

Justice, Pluralism, and School Choice: A Response to Ray Owens

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RESPONDING TO MR. OWENS' ESSAY, I FIND MYSELF IN A RATHER ODD POSITION. THE peculiarity of the situation grows from the fact that there is very little in his essay with which to disagree. His theological exposition, analysis of the racist history of common schooling, condemnation of school funding practices, and well articulated "general policy directives" contain little with which to disagree. I must nevertheless oppose his views on school choice initiatives and—interestingly enough—do so under the same rubric as several of his suppositions and arguments. Hence, it is perplexing that we can agree on so much and yet take this underlying agreement in such disparate public policy directions relative to educational vouchers and charter schools.¹

AREAS OF AGREEMENT AND SUPPORT

Mr. Owens is correct in calling the current inequalities in public education both a moral and a theological problem, in addition to a social problem. The unequal and unjust distribution of opportunity and education has underlying values that do not reflect a Christian concept of personhood, an ethical concept of personhood, or a Christian understanding of society and community. In this vein, Mr. Owens' use of Martin Luther King, Jr., as a

¹ It should be noted that my son attends a charter school. Several factors contributed to this decision, including greater diversity in the student body, abundant parental interest and involvement rates, smaller class sizes, innovative programs, and a focused curriculum around science, math, and ecology.

theological, ethical, and political resource is profound, enlightening, and appropriate.

Moreover, I find supporting and complementary thought from one of my primary theological influences, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Complementary to King, Bonhoeffer does not attempt to identify the image of God with any relation in-and-of-ourselves to God's being; rather, the image of God consists in the relationship of human beings to God and hence to one another. Our humanity and reflection of God's image is truly to be found in interrelationship (Bonhoeffer 1997:64f.).

This Christian concept of personhood has moral implications for the ethical concept of personhood. Because the image of God is in relationship, Bonhoeffer posits, "the ethical concept of the person is a definition based on ethical-social interaction" (Bonhoeffer 1998:50). Indeed, Bonhoeffer goes so far as to say that "the person exists always and only in ethical responsibility" (Bonhoeffer 1998:48). From and with God, we are "freed for the other," and called to express our Christian faith in community and solidarity with others.

Mr. Owens is also accurate in pointing out the tremendous inequality of American public education. Our public schools are failing to meet the needs of those whose needs are greatest. Our current (unjust) system of school financing means that "money shapes the student composition of most public schools, not because the schools' services are free but because one may have to pay an often substantial premium (in the form of investment in real estate) to join the community that a desired school restrictively serves. Family wealth thus controls access to 'public schools'" (Sizer 1997:35). This situation results in schools that are profoundly segregated by social class, race, and ethnicity.

Benjamin Barber gives sad, yet poetic emphasis to Mr. Owens' point when he writes:

It is easy enough to explain the continuing assault on America's children that passes as education policy nowadays: kids are politically invisible—without significant power—and their public schools are no longer regarded as "ours" because they are predominantly nonwhite, peopled by the "invisible children" of the Invisible Man. Even so, putting the moral issue aside, it is hard to comprehend how a tough-minded, realist nation can be so short sighted. The alternatives to focusing on schools are so much more costly—and grim (Barber 1997:21).

There is also, however, another persistent problem within the history of the American common school movement that—I believe—should also be brought forward in this forum—particularly because it helped influence my decision to provide limited support to various school choice initiatives. Though it is certainly no longer the case that public education seeks to, in the words of eighteenth-century common school advocate Benjamin Rush, “convert men into republican machines,” by “render[ing] the mass of people more homogeneous” (Rush 1965:17–18), we must nevertheless recognize that many “public schools” continue to devalue cultural differences and seek to assimilate students as quickly as possible into “American” culture. Again, though not as serious today as in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American public education retains a narrow view of multiculturalism, relying heavily on a prevailing Euro-American, Protestant worldview.

Due to many of the factors discussed in Mr. Owens’ paper, it is fallacious to assume that government-run schools are more integrated racially, culturally, and socio-economically than many private and religious institutions; and, it is certainly difficult to maintain that government-run schools nurture cultural differences more than many private institutions or charter schools. The English-only initiatives found in California and Texas offer only one example of a continuing assimilationist attitude in public education.

Charter schools can provide flexible learning environments tied to the community that avoids the assimilationist attitude of many traditional public schools. For example, in my son’s school district, the Eastside Multicultural Charter School of Tampa Bay uses a multicultural curriculum to teach students from low-income families. Opened in 1997, it was envisioned by three church members who wanted to find a better way to educate local children. It has recently received a five- to fifteen-year charter renewal due to its success.

AREAS OF DISAGREEMENT AND DIFFERENCE

Our current system of education sounds every alarm of injustice. Contrary to Mr. Owens, the demand that any system of education be just provides rationale for embracing a limited system of vouchers and choice. As Peter Paris astutely notes, usually the sufferers of injustice break the silence with their voices and disturb our peace. He notes further that those who make these claims on us “alone are the bearers of constructive social change. . . .

Their demands are always empirically based, and they struggle for dignity and freedom” (Paris 1988:120–21).

By far the most compelling evidence in favor of school choice initiatives is the failure of traditional public schools to provide low-income citizens with the intellectual and civic tools needed for a decent life. It was the clamor of injustice and the vocal support of many low-income families for vouchers, charter schools, or public school choice that caused me to reconsider my initial strong objections to these programs.

