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Voice, Choice and Power:  
Contested Spaces in Charter Schools  
by

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this research project was to examine the discourse of “choice” in the Alberta charter school movement.

Interviews with parents, teachers, administrators, and charter board members were conducted. In addition, data were also collected from current media articles, legislative debate, and other relevant literature. An interpretive mode of inquiry was used to analyse emerging themes and issues.

The study found that embedded in the language of “choice”, charter schools may face numerous obstacles as a result of the ambiguity in the term. The experiences of each interest group or “stakeholder” that I interviewed may have a varying concept of how “choice” is realised in practice. At times, these goals may be contradictory. Consequently, charter schools may have difficulty to provide a unified direction.

Based on the participants’ experiences, this study recommends that efforts be utilised to improve the present public education system (Connell, 1993; Molnar, 1996).

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE JOURNEY

#### 1.1 Search for Understanding

*Language must serve the individual, in a fundamental way, in the exploration and discovery of himself [sic] and his world; and it must also serve the individual by relating and connecting him to others, in dialogue, discussion, and communication.*

(Miller, 1972, pg. 123)

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I attended the public education school system. I enrolled in a string music program, learned two languages, and participated in academic challenge programmes. I continued my studies in post-secondary education and went on to become a teacher in the public school system, teaching Ukrainian to kindergarten children in a bilingual program and elementary music. I participated in the school's extracurricular music and sports programmes with the goal that students could enjoy the same opportunities that I had when I was a student.

I found that working with children was both challenging and rewarding. Although I received many accolades from parents and colleagues for my enthusiastic approach to teaching and my care toward each student, I did not leave teaching with pleasant memories. I had been caught in the crossfire between parents and staff in the pursuit for power over the operation and management of the school. As a result, I left feeling vulnerable and unsupported by the school administration and the local school board.

While I recognize that parental involvement is often considered an integral element to student success in schools, I question whether parental input can overstep the boundary of being supportive of teachers and the school, and become intrusive to the staff and even



threatening to the work environment. Unfortunately, for me and the staff at the elementary school, it seemed that this boundary was frequently crossed. The parents played an active role within the school. They operated bingos and casinos to raise funds for the bilingual language program. On a yearly basis, they would conduct fund raising activities, generating between \$50,000 to \$100,000 for the school, and more specifically for the bilingual program. However, this money came with a price. In exchange for the substantial financial support the school received, parents also wanted a commensurate amount of power. The school's administration had little choice in the matter as substantial funds were offered to the school during a time of significant funding cuts.

These parents had high expectations for their children. Children commuted long distances to receive second language instruction, and consequently parents wanted a "good return" for their educational investment. Often, they lobbied for extracurricular activities in addition to those already offered in the school. Teachers were asked to provide monthly, weekly, and sometimes even daily assessments to the parents so that they could track their children's progress. Parents were often present in classrooms, volunteering in various ways and becoming involved in the instruction of the pupils. They seemed to believe that they had broad powers over the methods and composition of instruction: they would hold numerous cultural and religious gatherings during school hours, despite opposition from teachers who worried about the amount of time that it would take away from curriculum instruction and the amount of time that they would have to expend above and beyond their already taxing workload; they would question the amount of second language instruction given in class, demanding that all courses be taught in that language, despite bilingual program guidelines;

and they challenged the ability of the principal to hire a particular teacher to replace a teacher on long-term leave without first consulting them. The parents challenged the teaching practices, questioned the Program of Studies, and distrusted the administrators' discretion. Consequently, parents often contested decisions made at the school level by demanding more "voice".

During this period, it became evident that the involvement by the parents had turned into something more authoritarian than supportive. Teachers worried over the excessive and sometimes uninvited "volunteering" of parents. Parents would arrive early in the morning before the teacher arrived to inspect the classroom. When the morning bell rang, parents would usually remain in the classroom without asking permission, often for the majority of the day. Their right to observe the class overrode the teachers' prerogative to manage the class, as they continued to interfere and challenge the teaching practices. Parents would assist teachers on a daily basis, and would then report on classroom procedures to the other parents. Parental involvement became threatening and intrusive for teachers. Every decision and every moment was assessed and evaluated by "overseeing" parents. Teachers were harassed and challenged during school hours as parents would "chase" and "corner" teachers in the classrooms, hallways, and staff rooms. They did not stop at cultural events, such as dance rehearsals, church, and community gatherings where both groups often met. The constant surveillance of teachers was exhausting and demoralizing.

