The Politics of Educational Reform: The Alberta Charter School Experiment 20 Years Later

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the public charter school movement in the Province of Alberta, Canada over the past 20 years to determine how charter school policy and regulations have limited and controlled the impact of charter schools on public education. Specifically we focus on the extent to which charter schools in Alberta fulfilled the aims and expectations of policy reformers as sites of research and innovation, vehicles to create competition, and expanded public school choice options for parents, and to enhance student learning and outcomes. Based on a critical policy analysis and interviews with stakeholder groups we argue that charter schools in Alberta have been a controlled experiment in the introduction of quasi-markets in the public education system. The Ministry of Education created a regulatory structure permitting a limited number of charter schools to exist at any point in time, and a rigorous approval process that created sufficient pressure to leverage change in public education and expanded choice options for parents; however, the tight regulations have also prevented charter schools from fulfilling their full mandate as a vehicle of educational reform.

Keywords

charter school, Alberta, Canada, school choice, innovation, market economy, educational policy

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the public charter school movement over the past 20 years in the Province of Alberta, Canada to determine how charter school policy and regulations have limited and controlled the impact of charter schools on public education. Specifically, we focused on the extent to which charter schools in Alberta are fulfilled the aims and expectations of policy reformers as sites of research and innovation, as vehicles to create competition, as expanded public school choice options for parents, and as sites to enhance student-learning outcomes.

We argue charter schools in Alberta have been an experiment in controlled choice in which the Ministry of Education permitted the establishment of a limited number of charter school authorities (maximum of 15 at any point in time) that created sufficient pressure to

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leverage change in public education by creating competitive pressures for metropolitan school districts in response to parental demand for more choice. They also broke the monopoly of public education by permitting charter school authorities to operate outside the regulatory constraints of the public school board bureaucracy, and to hire teachers who were not members of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

We begin by positioning charter schools within the public education context in Alberta, and explain the theory, logic and expectations inherent in adopting this market-based approach to educational reform. We discuss some of the polemic debates that surround charter schools and influence the socio-political context in which charter school legislation is enacted. In the second part of the paper we take a closer look at the research, position papers and policy documents to examine the degree to which charter schools are achieving the three key aims of this approach to educational reform in Alberta: (1) expanded choice and competition, (2) student achievement, and (3) research and innovation. Drawing upon interviews with government officials and charter school leaders we discuss the strengths and limitations of charter schools as a mechanism to leverage change in public education. In the conclusion we return to a discussion of the ways charter school policy and regulations have constrained the potential of charter schools from fully realizing their policy reform mandate; however, we note that the regulatory structure has been effective in providing the impetus for metropolitan school boards to be more responsive to parental demand for expanded choice options.

Methodology

We adopted a critical policy analysis approach (Gale, 2001; Scheurich, 1994; Taylor 1997, Walton, 2010) to examine the charter school movement in Alberta and to understand the political motivations that shaped and framed the evolution of charter schools, their impact as a mechanism for system-wide educational reform, and why they have not burgeoned into a viable alternative stream within the Alberta public education system. This approach to policy analysis emphasizes the social context of policy production and takes into consideration relations of power and invested interest in defining and shaping charter school policy and regulations. Critical policy analysis examines how policy serves the interests of those who author, interpret, and challenge it as it is taken up in local contexts. It challenges the taken-for granted assumptions about constructs that inform policy, and exposes the effects of policy on the daily operations of organizations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 21). We used this methodology together with market theory (Ball, 1993; Henig, 1994)[1] to inform the content analysis of policy documents and evidence of their impact on the evolution of charter schools in Alberta. Documents included commissioned reports, stakeholder and government papers, and changes to the legislation that chronicled the evolution of the first generation of charter schools, the regulatory structure used to manage its growth, its impact on the broader education system in the province, and its limitations to effect deep change and innovation in education (Alberta Education 2010; Bosetti, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2001; Bosetti et al., 2000; Government of Alberta, 2009; 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Johnson, 2013). Semi- structured interviews were conducted with three government officials responsible for charter schools, and focus group interviews with 20 charter school leaders (principals and superintendents) were conducted to provide insight into the meaning and implications of the impact and challenges of charter schools, as well their future direction. Participants were asked to share their experiences and perspectives regarding what they perceived to be the policy agenda for the introduction of charter school legislation into the Alberta public education system, how the policy agenda for charter schools came to be defined, the factors that influenced amendments

to the regulations, and the key political and social factors that shaped the implementation of charter schools. The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed and then content analyzed for key themes. We drew upon these interviews to understand the political context for the establishment and evolution of charter schools and the interpretation of the impact of the policy documents and charter school regulations in practice.

