an emphasis on the ethnic culture, heritage, and identity of the students.

For instance, a founder of one of these schools told us that in the early planning stages she met with several people from her community who were hopeful that the curriculum and instruction at the charter school would be different — that the school would present history and culture from the point of view of the people in that community, not from the perspective of mainstream public school textbooks and curriculum.

A teacher at this school noted that she has seen improvements in her students over the school year: "We know our own history, nobody has to tell us, we know it. And they're developing a sense of pride. And I can see it's taken a long time, but it's happening slowly." She added that, while the school does try to fulfill the minimum standard graduation requirements set by the district, "we have to meet the culture part, the spiritual part, and here what's nice is that we can touch the spiritual part and it's OK."

Many of these types of charter schools require parents to be involved in the school; often the schools have a parent contract that must be signed before students are enrolled. Thus, while parents and students associated with these schools are "disadvantaged" within their larger social context, they may well be less disadvantaged when compared to other families within their poor and segregated urban districts. For instance, these charter schools enroll the students with the most involved parents and with parents who are able to drive them to and from school each day (see Lopez, Wells, & Holme, 1998).

Meanwhile, there is ample evidence that the charter school law has done little to redistribute material resources in this global economic era. Many of these charter schools are housed in poor and makeshift facilities, such as those of one school we studied that consisted of a cluster of portable classrooms on a dirt and asphalt parking lot. The long-term survival of these schools usually depends on their ability to garner corporate sponsors to help make up for the lack of private resources in their poor communities. Often there is an overlap between these schools and two of those described below — charter schools founded by charismatic educational leaders and teacher-led charter schools (Scott & Jellison, 1998).

Home Schooling/Independent Study Programs

These charter schools span wide geographic distances and often use technology for distance learning in order to expand the "attendance zone" of their schools. It is not unusual for them to draw together, under one charter umbrella, clusters of parents and families who had already been home schooling their children before the charter school was created. These families participate in home schooling for a variety of religious, practical (e.g., a handicapped or bed-ridden student), pedagogical, and/or philosophical reasons that cause them to withdraw from the public school system. In this way, the families associated with these charter schools often run the political gamut from extremely conservative to libertarian to more progressive, yet they are united under one loosely organized charter school. This type of school does not ask families to adopt one method of home schooling; rather, it accommodates their diversity by allowing each family to make its own pedagogical decisions about what is valued knowledge and whose culture is reflected in the curriculum. Thus, home-schooling charter schools tend to attract a wide range of families, from very conservative "fundamentalist" Christian families to more liberal "Birkenstock and tie-dye" parents who are more like the flower children of the 1960s. For example, in one home-schooling charter school we studied, we interviewed parents ranging from those who were extremely religious and had taken their children out of public schools in protest of the secular nature of the curriculum to those who wanted to home school their children as they toured the country in a camper selling motorcycle helmets at trade shows.

Generally, most of the students and parents enrolled in these programs are White and, for the most part, middle class. In our study, we found it was generally non-working mothers who teach their children at home. In this way, these charter schools are a localized social movement, engaged by those who have the time and resources to take advantage of the freedom from the traditional public system. Yet, at the same time, they illustrate the characteristics of a post-industrial economy. For instance, many of the schools' teachers or facilitators are part-time workers who are paid by the hour or by the number of students they serve and who travel from house to house to provide parents with assistance, help them order school-bought materials, and give students formal credit for their work. These teachers often are also parents of students enrolled in the school. When the students reach high school age, they are more likely to be doing more teacher-directed or independent study work.

Through independent study programs, many of these same charter schools also serve older students, often from lower socioeconomic status families, who either dropped out or were pushed out of regular public schools. Such programs enable these students to earn high school diplomas instead of GEDs, but they also vary greatly in terms of the level of support and the quality of the instructional materials students receive. For instance, at one of

the home-schooling/independent study schools we studied, the instructors, some of whom did not have bachelor's degrees, would spend very little time with each student enrolled in the program. Instructor-student interaction consisted mainly of brief, half-hour (if that) visits by the instructors to the students' homes to drop off mass-produced, standardized curriculum packets and the corresponding multiple-choice tests, and to pick up completed assignments and tests. Students were left on their own to read and work through the assignments and tests. During one visit, an independent study student — a woman in her mid-twenties who was a high school dropout — had several questions and attempted to engage the instructor in a conversation on the Articles of Confederation and other topics she had read about in the U.S. history material. But the instructor, who was paid on a per pupil basis and had to drive long distances between her students' rural homes, did not have much time to talk.