At first, the principal tried to accommodate the needs of parents, complying with their suggestions and demands for who should be hired and who should be transferred, which teachers should teach certain grades, how curriculum should be taught, and which special

cultural events should take place in the school. As the parents realized that the principal would cater to their demands, the pressure that they exerted increased both in quantity and severity. At one particular meeting, the parents held a meeting and assessed each of the teachers. The parents reviewed each teacher and pointed out all their weaknesses. Accusations were also made and recorded at this time. While it may be argued that parents may have a right to review and evaluate teachers, this process left teachers feeling victimized. Furthermore, the parents demanded that the school administration and staff leave the meeting, not allowing them to defend themselves.

I was deeply affected by my experiences at this school. I began to question whether or not I was mistaken in assuming that the premise of the parent group was to provide support to the language program and the school. When did the parents assume that they were permitted to decide on school issues without the inclusion or permission of any staff member in the school? When some of the parental suggestions were challenged or denied, parents created a large lobby group which bypassed teachers and administration and instead went directly to trustees, the superintendent, MLA's and the media. The public exposure exacerbated the stress among the staff, further demoralizing them.

The experience for me, the teachers, and the administration was traumatic. Over the course of a year, half of the staff went on long-term disability. All the administrators asked for transfers at the end of the year, and since then, the entire language department, with the exception of one, has left. After two and a half years, two teachers are still on long-term disability being treated for severe depression.

Personally, I left the situation with an emptiness, having submerged all emotions,

only to have them re-surface when certain instances, people, places, or things jogged my memory. I am surprised at the emotional impact certain memories evoke, haunting me to this day. I remember walking daily from room to room, offering to take teachers' classrooms to my music class so that they could gather themselves emotionally in the staff room, away from students and parents. I recall days where I would walk into the staff room only to see the familiar faces of one or two, while most of the entire staff of thirty had called in sick. I remember teachers crying, saying it might be better if only they could leave the stress behind at the end of the school day, knowing that it not only affected them professionally, but it would spread to their personal life where their family faced these same parents within the cultural community. I remember the last day of school when only a few teachers had survived the ordeal. Many could not find the courage to walk through the school doors to face the staff, the parents, or the students. We said our goodbyes, knowing that many of us would find our own different paths, trying to forget the year. As a staff we had felt alienated, threatened, and victimized by the tyranny of the parents. I wonder how we could have made parents partners in their children's education without disempowering us?

There is value to telling this story as it compares the parents' commitment and involvement in their children's schooling to creating contested spaces between school staff and parents. Consequently, a positive, collaborative relationship between staff and parents was unattainable at this school, as staff and parents competed for voice and empowerment. Power plays made by these parents to control both teachers and administrators gave me great concern. However, I recall how these parents had often considered writing a charter proposal in order to gain more power and authority through the autonomous governing structure of

charter schools. It was their interest in starting a charter school that gave me great angst. From my perspective, I saw an educational reform movement that would create greater power differentials between parents and teachers, with teachers losing the battle. It is this experience that draws me closer to the controversial debate of charter schools. I have questions about an educational reform movement that has the potential to further exacerbate power relations between parents and teachers.

### **1.2 Turning to the Question of Charter Schools**

The stated intention of the Alberta provincial government is to provide enhanced delivery of education through innovative and alternative instructional programs. Innovative educational practices are said to be accomplished by allowing charter schools more autonomy and flexibility in which they can fulfill their charter mission (Alberta Education, 1996). In order for charter schools to be approved by either a local school board or by the Minister of Education, the charter school proposal must meet an educational need not being fulfilled within the regular public school system. The charter proposal must demonstrate a body of research that supports the innovative educational practice. Furthermore, educational practices must be held accountable for demonstrating how it has improved student achievement through outcomes-based measures (Alberta Government, 1997). In order for a charter school to receive a three to five year contract, they must ensure that the charter proposal is unique, educationally sound, financially and legally viable. In return, the charter school has considerably more autonomy in fulfilling their mandate through the local governing board run by parents, staff, and community members. The charter school attempts

to create a structure that fosters “shared governance” (Glickman, 1990) through school-based management, attempting to be responsive to the educational program.