Alberta Charter Schools: The Canadian Public Education Context

Canada is a diverse nation consisting of ten provinces and three territories. By constitutional design, each province bears sole responsibility for the delivery of education within its political boundaries. The absence of a federal ministry to oversee curriculum, standards, and policy development has resulted in little consistency between regions in terms of educational content and expectations. The public education system in Alberta[2] consists of 68 public school districts, each governed by an elected board of trustees. The Minister of Education, an elected member of the provincial cabinet, is responsible for ensuring that all school districts implement the provincially mandated program of studies for grades 1 to 12 and comply with all accountability measures as directed. Alberta is the only province in Canada with charter school legislation.

Alberta Educational Reform Agenda: Role of Charter Schools

Charter school legislation was introduced in May 1994, shortly after a national debate regarding the role of education in preparing graduates to compete in the global knowledge economy (Bosetti, 2001). In 1993 the Alberta government, concerned with the state of education in the province, commissioned a study of education reform. The report that followed, *Charter schools: Provisions for choice in public schools,* identified the absence of competition as the primary reason for the "failure of public schools to provide the level of excellence in education necessary for success in an increasingly competitive society" (cited in Ritchie, 2010, p.3).

The Ministry of Education responded with a reform package based on free market principles that included choice, competition and standards-based accountability that created institutional levers to provide "optimal environments and structural incentives to compel schools to improve" (Lubienski, 2012, p. 513). Along with the introduction of charter school legislation, the government increased funding to private schools, reduced overall funding to public education by 12%, introduced provincial standardized testing and diploma examination, consolidated school boards from 141 to 68, and required schools to establish parent-based school councils (Bruce and Schwartz, 1997). Mindzak (2015) surmised this reform agenda was possible in Alberta because a policy window was created through a combination of a general public perception of a crisis in education and a conservative government with 32 years in power, providing the conditions to introduce a neoliberal inspired reform agenda focused on cutting costs and restructuring public services.

As part of this reform agenda, charter school legislation was introduced to create "autonomous public schools that would provide innovative or enhanced means of delivering education in order to improve student learning" (Alberta Education, 2011a, p.1). They were positioned not as a competitive force, but as an "addition to the public education system" and as sites of innovation that would "complement the educational services provided by the local public system" and provide the "opportunity for successful educational practices to be recognized and adopted by other public schools for the benefit of more students" (p.1).

Only the Minister of Education has the authority to approve a charter school application in Alberta. Before assent can be given, charter

school applicants must engage in a protracted process to demonstrate that the proposed program is not of interest to the local public school board[3] and, in addition to numerous other criteria, the teaching and learning model is qualitatively different from any currently being offered through the traditional public school system, and that it demonstrates an innovative educational paradigm (Alberta Education, 2011a). In this reform agenda, charter schools have five policy aims:

• Stimulate the development of enhanced and innovative programs within the public education system;
• Provide increased opportunities for student learning within the public education system;
• Provide parents and students with greater opportunities for choice within the public education system;
• Provide teachers with a vehicle for establishing schools with enhanced and creative methods of educational instruction, school structure and management;
• Encourage the establishment of outcome-based education programs. (Alberta Education, 2011a, p.5)

While charter schools vary considerably in terms of vision and pedagogical foundation across the province, they share some common characteristics. They must provide a basic education as defined by the provincially mandated *Program of Study*; students are required to write the Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT) and Diploma Examinations; they cannot have religious affiliation, charge tuition, or discriminate in student admission in the sense they cannot turn students away as long as there is space and sufficient resources to support their learning needs (Alberta Education, 2011b).

Charter schools operate on an initial five-year performance contract, where at the end of the term an external, government appointed evaluation team reviews the school and determines if it has complied with the legal and financial requirements, demonstrated consistently strong or improving student achievement, fulfilled its stated charter objectives, and has demonstrated parental and community support (Bosetti, 2001). The evaluation team makes a recommendation to the Minister of Education who may renew the term or repeal the charter. Established charter schools with a demonstrated record of success may apply to the Minister for a 15-year term for their charter. Important to this long-term renewal is evidence that the charter school has:

a) Provided professional development opportunities related to its innovative approach to the rest of Alberta's education community,

b) Provided professional development opportunities related to its innovative approach to the rest of Alberta's education community,

c) Met or exceeded appropriate targets as set out in a student outcomes accountability framework,

d) Achieved student achievement results as good or better than overall provincial results, measured in a value-added manner,

e) Earned parental satisfaction results better than those of the province as whole, and at least as good as results for schools within public and/or separate boards offering alternative programs and/or catering to the same defined populations, and

f) Shared with the educational community their research, which evaluates the success of the innovation and identifies reasons for that success with government and educators (Alberta Education, 2009, p.3).