Yet at another home-schooling/independent study charter school we studied, the independent study students came into the school's storefront facility on a regular basis — usually two or three times a week — to work with instructors, many of whom were certified teachers. Thus, the range of student experiences across various independent study programs was wide.

These independent study programs are also sometimes seen by charter school founders and district administrators as a way to make money because of the limited expense involved in serving students for only a few hours a week. There is often an overlap between these schools and the entrepreneur-initiated charter schools described below (Vasudeva & Grutzik, 1998).

Charter Schools Founded by Charismatic Educational Leaders

This type of charter school is found in different settings, from suburban to large urban school districts. What seems to connect them is that they generally arise out of the hard work and vision of an educational leader surrounded by a core of committed teachers. This type of school is often driven toward charter status by the educational leader's desire for more curricular, pedagogical, and/or fiscal autonomy from the local school district. These leaders tend to see the need for greater fiscal autonomy to accomplish the kind of pedagogical, organizational, or facility and maintenance changes they envision. For example, one charismatic charter school principal in our study wanted to convert her school into a charter so that she could adopt a different math program than the one the district had adopted. Another charismatic charter school leader wanted to implement a schedule that varied from the one his district had mandated. Some charismatic charter school leaders focused on using their funding in different ways, such as constructing a new building or hiring non-union maintenance staff.

Such educational leaders are often mavericks within the public system and are generally charismatic people who may have an entrepreneurial bent but who generally value the professional knowledge of educators. These schools

are often, but not always, "converted" public schools — that is, schools that existed in the public system before becoming charter schools. Thus, these are schools with an institutional history of employing credentialed teachers who are members of a union and who are paid full salaries and benefits. The extent to which the charismatic leaders will maintain these standards for teachers varies, and depends on whether he or she chooses to shift the expenditures or resources from salaries to facilities or other areas. These leaders frequently choose to save money by contracting out certain services, such as maintenance and cafeteria services, to competitive bidders and bypass the salaried classified employees hired by the district. In this way, their schools begin to reflect the post-industrial service sector economy of part-time workers and flexible staffing that is becoming the norm in postmodernity.

Furthermore, the charismatic leaders often maintain an extremely high profile within their local communities (and often beyond). Thus, they tend to wield a great deal of political power and symbolic capital that helps them get what they need for their schools — from their local school districts, their state departments of education, or private foundations and corporations. The major question hanging over many of these schools is what will happen to them when the charismatic leader is gone.

Teacher-Led Charter Schools

Similar in some ways to schools that fit the description of schools founded by charismatic educational leaders above, charter schools led by groups of teachers tend to be even more focused on the instructional program of the school as the primary reason for going charter. These schools, like those above, also tend to be existing public schools that were reforming and taking risks even before becoming charters. They can, however, run the gamut in terms of their particular pedagogical foci — from progressive, multi-age, and open classroom schools to more traditional and rigid college-prep or "classic" curricula. They also vary greatly in terms of their location and student population. Some of these teacher-led charter schools serve at-risk students who have dropped out of regular schools, while others are suburban neighborhood elementary schools. Still others, as were two in our study, are converted urban public schools serving low-income students. Whether they were schools in our study or schools we heard about at a conference, these teacher-led charters share an ethos that teachers know what is best for the students they serve. In this way, these schools resemble a grassroots localized social movement of teachers attempting to gain control of their pedagogy and curriculum.