Charter schools are a new educational reform to create alternative educational programmes to meet certain student populations. It is a new twist on past reforms such as alternative programmes within a mainstream school, voucher systems, and the other milieu of parental choice reforms. With any new reform, high expectations often emerge. However, one should tread carefully. Alberta charter schools are in the formative stages, and much knowledge about them is sketchy and inconclusive. I proceed by raising questions and bringing greater awareness to the complexity of this issue.

I became intrigued by the nature of the charter school movement which purports to provide choice and opportunity. To me, this implies that choice and innovation are not being fulfilled within the regular public education system. What is the nature of choice and innovation being offered to charter schools? Would choice be offered to a certain group of students excluding other “undesirable” students?

With these questions in mind, I began the onerous task of filtering through the British and American charter school literature. Alberta only established charter school legislation in 1994, and relatively little research has been completed on the Alberta or Canadian experience. Proponents of charter schools praise the highly accountable nature of charter schools, the vision for innovation and enhanced learning environments, and the unencumbered governance structure which free them from bureaucratic constraints (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Freedman, 1994; Lawton, 1995; Nathan, 1996; Raham, 1996). However, in reading this literature I was uncomfortable with their premises and arguments supporting

charter schools. Because of my own experience, questions kept surfacing as to the validity of such statements. How would this influence my perception of the charter school research?

Issues of accountability create a personal uneasiness in how schools are being evaluated. What measures would be developed to assess the accountability of charter schools? Should schools only be measured by outcomes-based performance indicators? Would such performance tests favour certain schools at the expense of others? Would setting up a system based on accountability necessarily create a competitive market where schools would compete rather than collaborate? Would this create a school system of “winners” and “losers”?

Promises of innovation and enhanced learning environments troubled me as a supporter of public education. Has society lost confidence in public schools? Do they believe that public education is failing to provide enhanced learning environments? Is public education set up for failure due to the major funding cuts it has absorbed over the last number of years? In what ways is the public education system not creating alternative programs to meet the needs of all students? Could the public education system attend to all of the diverse student needs? What types of charter schools would establish unique, sound educational programs which would enhance the public education system?

The accusation that public education is “shackled” by bureaucratic constraints seemed to me to be an attempt to push toward decentralization and privatization - concepts I was tired of embracing. Would decentralization further erode the sense of community that comprehensive, universal education tried to encourage? Would decentralization create further class distinctions between the upper and lower socio-economic classes? How would

privatization of education create a higher standard of education for all? Furthermore, I wondered whether teachers would only feel more threatened and isolated without the support of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). Is this an attempt to break the Association's hold on the profession? Is the government trying to dismantle the ATA's power through charter schools?

And yet, I recognize the possibility that I, too, might be caught up in the oppositional discourse which espouses ominous forecasts. Opponents argue that charter schools create elitist, two-tiered school systems (Barlow & Robertson, 1994; Walford, 1991), erode the egalitarian nature of public education (Ball, 1993, 1994), and allow corporate and "New-Right" agendas to infiltrate public education (Demaine, 1993; Molnar, 1996). Their literature also assumes that a "manufactured crisis" has developed around public education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Barlow & Robertson, 1994). Yet, I wonder if public education is meeting all the needs of students? For example, how could I ignore the benefit of one charter school that caters to "at-risk" students who have been "kicked out" of the public education system? Is education being responsive to all students? Are educators arguing against the charter school movement to maintain their power and status quo within the public education structure? Is this another case of people being resistant to change because change involves risk and instability? Although the literature provides an overview of the various issues being debated, the Canadian context has not been thoroughly examined. I am skeptical that the Alberta charter school context parallels to the charter issues found in other countries.