Like other public schools, charter schools are required to hire certified teachers, but those teachers are not permitted to be members of the Alberta Teachers' Association, the professional body responsible for collective bargaining and disciplinary issues for public school teachers in the province. Charter schools are eligible for the same per-student grants as other public schools, with the exception of equitable funding for the inclusion of students with special needs. The *Funding Manual for School Authorities – 2015-*

16 School Year (2015) defines multiple levels of funding for schools to support programs that promote quality education for all Alberta public school students, however charter schools are denied access to this resource and must allocate funds from instructional budgets to accommodate students with mild and moderate learning challenges. Funding for students with severe disabilities requires the submission of supporting documentation to Alberta Education, with approval of funding only being confirmed at the mid-point of the school year. Charter schools are ineligible for transportation grants, and are operated by a not-for-profit society or company, governed by an elected Board of Directors.

To date there are only 13 charter school authorities in Alberta, serving over 9123[4] students representing about 1% of the total provincial student population (Alberta Education, 2015). Many of the charter schools have multiple campuses and report extensive waiting lists for admission, and generally students achieve above average to excellent scores on standardized Provincial Achievement Tests. There are six charter schools in the city of Calgary representing 83% of the total charter school enrolment, three in the capital city of Edmonton representing 11% of enrolment, and the remaining 6% in the four charter schools located in smaller communities in rural areas (Alberta Education, 2011b, p.1). Recent changes to legislation indicate the government's continued commitment to charter schools as vehicles of educational reform; however, their role and purpose has shifted from infusing competition and diversification of the education market to serving as pilot sites and incubators to research and fine-tune innovative practices (Alberta Education, 2011c; 2009). Teachers, as scholar practitioners, are expected to engage with researchers in universities and polytechnic institutes to design robust investigations into effective practices that improve student success. This is a unique shift in the charter school sector and merits deliberation regarding the implications for established charter schools in Alberta in terms of providing choice for parents and educators, and their impact on the larger public education system.

Unlike the United States, where charter schools have expanded to more than six thousand schools in forty three states, including the District of Columbia, representing 6.2% of the total student enrolment in public education (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2015), charter schools in Canada have remained a tightly controlled experiment in Alberta with a maximum of 15 Charter authorities permitted by provincial regulations (Alberta Education, 2015).

Polemic Debates Around Charter Schools as Market Based Reform

Support for charter schools in Alberta has been mixed, with the tendency of both proponents and detractors to draw upon ideological arguments rather than empirical evidence to support their position (Smith, Wohlstetter, Farrell & Nafack, 2011). These polemic debates continue and define the contested terrain in which charter schools are positioned in Alberta. The following are the enduring arguments that create the parameters for these debates.

Charter schools are founded on competitive-market based principles. Advocates claim that charter schools can revitalize the public education system by injecting market forces into an "over-regulated, over-centralized public education monopoly with strong allegiance to the status quo and no institutional incentive to improve student performance" (Buechler, 1995, p.3). Liberated from the bureaucracy and regulatory constraints of traditional public boards, charter schools have the freedom to adopt innovative practices related to teaching and learning as well as organization and governance, in exchange for higher levels of accountability in meeting their charter mandate and enhancement of student learning in some measureable way (Alberta Education, 2009).

The persuasive argument put forth by choice advocates is that charter schools "are held accountable from below, by parents and students who directly experience their services and are free to choose" (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 217). The logic behind this assertion is that within the education market, charter school providers will target disaffected, marginalized students with programs to support their academic success, and parents, given a choice, will select high quality schools that reflect their family values and aspiration for their children, withdrawing them from poor performing, unresponsive schools, creating pressure on public school systems to improve the quality of education for all children (Ravitch, 2010; Wells, 2009). This will result in the "rising tide will lift all boats" effect with a public education system providing more program options to address the diverse learning needs and interests of students and preferences of parents, resulting in overall improved student outcomes and quality of education (Kolderie, 2004; Nathan, 1996; Ravitch, 2010; Smith, 2001; Wells, 2009).

Critics of school choice and market based reform reject charter schools as a move towards the commodification of education and the privatization of the public good, and raise concerns regarding equality of opportunity. They argue charter schools drain public resources away from traditional public schools and create a segregated, multi-tiered education system, skimming away the highly motivated and academically capable students, leaving the lower achievers, special needs, and minority students in their neighbourhood public school (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2011; Bosetti, 2000; Kachur, 1999).

Governments and policy makers step away from their responsibility for, and consequences of the choices provided and consumed, while maintaining control of the educational agenda through performance indicators, the mandated core curriculum, and formula funding. Debates regarding the goals of schooling are played out at the local level through the competitive effects of school choice initiatives, rather than through political discourse in the public sphere (Bosetti, 2000). Critics maintain that it is unreasonable to hold parents who advocate on behalf of their children responsible for the education system's failure to address issues of equity and diversity. They argue school choice in an educational market is not a substitute for government intervention through public policy that ensures the learning needs of all children are addressed (Kachur, 1999).

In the next section of the paper we take a closer look at the degree to which charter schools are achieving the stated policy aims of innovation, competition, expanded choice options, and enhanced student achievement.