Some of these teacher-led schools are being started with the help of local teacher union affiliates. Teachers in these schools are generally credentialed and often still part of a collective bargaining unit, which means they receive the same pay and benefits as other teachers in their districts. Like employee-owned companies, these teacher-led charter schools are generally vested in

maintaining the honor of the teaching profession and are supportive of public education in general, as long as the teachers are given the latitude to use their professional judgment to determine what type of instruction will best meet the students' needs.

Parent-Led Charter Schools

Schools that resemble this composite can also be found in various types of communities, but we believe that they are most likely to be found in wealthy suburban areas or in exclusive urban neighborhoods where well-educated parents have the money and connections to place their children in private schools. At this type of charter school, a core of extremely involved parents generally works with educators to move toward charter school status, and often these parents are intricately involved in writing the policies and procedures for the charters. For instance, in one charter school in our study, the most involved parents were those from the nearby wealthy community. At this school, these parents helped write the charter and were involved in the governance of the school. These are also parents who are able to muster incredible private resources — cash, in-kind services, and materials — for their schools. These schools are likely to have many parent professionals, especially lawyers and accountants, who play major roles in helping the schools define the terms of their financial and legal agreements with their charter-granting agencies, and to work through the difficult budgeting process that autonomous charter schools face. In addition, it is not unusual for these parents to play a part in deciding who will ultimately enroll in the charter school; thus they can control with whom their own children will associate. For instance, in one charter school we studied, parents sit on a student review board that decides which students have violated the student behavior code and thus who should be expelled from the school. In many cases, therefore, these parent-led charter schools provide examples of the communities and families that have the greatest advantages under policies that foster localized social movements to create or reinvent publicly funded schools.

The working conditions at these charter schools can vary, but the educators are generally fairly well-paid professionals. The pedagogical foci of these schools may also vary incredibly from a back-to-basics curriculum to a more progressive, open classroom approach, depending on the philosophical and political orientation of the parents and teachers involved. In some settings there is an overlap between schools with strong leaders and those with powerful parents, especially when the parents are involved in bringing in a leader to run their charter school.

Entrepreneur-Initiated Charter Schools

This type of charter school is generally, but not always, found in urban areas and often, but not exclusively, serves so-called "at risk" poor students of color

who have dropped out or been kicked out of regular public schools. These schools are less likely to be "grassroots" or community based and are more likely to be founded by people from outside the communities they serve, people with a strong entrepreneurial philosophy of how schools should operate. This composite would include charter schools run by for-profit management firms. These charter school founders often, but not always, place little value on the professional knowledge of educators. They generally have little or no background in education and tend to believe that what is wrong with the public school system is that educators lack the business skills and wherewithal to run schools efficiently and effectively. They often represent a neoliberal or free enterprise ideology that calls for market solutions to all social ills. For instance, the founder and director of one of the charter schools in our study regularly espoused his belief that his background in business made him a better charter school director than any educator. He argued, as do many people within the charter school movement, that the public education system is a failure and that it ought to be privatized and run by entrepreneurs like himself.

The curriculum in these schools is often driven by textbook publishers or GED test-preparation guidelines, and the educational goal is generally a high school diploma or its equivalent. Thus, this composite often overlaps with the independent study programs described in the "Home Schooling/Independent Study Programs" composite above. Compared to the other charter school composites, there is often far less parental involvement in these more entrepreneurial schools, and students spend relatively little time with their teachers — maybe a few hours a week. The remainder of the time they are presumed to be working independently on their schoolwork. Teachers in these schools, as with the home schools, are often part-time workers with few or no benefits and are paid hourly or based on student load. These entrepreneurial independent study schools also are likely to use technology to provide distance learning opportunities to students. Other than the less expensive teachers and perhaps the more innovative use of technology, it is not entirely clear how these schools differ from continuation schools currently operating in most schools districts — except that the entrepreneurial founders have much more control over how and when they spend public money on the students than do regular school administrators.

We presented these composites of some of the most prevalent types of charter schools in order to demonstrate the various ways this reform embodies the different aspects of the postmodern paradox — both the localized social movements and the global post-industrial economy. In the next two sections of this article, we discuss both the liberatory possibilities and the ongoing concerns of charter school reform as these various composites of charter schools interact with existing and worsening inequalities in a post-industrial, global economy.