### 1.3 The Task at Hand

I set out with a hope of understanding what choice means in the Alberta charter school context. On this basis, I formulated the questions for my research. I believed that the intention of this research would be realized through interviewing parents, teachers, administrators, and charter board members. Three underlying questions framed the study: Why did they feel a need for charter schools within the public education system? How did they believe that choice and innovation was being implemented in the charter school? In what ways did the charter school governing structure empower parents, teachers, and administrators? Meaning and understanding would be acquired through these “stakeholder” groups.

In late September of 1997, I began contacting all of the Alberta charter schools to see whether I could conduct interviews. I made initial contact with eight charter schools across the province of Alberta. I would soon realize that finding time to make initial contact with administrators would be the first of many arduous tasks. They appeared to have had enormous time commitments with their charter school, and had little available time.

In all cases, I made the request to the administrator of the charter school. I soon found out that the administrator did not have the unilateral right to allow me access. Typically, my request was brought to the charter board’s attention by the principal. I was told by administrators and charter board members that if the information collected would only be used for the sole purpose of a thesis, then most charter schools did not want to expend the time or energy (Personal Fieldnotes, 09/29/97). Six of the eight administrators stated that numerous requests were made by other researchers to study this reform

movement. Of these, four administrators suggested that they did not necessarily want to bring more attention to themselves in the public's eye, but rather remain somewhat quiet and "anonymous".

At this point, I believed that my entire study was in jeopardy. It was then that the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta were to begin a two year study to evaluate the early successes and failures of the Alberta Charter School movement. I was hired as a research assistant to collect data for this larger study. In addition, it was agreed upon with the principal investigator of the larger Alberta Charter School Study that I would research the particular notion of "choice" which would later be included with other aspects of the larger study. I conveyed this agreement to administrators when I contacted them to set up interviews. As well, this arrangement was announced by the principle investigator of the Alberta Charter School Study to charter board members and administrators who were attending a provincial charter school meeting held in early October, 1997. As a result of my participation in this larger Alberta Charter School Study, I was allowed to conduct interviews in the charter schools. Access into the charter schools would be contingent upon sharing the information for my research endeavors.

My request to interview two parents, teachers, administrators, and charter board members would be determined by the administrator of the school. I wondered if this would create a problem for me in trying to understand the meaning of choice? It would limit it, but I felt I could still gain an understanding of individuals' perspectives on the notion of "choice" in charter school. Further, I realized that I had little choice other than to accept the terms set out by each charter school.

I was able to interview all chairpersons from the charter governing boards. With the exception of one parent, all other parents had elementary children enrolled. Again, with the exception of one junior high teacher, I was able to interview six early elementary teachers and five upper elementary teachers. Their views on choice in relation to their experiences with charter schools would be valuable in trying to make meaning of how choice was constructed in their lived experience of charter schools.

Since my purpose was to inquire into the nature of the participants' experiences of the movement, I was cognizant that I needed to be open to people's responses during the interview. I decided to use a semi-structured interview format to interview parents, teachers, administrators, and charter board members to allow them to voice their particular perspectives. I used approximately ten questions to guide each interview: When did you first hear about charter schools? What did you know about charter schools prior to coming to the charter school? What made you decide to be a part of charter school? Why did you choose a charter school over another type of school? Is choice practised in this charter school? If so, how? Are the teaching practices or curriculum different from your previous experiences? How? What are your expectations of this charter school? Are they fulfilled? What are the obstacles or weaknesses of this charter school? What kinds of decisions do you get to make?

A conversation often emerged during the interview from these questions. My intention was to create a comfortable atmosphere in which the participants would feel free to openly discuss any issues that they wanted to address about the charter school movement. Many qualitative researchers have written on conversation as a way or method of opening up possibilities to create meaning. For example, Gadamer (1995) notes the "art of

conducting a real dialogue” (p. 367), to allow for the interpretation to arise from the dialectic process (cited in Gallagher, 1992). I decided that I too would try to create a conversation that would allow for an openness, and yet “attempt to stay with the subject matter” (Gallagher, 1992, 148). I was curious to see how stakeholders’ participated in charter schools, if it related to their notion of choice, and how they viewed choice within the charter schools. Near the end of our discussions, I often asked who decided how “choice” was implemented, and to what degree they had input to how choice was envisioned in the school.