Innovation and Competition: Conceptual Concerns

There are a number of conceptual concerns that need to be acknowledged to make sense of the impact of Alberta charter schools in terms of being a vehicle for innovation and competition. There appears to be an implied causal connection made by policy makers between structural reform, such as the introduction of charter schools and the creation of competitive education markets, and innovation in classroom practice that will lead to improvement in student learning. That is, the belief that market competition will stimulate diversification of programs offered by schools of choice, and these programs will be innovative and have a positive impact on student learning. A charter school director comments,

> I think the idea is that charter schools will address underserved populations and provide choice and competition in a public environment and improve student outcomes.... now we've got all these little laboratories, all of these little pilot projects who have been around for 10 or 20 years. What can we learn from them? What can regular public [school] systems and other provinces learn from them? It

> is easy to say we want research, but what does that mean? Who does it and funds it? We want to know about their innovation and success, but who defines what is innovative?

Policy makers assume that parents are seeking innovative practices, when according to some Alberta charter school superintendents, what motivates parent's choice of schools may be the desire for a more traditional approach to education with a focus on direct instruction and basics, or a sense of community to be with like-minded individuals with shared values regarding educational opportunities and experiences for their children (Bosetti, Foulkes, O'Reilly & Sande, 2000; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000). Not all innovations are popular with parents and educators, particularly pedagogical innovations, which provides justification for some innovations to reside in schools of choice (Loveless & Field, 2009). Furthermore, some see that "the job of charter schools is to satisfy their customers, not to demonstrate to outside analysts that they have devised something never before observed in this galaxy" (Finn, Manno & Vanourekm 2001, p.91). A charter school parent and director stated, "I think choice is the number one driver for creating charter schools. Charter schools served our families by giving access to unique programs not available elsewhere. I don't see research and innovation as the number one priority for parents." The superintendent of a charter school offering a traditional approach to education echoed this sentiment: "I don't ascribe to the need for charter schools to be beacons of research and innovation. Charter schools need to be beacons of choice. We are de facto research experiments." Given these assumptions, the construct of innovation and conditions that foster innovation merits consideration.

Schlechty (2009) identified disruptive innovations as those "that are incongruent with existing social systems and therefore require fundamental changes in these systems if the innovation is to be properly installed and sustained" (p. 27). Charter schools are promoted as sites of disruptive innovation, with the potential to serve as laboratories to document and research how these innovations have an impact on the improvement of student learning. Drawing upon the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Ministry of Education considers four types of innovation: product, process, organizational or marketing. In the context of the education sector,

> a product innovation can be a new or significantly improved curriculum or a new educational software or resources; a process innovation can be a new or significantly improved way of teaching; an organization innovation maybe a new way of collaboration between teachers, or organizational changes in the administrative arena, and, a marketing innovation can be a new way of promoting the innovation or a new strategy to recruit/maintain students (Alberta Education, 2011b, p.2).

Regulations governing the operation of Alberta charter schools define these innovations as "creative approaches to educational instruction, school structure and management" (Alberta Education, 2011a, p. 2).

A significant challenge in promoting charter schools as sites of educational innovation is that the core concept of innovation is nebulous, subjective and derives meaning from local context (Lubienski, 2003). The primary meaning of innovation is that something must be original or new to be innovative. Therefore, pre-existing ideas or practices may be combined as part of a charter mandate and introduced into a context where it is experienced as new or different. Lubienski (2012) argued, this subjective focus on innovation can dilute the larger push for producing new approaches to teaching and learning by "confusing the diffusion of practices

with the creation of new ones "(p. 151). Change alone is not innovation (Daft and Becker, 1978), and as one charter school superintendent pointed out "not all improvement is innovative and not all innovation results in improvement" particularly when related to student learning. Policy makers want charter schools to be innovative (provide something new), provide a diversification of program options (different) and improve student learning; however, the interpretation of new or different is context specific.

The Alberta charter school regulations accommodate this distinction in the policy goals where the expectation of the educational services offered by charter schools "will be different from what is locally available, provide enhanced or innovative delivery of public education to students, broaden the range of educational opportunities and enhance student learning" (Alberta Education, 2011a, p.1). Enhanced student success, according to a Ministerial order issued in May 2013, means "engaged learning and ethical citizenship with an entrepreneurial spirit" (p. 2). These criteria lean toward diversification of program offerings by providing something new or different as defined by the local context, rather than innovation in terms of novel or original, or defined as measurable improvement in student outcomes.

Innovation and Competition: Operational Concerns

In terms of an agenda for educational reform, this broad mandate for Alberta charter schools, together with a restrictive regulatory framework, limits their potential to foster significant innovation and sufficient competition that could affect improvement in student learning. In terms of competition, with the current limit of only 15 charter school authorities in the province, it is unlikely they will create sufficient competitive market pressure to improve performance of school districts in terms of efficiency and effectiveness as evidenced by improved student learning. School district policy and leadership are factors in how a school board will respond to market pressures and adoption of innovative practices. Some school boards are committed to the common comprehensive school in which the needs of learners can be accommodated in an inclusive setting, while others are responsive to provisions for choice.