Liberatory Possibilities of Charter School Reform: Cultural Sites of Resistance

Given this range of charter school composites, the various reasons why charter schools are founded, and the different philosophies that drive them, researchers are likely to find a range of ways to understand the outcomes produced by these schools. In many ways, charter schools reflect the postmodern condition in which the meta-narratives of modernity no longer hold; thus, in looking at charter schools, closer attention should, in theory, be paid to voices that for too long have been silenced (Harvey, 1990). Researchers must explore the liberatory and even emancipatory potential within charter school reform.

Within the first composite we described above, possibilities clearly exist for groups of parents and educators who have been the least empowered in the state-run education system to have a voice in how their children are educated. Within these urban, ethnocentric, and grassroots (or localized) charter schools, we have seen the potential for educators, parents, and students to work together to create cultural sites of resistance where they openly question the value of assimilation into a society dominated by Eurocentric culture and historical perspectives (Haymes, 1995). For example, a woman who helped to found one of the ethnocentric charter schools in our study explained that the decision to start a charter school was made at a community meeting: "Speaker after speaker — older adults as well as young — thought that maybe we need to have our own schools. We need to decide our own curriculum. We can decide how our children are going to learn, what they are going to learn."

If ever charter school reform reflected the more radical tendencies within postmodernity to challenge the universalistic understandings of "truth" and "reason," it would be within these localized urban ethnocentric and grassroots schools that allow for different pedagogical approaches grounded in perceptions of cultural group differences. In this way, these schools create "homeplaces" for those who have been disconnected from and disempowered within the traditional state-run system. In her discussion of such homeplaces, hooks (1990) notes, "With this foundation, we can regain lost perspective, give life new meaning. We can make 'homeplace' that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole" (p. 49).

A founder of a charter school serving a Latino community explained that one of the motivating forces behind the effort to start the school was the way limited-English-proficient Latino students were being treated in the public schools:

> Some of our students who were not English speaking, who were getting close to fluency but not quite there yet, many of them were put in ESL programs. And

> sometimes the kids never progressed out of ESL, you know, they just continued at the junior high and high school level. And [one of the school's founders] had been at a junior high where she saw the kinds of classes where some of these students wound up. They wound up in huge classes and they worked straight out of grammar books, and she just felt there could be another kind of program for these kids.

Furthermore, as with the community-control movement of the 1960s, urban grassroots charter schools have the potential to be politically empowering for formerly disconnected and disempowered parents. The process of organizing and founding a charter school can help low-income parents and community members of color create and sustain new social networks that can be used for political organizing and gaining political voice within the larger society. This process also promises to forge connections between disempowered parents and the education system by enhancing their participation in their children's education in ways that are enriching for both parents and students. In one of the urban charter schools we visited serving low-income students, parents sit on every decisionmaking committee or council. The most involved parents, in particular, are able to voice their opinions and influence the course of the school.

Similarly, in looking at other charter school composites, from the perspective of parents who have felt alienated from the traditional public system for political or cultural reasons, the home-school charters have indeed "liberated" them from public schools. In this context, charter school reform certainly allows parents and students who felt disconnected from the education system, even if they are not as disempowered within the larger society as other groups, to reclaim their rights to define their children's education. In this way, the home-school charters are like many of the localized social movements of postmodernity — they provide an identity-building space for those who seek it, but they do little or nothing to overcome larger social inequalities. We heard hours of testimony from home-schooling parents about their frustration with the public education system and the lack of response on the part of educators to their specific demands. The following quote from a home-schooling mother in one of the charter schools we studied is typical of what home-schooling parents said to us about their prior public school experience:

> I would ask her how was her day at school and she would say she had a great day. I would ask her what she learned and she would say that they did a stupid thing that she already knew. It was like she was not being challenged. She was only going for recess. At home, she is probably getting two days of schooling in two hours that I teach her. They also pick up so many bad social habits in a group.