I taped interviews and took personal notes. I wrote down significant moments that occurred during the discussions. After each interview I listened and reviewed the tapes, making further notes and comments to highlight points of the interview that struck me. After I transcribed the interviews onto paper, I reread the transcripts, highlighting sentences and making comments in the margins. Of the forty participants interviewed at the five charter schools, only two participants requested that the interview not be tape-recorded. In four other cases, where the conversation became very critically engaged, these participants asked that the tape recorder to be turned off during portions of the interviews. Interviews lasted on average between a half hour and an hour.

In addition to interviewing, I attended four staff meetings and two parent meetings to further understand the public expressions of charter schools. In five charter schools, administrators invited me to visit the classrooms and talk with students. This gave me the opportunity in certain cases to see how choice was interpreted by teachers in the class. On an informal level, I chatted with students with regard to their school work and how they enjoyed the school. On three occasions, I also had the opportunity to attend provincial

charter school meetings where board members, administration, or superintendents represented their charter school. These meetings were particularly insightful as participants candidly expressed some of the common issues they faced at their school. Charters schools often circulated public reports and documents to bring awareness to parents, teachers, media and other charter schools some of the continuing positive and negative issues that they faced. I, too, had the chance to reflect upon my charter school experiences with administrators and charter board members whom I had previously interviewed to follow up on issues that we had discussed. Again, careful notes were taken during these meetings. These notes would augment the personal interviews that I had conducted earlier in the fall. This gave me an opportunity to meet with certain key individuals on an on-going basis throughout my research.

In order to gain a different perspective on the charter school movement, I interviewed the president of the Alberta Teachers' Association. I thought that the perspective of the Association might bring different issues into view for consideration and thought.

Lastly, in one case where I could not gain access into the charter school<sup>1</sup>, I was able to interview people who were previously involved with the charter school and had since left for various reasons. I thought that the perspectives of these "external stakeholders" would add to the richness of meaning and experience surrounding this reform. Britzman (1991) states, "any search for meanings must be situated in the practical context within which they

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<sup>1</sup>

This charter school was currently undergoing labour relations disputes between teachers and the charter board. The charter school felt that because of the instability and volatility within the school, they did want to be included in the study.

are voiced” (p. 14). I was reminded of the value of this by Britzman (1991): “Multiple perspectives on the same event, however, are both inevitable and desirable. The delicate work of interpretation depends upon difference” (p. 16).

Once I collected the data, I began the task of describing the different perspectives of my participants on the choice movement. As I imagine with any researcher, the first thing one attempts to do with the data is to make some sense. For me, the same was true. As part of my attempt to clarify my understanding, I wrote individual charter school case studies. These included: their charter mandate; the various perspectives of parents, teachers, administrators, and charter board members; and my personal reflections of the charter school. This process allowed me to thematically categorize the various perspectives of the participants within the context of their charter school.

After writing individual case studies, I looked for similar themes between the charter schools. Emerging themes became apparent as I began to group common perspectives and experiences together by first grouping the data into three large groups: 1) Why people chose charter schools 2) How choice was practiced in charter schools and 3) Who decided how choice was delivered in charter schools. From there, I looked for commonalities and differences among stakeholder groups in their responses to these themes. My intention was to understand what had been said and what the movement meant to the people that experienced it.

As is often the case, issues did emerge from the data. Taken-for-granted notions such as "voice", "empowerment", and "community" appeared problematic to me. There appeared to be a difference between what was said, and how that played out in practice. For example,

their perceptions of how participants gained “voice”, “empowerment”, and “community” in charter schools did not match with the examples that they cited in their daily practices in charter schools. There also appeared to be multiple discourses at play in the daily operations at the school between parent/teacher, parent/governing board, governing board/administrator, and administrator/parent. During this period, I tried to untangle the issues in an attempt to make sense of the participants’ experiences.