For example, in 1974 the Edmonton Public School Board advocated school choice in their mission to ensure that all students achieve success in their individual programs of study, and adopted an open boundary attendance policy. In 2006 they reported "49% of elementary students, 54% of junior high students and 56% of senior high students attending schools other than their designated neighbourhood school" (Maguire, 2006, p.20). There are only three charter schools in the Edmonton area. In contrast, Calgary has six charter school authorities and enrolls 83% of all charter school students; the remaining four charter schools are in rural or semi-rural communities (Ritchie, 2010).

Innovation and competition is further constrained through the charter approval process. Those seeking to establish a charter school are required to first approach their local school board to have their application considered as an alternative program of choice in accordance with Section 21 of the School Act (Alberta Education, 2011a). The local school board is charged with the responsibility of reviewing the proposal to determine if such a program already exists in their board, or if the concept proposed should be considered as an alternative program. If the board decides to refuse the proposal, the charter school applicants can appeal to the Minister of Education for authorization. Charter school applicants in effect do the work of local school boards in identifying an unmet need, designing a program in response to that need, and demonstrating sufficient parental support for the proposal. The local board may accept and

implement the proposal as an alternative program or reject it. Charter school applicants seldom desire to have their proposal authorized as an alternative program that would operate within the constraints of the bureaucratic structure and regulations of the local school board and the provincial teachers' union. Applicants are motivated to include in their proposals innovations in school organization, structure or administration that contravene public school board policy; thereby making it impossible for the local board to approve the proposal as an alternative program,. For example, some charter schools have adopted forms of merit pay, parent and student voice in teacher evaluation, employment of professionals to complement teaching specialized programs, school uniforms and partnerships with organizations for school facilities. These are forms of innovations that change established practices in how schools are managed, organized and use their resources; however, their impact is localized and likely not sufficient to have a positive effect on the broader public education system, nor to affect classroom practices to improve learning and the quality of education for all students.

Recent research (Butterfield, 2013; Linick & Lubienski, 2013) highlights a variety of factors that affect a school district's ability to respond to competitive pressures. These include local school district policy in provision for choice, the level of information and support for parents to help them to select schools, incentives for teachers to engage in and adopt innovative practices in their classroom, and the perspective of district leaders regarding the merit of innovative practices and their willingness to respond to market pressures.

School board leaders are more likely to respond to potential competitive pressure generated by charter school proposals they perceive as high quality, and that generate sufficient demand from parents to warrant action. As discussed previously, in the case of Alberta charter schools, school boards have a number of options in how they respond to proposals. They can work together with the charter applicants to accommodate the proposal as an alternative program in their board, as has been the case with Edmonton Public School Board. The Calgary Board of Education has taken a different approach, rejecting most applications and establishing their own alternative programs in direct competition with charter schools in the region. Not all charter school proposals pose sufficient competition to the public school system; they are niche schools, or represent a program that the local board does not have the capacity or motivation to accommodate. In some cases public charter schools serve as an outlet to address the needs of hard to educate students and disruptive parents in the public education system (Bosetti et al., 2000; Ritchie, 2010).

Adoption of Charter School Innovations

The dissemination and adoption of innovative practices fostered in charter schools has a number of challenges. While charter schools have a mandate to share successful innovations and practices with public schools for the benefit of all students, this requirement poses a challenge in a competitive market-based system, where these innovative practices may be *the* defining characteristic of a charter school that attracts students.

Competitive pressures aside, consideration needs to be given as to whether these pockets of innovation and success can be scaled up and replicated in other school settings. Charter school programs and success may be attributed to a number of factors such as the particular student population or community they serve, the personalities of the teachers and leaders, the school culture or the quality of instruction and resources. Therefore, the pedagogical models, and innovative practices may not be easily transferrable to comprehensive public schools, nor reflect the

values and mission of the district. Ravitch (2010) concluded schools are not very good at replicating the success of model charter or regular public schools. While "schools can improve and learn from one another," real school improvements "occur incrementally, as a result of sustained effort over years" (p. 137).

Alberta charter school leaders report numerous attempts to invite public school educators into collaborative relationships.[5] While there has been some reciprocal professional learning between charter schools and metropolitan school boards, charter school leaders report that at a system level there is lingering reluctance on the part of larger systems to engage in collaborative partnerships with charter schools. As one charter school administrator observed, "the lack of favourable response to our overtures to collaborate early in the school's history has resulted in the staff no longer seeking those opportunities and becoming increasingly insular in their practice."