These parents had turned to home schooling so that they could effect change for their own children. The home-schooling charter schools enabled them to do this with financial support from the public education system. In this way, charter schools are localized social movements.

Furthermore, both the teacher-led and charismatic leader charter schools described above offer the possibility of liberatory and even emancipatory reform to the extent that these educators have embraced curricular and pedagogical practices that are more successful with and inspirational to the students they serve. For instance, educators like the school founders quoted above, who see the need to develop a more culturally relevant curriculum, one that offers a critique of the Eurocentric focus of our society, can be liberated via charter school reform.

Yet as we mentioned in the composites above, other forms of autonomy are also appealing to charter school founders and leaders. For instance, many of the charter school educators we interviewed spoke of the power of the autonomy they gained through charter school reform to restructure their school day and year. One school in our study extended the school year by twenty days and was able to reduce class size across the grades. Founders and leaders of every charter school we studied also stressed the significance of being able to hire their own teachers outside of their districts' personnel policies. According to the principal of a charter high school in our study, "The charter was a vehicle to assert that we would be as inventive as we needed to be to address the issues of student achievement and learning."

Others talked about being able to make democratic and collaborative decisions at their school sites. These were educators who valued the autonomy they gained through charter school reform, which enabled them to use their professional knowledge and background to make decisions about serving children. As one charter school principal/director told us, in the traditional public school she worked in prior to coming to the charter, the principal made all the decisions. At her charter school, none of the decisions are made by only one person; instead, the staff does so in conjunction with the parents. Of course, as with any participatory system, some parents and some educators have more voice and authority in these settings, but the governance process in charter schools is generally more inclusive of the people associated with the school than is the process in traditional public schools. Every charter school in our study included parents and/or teachers on their main governance boards.

Even when the perceived benefits of charter reform are freedoms that non-charter school educators can and sometimes do have, charter school educators and observers note that having the charter school title or "banner" empowers people to do things differently. As one school board member noted, the charter school movement "gives people a belief that they can do it. People working in institutional settings [are] often fearful to develop [new ideas], often nervous or afraid to be shot down and have their hand slapped, . . . so to the degree a charter school's gonna help us break institutional culture, then it's a good thing."

These liberatory possibilities within charter school reform become more problematic, however, when they are examined within the context of larger

power relations in a society left highly unequal by the economic and political vestiges of modernity — a society that may well be becoming even more unequal in the global capitalism of postmodernity.

Vestiges of Modernity and Postmodern Concerns

Charter school reform as a celebration of the localism, difference, fragmentation, and multiplicity of our age might be less disconcerting if it were not taking place in conjunction with economic, political, social, and cultural shifts enmeshing these localized sites of resistance in a larger power structure that continues to privilege certain communities over others. In other words, the global distribution of material resources, political power, and cultural capital remain inequitable. Furthermore, because charter schools are part and parcel of a larger political push to roll back the welfare state and shrink government size and spending, they have come of age in an era when resources are less likely to be redistributed from wealthy to low-income communities. When we examine charter schools through this wider lens, the emancipatory potential of the reform seems feeble in comparison.

First, there are the obvious concerns regarding the uneven distribution of material resources across communities. Because charter school reform in essence atomizes the public education system into smaller political entities — individual schools as opposed to districts — the isolation and separation of poor communities from each other and from rich communities is exacerbated. While such isolation may be liberatory in some respects, as Massey and Denton (1993) have argued, the segregation and separation of the wealthy from the non-wealthy make it difficult for members of a poor, isolated community to build coalitions based on mutual interests with people who have the political and economic means to invest in public services such as schools. For instance, they note "that blacks are the only ones to benefit from resources allocated to the ghetto — and are the only ones harmed when resources are removed — [which] makes it difficult for them to find partners of political coalitions" (p. 14).