During this time I also returned to the literature. Much had been written on each of the notions of “voice”, “empowerment”, and “community”. In trying to better understand the notions of “voice”. I read Belenky et. al. (1986) who helped me recognize that voice was a process of coming to know. I believed that I should give each stakeholder a voice in their understanding of choice, and in doing so, I would not silence or marginalise any particular group. As I delved deeper into my transcripts, I noticed the silences that occurred before, during, and after the interviews. These pauses or interruptions could not be ignored. To make sense of that, I turned to Fiumara (1995) and her approach to voice and silence. She pays particular attention to that which is not said, the silences and pauses, and asks for a philosophy of listening as opposed to that of voice. It was her unique approach to language that influenced the way I would look at transcripts for not only what was said, but what was not said. In looking at voice, I also became familiar with Weedon's (1987) and Walkerdine's (1995) notion of voice and how that is connected to power. The ability to give voice to one's experiences has direct implications of how one is able to "name" and "represent" things in the world (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). As Adrienne Riche states, "While language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence" (1977 cited in Belenky et. al. 1986 p.

23). These authors helped me to understand the nature of the voices of my participants.

I turned to Ellsworth (1989) Gore (1990) and Fielding's (1997) notions of empowerment that looked at shifting power relations between agent and subject. This helped me to acknowledge the problems that participants had with attaining empowerment in a school setting. I began to see how teachers would reflect on their sense of empowerment in charter schools, yet at the same time, appear to lack significant voice on policy, governance, and management issues.

The notion of community was revisited many times throughout the course of the research. Before conducting interviews I had read *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol, 1991) and *Social Justice and Schools* (Connell, 1993), that called for inclusive schools that did not separate, exclude, or differentiate. These were questions that arose for me from the beginning about charter schools. Later, I came across Gutmann's (1987) book entitled *Democratic Education* that discussed the "tyranny of dualisms" that often divide individuals between individualism and collectivism. I began to see what my participants were caught in.

Finally, from the plethora of literature that I had read on the choice movement, I felt that I needed to also situate the charter school movement in an ideological and political context. To inquire further, I read theoretical accounts of the New-Right movement because many writers felt that the New-Right philosophy underwrites the charter school movement (Ball, 1994; Ball, Bowe, & Gold, 1992; Bridges, 1994; Carl, 1994; Gewirtz, Ball, Bowe, 1995; Kenway, 1990; Kenway, Bigum, Fitzclaren, 1993; Walford, 1991). I thought that this may help me understand the charter school movement in a larger political context.



However, I had questions as to what degree the Alberta government had used New-Right policies to direct this movement. Although I had read ideological indicators of the New-Right policies, I was unaware of the Alberta government's impetus for creating charter schools. To date, little has been written on the Alberta charter school context relating to the issue of the New-Right movement. Instead, Alberta charter school literature has focused more on descriptive analysis (Bosetti, 1995; Raham, 1996), early strengths and weaknesses of the movement (Bosetti, 1998a, 1998b; Bosetti, O'Reilly, Gereluk, 1998; Bosetti, O'Reilly, Sande, Gereluk, 1998; Gereluk, 1998), a practical information booklet on how to set up a charter school (Alberta Education, 1996a; Freedman, 1995), and parental relations within the charter school context (Benton-Evans, 1997). I was unsure whether the Alberta government had followed previous examples of New-Right measures, or whether the government had an absence of policy on the charter school movement. Because of this, I did a comprehensive search of all Alberta Hansard accounts that related to the discussion of charter schools in Alberta in hopes of finding out the government stance on policy directives, intentions, and expectations on the charter school movement.

Throughout this period, I also had the opportunity to reflect on my findings with other members of the Alberta Charter School Research team. I brought issues that I was working through to the monthly research meetings in addition to the weekly conversations with faculty who were also intrigued by the Alberta charter school phenomenon. With the Alberta Charter School Study Research Team, I began to present initial findings at conferences, in publications, and symposia that were arising from the interviews (Bosetti, 1998a, 1998b; Bosetti, O'Reilly, Gereluk, 1998; Bosetti, O'Reilly, Sande, Gereluk, 1998; Gereluk, 1998).