Berends, Goldring, Stein and Carvens, (2010) argue the highly institutionalized and bureaucratic nature of the public school sector hinders significant changes in instruction and innovative reform, making scale up unlikely. Interest groups such as teacher unions, school boards, administrators and other beneficiaries have a vested interest in the institutional status quo (Chubb & Moe, 1990). The Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association (2011) do not support public charter schools, and create barriers for charter schools by denying them access to, or membership in, their professional association and networks.[6] This limits the capacity of charter schools to fulfill their mandate to share innovations and build constructive relationships to benefit public education and improve the quality of education for all students.

The Alberta Association of Public Charter Schools (TAAPCS) has created opportunities for charter schools to collaborate and share their practices among those in this sector. Charter school superintendents as members of the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) attend zone meetings and engage in professional development activities with other public school superintendents in the province. Extending from research of charter school leadership practices, Butterfield (2013) argued that as the major authorizer of charter schools, it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education to create a framework and mechanism for facilitating the diffusion and sharing of innovative practices among educators across the public system, in keeping with the vision of developing engaged learners and ethical citizens with entrepreneurial spirits.

Charter school leaders identified a variety of political mechanisms local school boards employ to create significant barriers to the success of charter schools. Among the most predominant challenges facing charter school authorities is access to adequate facilities that meet the needs of their unique programs and that are centrally located to provide reasonable access to families being served. As facility allocation is a joint responsibility of the Alberta government and local school boards, considerable tension emerges when charter schools submit facility requests that will require a board to relinquish an under-utilized building. Often the facilities offered are old and out-dated, requiring significant renovation and maintenance. The location may not be ideally suited to support the mandate of the charter (e.g. science or performing arts facilities), or be located in neighbourhoods parents would deem as safe. Some charter schools have been successful in leasing facilities from community-based organizations and foundations, while others must use resources to renovate the space made available through school boards.[7]

Public school boards marginalize students and teachers in charter schools by not permitting them to participate in professional development activities, sports leagues, science fairs, and other extra-curricular activities. In effect, these strategies serve to marginalize charter schools in the public education system,

rendering them islands of practice rather than beacons of change; thereby limiting their capacity to achieve their full mandate (Gereluk, Kowch & Thompson, 2014). A charter school administrator explains,

> There is no process for collaboration [with the traditional public school system], no system-to-system relations. We are not part of provincial specialist councils, or big conferences and we are not supported by the ATA [the Alberta Teachers' Association]. In many ways we are kept separate from the sharing that takes place. If we could connect [with the public school system] we would gain a better understanding of how to influence positive change and share effective practices.

Research and Innovation

In 2010 the Government of Alberta released the *Inspiring Education* framework that outlined a new agenda for education reform and a shift in the mandate for second-generation charter schools as incubators for research and innovation. This new agenda shifted the focus away from system level reform to a focus on activities that promote learning at the school level through research informed innovation in teaching and learning, core competencies and accountability for learning excellence (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 34). The significance of research and innovation is emphasized in the following statement:

> Research and innovation will be encouraged and supported as part of a strong education system. Education research is integral to all parts of the education system, and all stakeholders will need to collaborate to conduct, interpret and apply research findings. Research partnerships will identify and expand our existing knowledge base regarding how students learn and how to facilitate the most appropriate learning environment (Alberta Education, 2011b, p.2).

Alberta Education envisions charter schools working in collaboration with post-secondary institutions to inform different approaches to pre-service teacher education, and testing of these ideas to improve student success. Charter schools would become catalysts for critical thinking about education, and have increased responsibility for disseminating effective education practices. Charter school teachers and administrators could play a significant role in the professional development of educators in the broader public education system and offer the opportunity for extended visits for observation or practice. Parents and teachers would choose these schools because they are interested in being part of these laboratory schools and subjects of research (Alberta Education, 2009).

While improving student success is the core mandate of charter schools, the focus on the classroom instructional practices and pedagogy that informs improvement in student learning was not highlighted in this revised vision. This lack of specificity may perpetuate innovation related to governance, finance and organization rather than instructional strategies and theoretical approaches to teaching and learning that could be tested, fine-tuned and shared with other educators. Alberta Education framed research and innovation in the following:

> Each charter could define the scope of the ideas to be explored and the scope of the foundational requirements in basic education, such as alternative forms of the programs of study, different approaches to staffing, other ways to evaluate student success and alternative funding models (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 2).

It is noteworthy that this vision for the second generation of charter schools as incubators of innovation and sites of research is not entirely new. In 1896 John Dewey, as a professor at the University of Chicago,

established the University Elementary School that became the Laboratory School in 1902. He envisioned the school "as a scientific 'laboratory' staffed with college trained teachers and devoted to research, experiment, and educational innovation" (Knoll, 2014, p. 455). The school was designed to conduct research on education methods centered on the child and experiential learning as an alternative to the traditional methods of drill and memorization. The Laboratory School initiated the laboratory movement for teacher preparation and educational research in the USA (Jackson, 1990) and in Canada. It is not uncommon for faculties of education to have laboratory or demonstration schools in the public education system as settings for pre-service teachers to observe how theory and innovative practice are combined to create effective approaches to teaching and learning.