Currently, minority families are the strongest supporters of charter schools and voucher programs and, according to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies—a Washington-based think tank devoted to black issues—this support continues to grow. Surprisingly, a full 85 percent of minorities surveyed support school vouchers. There is also a significant and growing bipartisan group of minority community leaders, educators, and politicians who are becoming outspoken advocates for the cause of school vouchers.

To be clear, there is certainly not a consensus on this issue in any minority community. Many people in (especially) the black community believe that vouchers are “exploitative,” or that vouchers are little more than “a concept of exclusion and selective opportunity” (Kweisi Mfume). Linda Darling-Hammond, whose work on this issue I respect greatly, is a vocal opponent of school vouchers, calling them “a smokescreen to avoid tackling the real equity issue” (Hammond 1996:1).

Nevertheless, I found far more well articulated minority support than dissent. When people like Howard Fuller—the black former superintendent of Milwaukee’s *public* schools—stand against the teachers’ unions and turn the class issue back onto the left, school choice proponents can no longer responsibly be portrayed as radicals. Fuller, speaking of former President Clinton’s opposition to the Washington, D.C., voucher program, joined a growing chorus and pulled no punches when he said, “It’s about giving poor people choices, the choices that people with money can make every day. Bill Clinton can decide to send Chelsea to private schools because he has the money. And then he says to the poor parents in Washington—who are stuck with the same schools he wouldn’t send his daughter to—that they have no way out” (Freedman 1997:3).

Though in no way wanting to co-opt Dr. King’s views for this argument, when reading Mr. Owens’ discussion of freedom and destiny, I was struck that the freedom to select a school that is in the child’s best interest is a pow-

erful way of preventing destiny from becoming determinism—or fatalism. As one parent of a school voucher student said, “I was tired of being taken advantage of by public schools and tired of having the door closed in my face. Kids and families are now viewed as consumers.”²

Mr. Owens overstates his case when he argues that suggestions from school choice proponents that choice schools might positively effect other public schools “is, at best, misguided and, at worst, deliberately deceptive.” Though insufficient empirical data exist to state with certainty whether school choice initiatives improve student achievement, or whether voucher and charter school programs increase stratification and segregation, two well-documented aspects of the Milwaukee voucher program warrant specific attention.

First, parental and student approval ratings are very high. The majority of parents surveyed indicated that they are largely unconcerned with the outcome of the empirical studies and are highly satisfied with the program that exists. From the perspective of many of Milwaukee’s low-income participants, the burden of proof now rests on those who oppose the voucher plan.

Second, voucher proponents, critics, and public school administrators alike recognize and acknowledge that Milwaukee’s traditional public schools are improving. After the school choice program was expanded by the Wisconsin legislature in 1995, the Milwaukee school district instituted a number of reform measures, including implementation of new graduation standards, opening seven new “innovative schools,” closing ten of the worst-performing public schools and reopening them with new principals and staffs, and loosening the central bureaucracy—returning more power to the local principles, teachers, and schools. Moreover, study has shown that public school districts that include charter schools have changed educational offerings to meet the needs of the community and have increased their public relations.

Clearly, general agreement that Milwaukee’s public schools are improving does not demonstrate a necessary cause and effect relationship between school vouchers and public school performance. At the very least, however, such statistics do challenge the notion that school choice will necessarily

² Quoted in “Milwaukee’s Voucher Grade is Unclear,” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 20, 1998.

harm traditional public schools or that suggesting a positive correlation is necessarily “misguided” or “deceptive.”

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Depending on one’s point of view, I am either weighted down or lifted up by the theological and political realism of Reinhold Niebuhr—by the “limits and possibilities” of history and our current times. In many ways, this response to Mr. Owens’ position has a pragmatic intent. Even before the events of September 11, funding for issues such as education, urban renewal, and opportunity programs was meager. After September 11, the situation will grow increasingly worse. In my home state of Florida, the local National Public Radio station recently reported that “even classroom spending will not be spared the budget knife in 2002.” There is increasing agreement that American monetary assistance for domestic and international support of programs for low-income and poor communities and countries is likely to take a hit because of the slowing economy, reduced tax revenues, and monies that will be redirected towards security measures.

Unfortunately, the latent, though persistent, class and racial bias that permeates American public policy and American political life will mean that those whom William Julius Wilson calls the “truly disadvantaged” will be at the greatest risk. As I have indicated elsewhere, the unjust relationship of money and political influence in our country will mean that we will increasingly have to address the issue of public schools on multiple fronts. I wholeheartedly support a continuing and unrelenting focus on the systemic issues identified by Mr. Owens, particularly the inequity of public school funding and the underlying taint of racist reinforcement.

At the same time, we need to be pragmatic and work to seize the opportunities of the current political landscape. School choice programs, decentralization, school restructuring—all of these are areas that can help or hinder progress in educational reform. Standing as a bulwark against such programs is unlikely to produce any sustained benefits. Neither should we throw our uncritical support behind a massive, unproven restructuring of our public schools towards a “market mindset.” Rather, charter schools and school vouchers offer one form of viable progress in educational equity, which should not be dismissed at the outset, but rather explored to their full potential.

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