These issues of isolation and segregation can be explored within the context of a poor urban school district, as well as across a broader metropolitan area. For instance, we learned in several districts we studied that charter school reform within a low-income, urban community serves to consolidate the most well-connected and efficacious parents and students, leaving those with less power and ability to build such coalitions in the inner-city public schools. Charter school reform can also lead to further divisions across different racial and ethnic groups within inner-city areas. We saw an example of this in one of the urban districts we studied, as Latino parents and educators struggled to form a school that catered to the cultural history and interests of Latino students. In the process, they separated themselves politically and culturally from African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups in the

same school district. Still, when we compared this relatively privileged Latino school community to a nearby suburban charter school with a wealth of resources, we found the former relatively deprived when it came to material resources and educational opportunities. The Latino school, for instance, lacked basic equipment and supplies, while the suburban charter was flooded with new technology and instructional materials.

While Higham acknowledges the need for different ethnic groups to maintain a nucleus where efforts to preserve and sustain their own integrity are upheld, he also distinguishes between ethnic boundaries and nuclei. He argues that ethnic boundaries should always be permeable and that the very act of strengthening boundaries can fall into the trap of universalistic — and thus modern — thinking that may inadvertently contribute to stereotypical perceptions of racially or ethnically based differences in student ability. In other words, such boundaries may contribute to the same forms of social stratification and differentiation that are typical vestiges of modernity (cited in Tyack, 1993).

By overemphasizing the power of group boundaries and within-group similarity, charter school founders may overlook not only the diversity within the group, but also the way stratification can occur across a particular group. In addition, the more disempowered and disenfranchised charter school founders, who are also the least likely to have access to the types of resources they need to make their schools successful, may be setting themselves up for blame if things fall apart. In their research on decentralization in education, Lewis and Nakagawa (1995) and Fine (1993) have demonstrated that efforts to push more responsibility and decisionmaking onto local districts and schools also result in more blame being placed on educators at the schools if the reform effort fails.

Yet the concern around the atomizing of the public education system and the splintering off of different groups around identity or certain ideologies as reflected in particular forms of curriculum and pedagogy is particularly troublesome when seen in the context of charter schools that are similar to the fifth composite — the parent-led charter schools — described above. In instances when privileged parents resist the hegemony of the state from their standpoint of relative power and influence, the political and social implications are different. These parents are less likely to be resisting state- or district-mandated curriculum and more likely to be resisting state policies that dictate how public funds will be spent — for example, on Title I or bilingual education. Such resistance relates to a large political backlash against policies that redistribute resources (Edsall, 1991).

Particularly in a state like California, where funding for public schools has decreased significantly over the last two decades, parents in wealthier communities frequently resent the extra targeted state and federal funds that go to schools serving large numbers of low-income, limited-English-proficient, or handicapped students. Charter school reform is one way they can use the

wealth of their local communities to create the kind of public schools they want. The extra resources these schools are able to garner include donations in the form of cash or equipment, in-kind volunteer services from parents and community members, and a lot of expertise, advice, and social networking from parents and community members who work in powerful corporations or industries (Scott & Jellison, 1998).

These well-resourced charter school parents and community members are more likely to control with whom their children will associate in a more autonomous public school by attracting other parents and students who share similar belief systems and who are also skillful in negotiating social networks. Once such high-status charter schools are founded, they quickly become oversubscribed, which means that only parents with the most political savvy, cultural capital, and social resources will be able to get their children in the door.

Furthermore, in California, where we conducted our research, charter schools are allowed by law to have admissions criteria. Thus, they can more formally determine who becomes a part of their community and who does not (Lopez, Wells, & Holme, 1998). About two-thirds of the charter schools in California require parents to sign contracts agreeing to volunteer at the school a certain number of hours each week or month; about one-third of the charter schools require students and/or parents to sign contracts agreeing to abide by certain codes of conduct or achieve at a certain level (Lopez, 1997). Although most charter school laws state that these schools must be non-discriminatory and open to all those who apply, there are subtle and covert ways that parents and students with the less valued cultural capital will be dissuaded from applying or enrolling. This subtle social sorting process will occur when the cultural capital of those most active in the charter school becomes symbolic of the school's ideological orientation and affiliation.