Charter schools may not be the silver bullet for education reform, but as designated sites of research, and incubators of innovation they can provide a home for researching effective practices. Given the long history of first generation charter schools that were established as schools of choice for parents, there will be resistance from some of these communities to this new research mandate. An administrator of a charter school that has been engaged in research with a local university commented on their experience: "it felt like research was being done to us rather than walking hand-in-hand with us to inquiry into our practice. We do not want to fall into being the guinea pig."

While charter schools have become fixtures in the public education landscape, it will take time and concerted effort to break the barriers to collaboration with the regular public education system and to shift perception among public school educators, leaders and related professional association groups that charter schools have a viable role as incubators for innovation. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2011) argues there is no evidence that charter schools have been leaders in research or have much to teach public schools. They state, "it is unclear to what extent educational approaches that might succeed in the hothouse environment of a charter school would survive in the real world of public education, where classrooms are increasingly diverse and where schools do not have the luxury of teaching only the students they select" (para. 8). They conclude that providing additional funding to charter schools for educational research, while cutting the funding available to public schools through the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI), a program that supported innovation through professional development and school based action, "ultimately diminishes the ability of the entire public education system to achieve ongoing improvement and transformation" (para. 8-9). For charter schools to become a lighthouse of research and innovation for public education will require significant support from the Ministry of Education to ensure they engage in robust research and have opportunities for collaboration with the regular public system.

Student Achievement

There is little conclusive evidence from studies conducted in the United States that charter schools are boosting academic achievement in a significant or sustained manner (Berends et al., 2010; Loveless& Field, 2009; Lubienski, 2012; Smith et al., 2011). In part, this is attributed to problems in robust research design, determining the appropriate comparative group with which to compare charter school outcomes, and whether student achievement can be attributed to innovative teaching practices, student selection, the culture of the school, or a combination of factors. In their review of research on U.S. charter schools, Loveless and Field (2009) revealed a large divide between advocates and critics of charter schools, with some researchers indicating positive effect, and some indicating negative effect. They concluded, "no matter where the evidence on charter school achievement eventually settles—positive or

negative--the effect will probably not be large" (p.111). They argued that the real debate about charter schools is ideological and "the empirical evidence on charter schools has not yet settled the theoretical arguments about their existence" (p. 112). Ravitch (2010) contended "the enthusiasm for charter schools far outstripped research evidence for their efficacy" (p. 143).

There have been few conclusive studies examining the effects of Alberta charter schools on student achievement. In 2006 the Ministry of Education completed a study of the impact of charter schools.[8] The results were used to inform a government concept paper in which they drew upon the major findings of the study to discuss their vision for the second generation of charter schools. With regard to student learning they stated, "overall, charter schools appear to have provided enhanced student learning outcomes as compared to similar schools and similar students enrolled in other jurisdiction types" (Alberta Education, 2009, p.1).

In a study commissioned by the Canada West Foundation, Ritchie (2010) discussed the findings of the government charter school impact study and the challenges of comparing the achievement of students in public charter schools that cater to certain kinds of students, with student in the regular public school system. The government study used charter school student achievement on the grade 3, 6 and 9 Provincial Achievement Tests (PAT), and compared them with control schools[9] in the regular public and separate (Catholic) schools in the district in which the charter school was located. The findings indicated that statistically, charter school students performed to an equivalent level or better than students in other schools, "however, there was considerable diversity in student achievement among charter schools" (p.15). For example, students in charter schools that catered to at-risk-youth and English Language Learners scored lower than students in charter schools for academically gifted. In the grade 6 PATs in language arts, charter school students scored significantly better than students in control schools, while there was no significant difference in performance in mathematics. Using the same process for grade 9 PATs, they found charter school students scored significantly better in mathematics and language arts than their control group (p. 16). The charter school impact study concluded, "over a six-year period, these charter schools added significantly more value to their entering Grade 3 students than did the schools into which the control students enrolled" (cited in Ritchie, 2010, p. 16).

Johnson (2013) identified Alberta's best schools using student results on Provincial Achievement Tests in math, reading, science and social studies in grades 3, 6 and 9. In his analysis he compared students from public, private and charter schools where he controlled for observed student background (socio economic status). He categorized "good" schools as those where principals, teachers and staff were making a noticeably positive difference to student performance (p.1). His study of 800 schools revealed a disproportionate number of private and charter schools ranking in the upper echelons, and the gap between charter schools and all other schools as large and consistent across all three grades (p. 9). He reasoned this discrepancy may be attributed to charter schools selecting the best students and rejecting weaker applicants, hiring stronger teachers, and alignment of their mandates to the interests of families, and teachers who choose to work in these schools, thereby producing better results (p.9).