In another article from this study (Lopez et al., 1998), we demonstrate the various ways that charter school operators use mechanisms, including recruitment processes and parent and student contracts, to shape their charter school communities, attracting "desirable" students and parents while trying to get rid of "undesirable" families. Thus, instead of excluding students strictly on the basis of race or ethnicity, many charter schools exclude students on the basis of behavior. For example, several schools we studied were able to ask students to leave if they were not making adequate academic progress. As one member of a charter school governing board explained:

> This whole contractual business involves saying to the child and to the parent, if you don't make progress, then certain things happen. And one of the grounds for being invited to leave the school is that you're not making academic progress, particularly if you are interfering with the academic progress of other students. We will not allow a student to do that. And we don't have to expel you. We do not have to go through the legal expulsion process.

Many parents and educators we spoke to commented that they like the charter schools because they are like private schools. Conduct codes of various sorts, including those for parent involvement and student behavior, keep out students who do not conform to desired behaviors. Such a sorting process means that it is less helpful to think of access and equity in traditional ways. Rather, researchers need to pay attention to new layers of inequality, not just broad categories of disadvantaged groups struggling for access to "mainstream" institutions. Charter school reform provides a window into the complexity of current efforts by localized groups to gain recognition for cultural perspectives while creating institutions bounded by relative privilege.

In this way, charter schools reflect the blurred postmodern distinctions among ideology, identity, and interests, often very discretely. This makes them distinct from more modern forms of organization in which activists were drawn together by their affiliation around identities constructed of essentialized categories such as race, class, or gender (Calhoun, 1995). Although some charter schools founded around an ethnocentric curriculum are grounded in forms of these more modern constructs of identity, others, especially those in more privileged areas, are likely to build coalitions around ideologies related to cultural capital and belief systems. As we mentioned earlier, charter schools in racially segregated and isolated communities are often combining both old and new images of identity; in other words, they may be race-specific or ethnocentric, but they can also try to enforce codes of conduct and behavior via student or parent contracts (see Lopez et al., 1998, for more detail on the mechanisms that charter schools use to exclude "undesirable" students and parents).

Meanwhile, more privileged groups of charter school founders, who are likely to be mostly White, are starting charter schools cloaked in ideology, in part because they cannot build a school identity around race and in part because many of them want racially diverse schools — as long as all the families there share the same values and all the students act like their children (Brantlinger, Massoumeh, & Guskin, 1996; Wells & Serna, 1996). These schools are positioned to present an image of themselves as grounded in a curriculum of high intellectual standards that are greatly valued in the larger society, as opposed to an Afrocentric focus that holds far less status outside of the African American community. For instance, the founders, educators, and parents at a suburban charter school in our study created a high-tech image for their school, which allowed them to attract students whose parents worked in the technology industry. This in turn enabled them to garner additional computers and software for the school through donations and grants. The entire school community is connected via email. All of this enabled them to become a school that high-achieving students and their families want to attend.

The ideology of schools in more privileged communities versus the racial or cultural identities of schools in more marginalized communities trans-

lates into the semiology or marketization of charter schools through signs and symbols. In the case of the high-tech suburban charter school mentioned above, technology and computer literacy became symbols of who belongs — who fits in at this school. In their book on education reform in England, Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe (1995) note that within deregulated school choice plans, schools could in theory play a role in facilitating and enhancing parental understanding of the processes and practices of schooling. Yet the authors found that an emphasis on market competition between schools inhibits such an approach by putting pressure on schools to focus on what is visible and/or measurable.

For instance, Gewirtz et al. (1995) argue that, in the first seven years of market-oriented school choice policy in the United Kingdom, they have witnessed a growing emphasis on middle-class symbolism as a way in which more privileged parents shop for schools. They note further that the market is providing a far greater incentive than existed previously for schools to manipulate images, rather than to genuinely inform parents and children. In this way, marketing messages from the school become simpler, more uniform, and somewhat formulaic.

These patterns of emphasis and symbols, Gewirtz et al. (1995) note, are clearly rooted in the incentive structure of the market and aimed at attracting those students who, at the lowest cost to the school, enhance the school's position in the league tables of examination results, attendance levels, and school-leaver destinations. According to Gewirtz et al. (1995), *"The new symbolism is important because it carries messages about what and who is valued in schools"* (p. 142, italics in original). These "patterns of emphasis and symbols" were evident in the suburban charter school mentioned above with its high-tech image. Other schools in our study also manipulated their images in various ways to make themselves appealing to high-status parents. For instance, many charter schools call themselves "academies," some require students to wear uniforms, and others call their principals CEOs.

In this way, charter school reform allows autonomous school communities to mimic the global emphasis on the commodification of culture. The problem is that some school cultures, symbolizing their ideologies or narratives, are far more valued in the educational marketplace than others. These values shift slightly from place to place and must be contextualized within their local educational markets in order to be understood, but chances are that many of the same students who are poorly served within the traditional education system will not end up in the most highly valued charter schools or in charter schools at all. In our study, we found that only those charter schools that operated as home-schooling/independent study charter schools were willing to enroll and keep any student that applied — even those who had been kicked out of regular schools. However, in these charter schools students rarely associate with each other, therefore the backgrounds of applicants are often less important than keeping enrollment and per pupil reve-

nues up. Conversely, all of the in-house charter schools in our study had some limitations regarding who attended, either through selective recruiting, strict contracts or behavior codes, or other means. These schools actively sought and enrolled students with more involved parents and/or more motivation to succeed in school than their peers in nearby public schools (Lopez et al., 1998).

Conclusions and Implications for Research on Postmodern Education Reform

Social science research aimed at depicting inequality is in many ways a product of modernity. Mirroring the Enlightenment's emphasis on "progress," social science research has often focused on measuring "outcomes" defined in universalistic terms without considering the particularistic meanings of successful outcomes in different localized communities. We do not assume that all parents strive for the same educational "outcomes" for their children. Thus, universalistic standards of measuring school success and the access of students of different races, ethnicities, social classes, or genders to the most successful schools must be questioned — not ignored, but rethought. The concept of relative privilege that we discuss in this article is important to any discussion of charter school enrollment. Thus, rather than simply looking at the race, class, and gender of students enrolled in charter schools, research must also ask what the other ways are in which charter and non-charter students within the same local context differ. If, for example, charter schools enroll only those students whose parents agree to sign contracts committing them to a certain number of volunteer hours, as was the case in seven of the schools we studied, then charter schools are likely to siphon off the most involved parents from nearby public schools. This phenomenon must be factored into any discussion of access, equity, and stratification within the charter school movement. Only by linking current education reforms, such as charter schools, to larger social and economic changes can education researchers appreciate the need for new ways of thinking about and measuring such fundamental concepts as equity and social stratification as they interact with the paradoxes of postmodernity.

Our interdisciplinary study focused on the multiple meanings of charter school reform. We examined how people in different social locations define the possibilities for localized social movements, and how they see the potential threat of greater inequality resulting from this reform within and among communities. We started with no grand or meta-narrative of what charter school reform is or should be, but only a framework that questioned how it came to be at a time of global economic developments and demands for a more deregulated state educational system. Our framework allowed us to examine the particularistic nature of a reform that defies universalistic definitions. It does mean, however, that our findings do not clearly state whether

or not charter school reform is "working" on a grand scale or whether or not it is, in every instance and every locality, leading to greater social stratification across broad categories of race, class, and gender (Dale, 1994). Rather, it means that we have focused on understanding how modern identities and postmodern ideologies converge and, thus, for whom charter school reform is "working," under what conditions, and on whose terms.

According to Mann (1998), postmodernity marks an end to the old frameworks of analysis that are seen as inadequate and partial. "It calls for a more sensitive approach to social divisions, social identities and diversity that does not reduce these to grander monolithic accounts or subsume them as subheadings" (p. 82). We have highlighted complex and contradictory themes that underlie charter school reform, and shown how they relate to the central paradox of postmodernity. Our purpose is to inform the broader public debate on the role of public education and the effects of certain educational reforms in a postmodern society.

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