Conclusion

It can be argued that charter schools have been a remarkable experiment in controlled choice in Alberta and have gained their place as a permanent fixture on the public school landscape. With legislation permitting only 15 charter school authorities to operate at one time (though some have up to seven campuses), and an authorization process that requires applicants

to first approach local school boards to have their charter considered as an alternative program within their board, the Ministry of Education retains control over this quasi education market. These limiting factors have created enough pressure for local boards to be more responsive to parent demand and provide expanded school choice options in their districts. The limit on the number of charter schools has prevented them from gaining a critical mass sufficient to becoming a viable alternative stream within the public education system, or to providing a wide breadth of school-based innovative practices. That said, charter schools serve niche populations and offer a variety of educational approaches in novel combinations (differentiated instruction, inquiry-based learning, individual program plans, English language instruction); pedagogical orientations (Suzuki method, Aboriginal perspectives); and specialist focused programs (arts-based, science focused, traditional learning). They also provide programs for students under-served in the local public education system (gifted students, at-risk-youth, second language learners, and girls).

Perhaps the key success of charter schools is in providing choice for parents, where like-minded individuals have the opportunity to come together in a common purpose, providing an educational experience for children guided by a clearly articulated framework, as defined by the charter (Bosetti, 2000; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000). In many cases charter school pioneers have "united in a voluntary association as a defense against what they perceive to be the tyranny of the unresponsive bureaucratic structure of public education and desire for a direct voice in how schools are run" (Bosetti, 2000, p.180). They are bound by their perceptions of shared interests and mutual goals embodied in their active choice of schools (Smrekar, 1996). This is reflected in high levels of parental satisfaction and steady demand for enrolment as evidenced by long waiting lists for some charter schools (Alberta Education, 2011b; Bosetti et al., 2000).

Through the charter evaluation and renewal process some charter schools have undergone a subtle metamorphosis over time, increasing their focus on research-informed pedagogy and innovative teaching and learning practices (Baydala, Rasmussen, Bisanz, Kennedy, Weigum, & Worrell, 2009; Pearce, Crowe, Letendre, Letendre, & Baydala, 2005; Roessingh, 2012). However, U.S. researchers caution, innovation generated by competitive forces is often focused at a level or in areas least likely to improve equitable access to quality education, (Linick & Lubienski, 2012; Smith, Wohlstetter, Farrell & Nafack, 2011). What is significant in the Alberta context is the nature of the innovation or change that charter schools provide (structural, operational or pedagogical) and whether that change can be scaled up and adopted in the regular public school context, or if it is most effective taken up in a school of choice that appeals to niche populations.

Charter schools, decoupled from market ideology, have a role in fostering innovative teaching practices and contributing significantly to the body of knowledge on teaching, learning, and leadership. In order to actualize this potential, charter school teachers, administrators, and directors require adequate government funding and support to engage in school-based action research and nurture sustainable partnerships with post-secondary institutions. A charter school superintendent argued they would benefit from a co-constructed "framework, developed by educational partners, with leadership from the [Ministry of Education] to support the research mandate." Charter schools adequately funded to engage in research could serve to inform exemplary teaching practices that enhance student success and foster meaningful, evidence-based professional learning for teachers (Butterfield, 2013). The deeper understanding of teaching and learning that would emerge from these collaborative efforts would be determined within the parameters of each public charter school, bearing in mind the contextual variables that

define the uniqueness and 'niche market' for which each school is designed.

Elected officials and government managers need to coordinate purposeful, collaborative professional learning that draws together teachers, school leaders, directors, and parents from across the spectrum of public education, including separate school districts and charter authorities. With a singular objective of enhancing student success and providing opportunities for all students to thrive as ethical citizens and engaged learners with an entrepreneurial spirit, Alberta charter schools may yet fulfill a dual mandate as schools of choice and centers of educational research and innovation.

Notes

1. Market theory proposes that competition compels schools to become more efficient, differentiated, oriented towards academic quality, and consumer-driven in order to survive.
2. Alberta is a province in Canada with a population of approximately 3 million people. The largest urban centers are Edmonton, the capital city, and Calgary, an economic hub for the oil and gas industry.
3. Charter school applicants must first apply to the local school board to be considered as an alternative program. Only if the board rejects the proposal can the applicants then apply to the minister for approval.
4. This is based on 2014/15 enrolment data as reported in a personal correspondence with the Director of Field Services, Alberta Education, July 10, 2015.
5. Focus group interviews with charter school principals and superintendents, February 2015.
6. Focus group interviews with charter school principals and superintendents, February 2015
7. Focus group interviews with charter school principals and superintendents, February 2015
8. Alberta Education did not release the results of the Charter School Impact Study CSIS), but reported on the findings in their concept paper.
9. Ritchie (2010) reported the control schools used in the Charter School Impact Study were "public or separate schools in the same district with the same, or very close, scores on grade 3 PATs to the charter school. The purpose of the test was to see how charter students compared to academically equivalent achievers in differ schools in order to assess the 'school factor" (p.15).

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