We were all cognizant of the fact that these findings were tentative, but we also believed that our interpretations of the charter school movement would provide an opening for further educational discussion. When we presented our information, I was also exposed to the numerous other presentations and studies that were presented (Cantrell, 1998; Jellison, 1998; Rofes, 1998; Scott & Jellison, 1998; Slayton, 1998; Vasudeva & Grutzch, 1998; Wells, 1998). Similar trends and findings that were presented, created a sense of ease or legitimacy that I too was on a similar path. For example, Rofes (1998) and Cantrell (1998) discussed the notion of the privileged voice of parents. Scott and Jellison (1998) and Slayton (1998) brought forth the marketing and networking strategies that were developed in perceived high-status, successful charter schools in California. Wells (1998) raised many points for consideration in charter school reform in areas of governance, management, and the notion of cultural capital. These presentations helped me see how I might proceed in my interpretation to further understand this phenomenon.

#### **1.4 Temporality and the Flux of Information**

*Any claim to unbiased, neutral, and objective knowledge is itself a prejudice that determines what counts as good science.*

(Gallagher, 1992, p. 90)

At the outset of my inquiry into the nature of the charter school experience, I wanted to address all aspects of charter school reform. I soon realized that this was unrealistic. Even as this research was being collected and analysed, new issues and trends emerged weekly and sometimes even daily. I tried to remain true to the original purpose of this research - to gain an understanding of the meaning of choice through the participants' experiences. Many

researchers acknowledge that research cannot be all-encompassing and all-knowing (Haraway, 1988; Jardine, 1994; Denzin, 1997). As Haraway states, “The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision” (1988, p. 583). I would have to live with the fact that my study was partial. In recognizing the dynamic, temporal, interpretive nature of my research, I did not intend this study to offer a solution to the charter school movement, or a complete explication of the success or failure of charter schools. Instead, I hoped to open up the discourse of choice that I found to be embedded in the charter school movement, and further explore the meaning of charter schools through the experiences of my participants.

I was hesitant to begin to write. I had undertaken to examine a policy issue through a qualitative lens. While a qualitative approach has been done by many policy researchers (Ball, 1990; Apple, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994), I was still weary of whether this would be an acceptable approach to take to fulfill my thesis requirements. Furthermore, I located it within a temporal, interpretive study, weaving my voice with the voices of my participants’ throughout. Richardson (1993) reassures me that the process of having my voice present is not only acceptable, but that it is necessary in order that we be “more fully present in our work; more honest; more engaged” (p. 516). However, I am still uneasy and find the angst I feel located in academic writing; Lenzo (1995) feels this angst as she writes:

Experienced tenured researchers find this challenge to traditional constructions of authorship difficult enough, but the difficulties are magnified when considering the task of the doctoral dissertation student who both strives for legitimacy and wishes to challenge knowledge legitimization practices themselves. What kind of textual authority can admit to uncertainty, deal in contradiction, and question attachments? How are the multiple and shifting positionings of the poststructural research-as-selves to

be handled? (p. 19)

I am somewhat comforted in knowing that this is not simply a personal tension in which I struggle. Rather it is a recurring issue among beginning researchers who must tread carefully in order to be accepted at the doors of the academic institution. I move forth in hopes that I can call upon the other researchers from the past who have forged an alternative way of representing the world of research in which I am situated (Carson, 1992; Lenzo, 1995; Gallagher, 1992; Gadamer, 1995; Britzman, 1991; Lather, 1993).

### **1.5 Access into the Charter Schools**

Accessing the charter schools in Alberta was a difficult task. There were schools that were experiencing turmoil and instability, and quite understandably were reluctant to be interviewed. Due to the highly controversial and political nature of this research, and the perceived ramifications of exposing the issues, people were very resistant to discuss any obstacles or weaknesses for fear of further negative public exposure. I take this to be a limitation of the study. As Clandinin and Connelly (1996) helped me realize, often a "cover" story might be given by a teacher, that promotes the ideology of the school. This was the case for some of the teachers in the study. Often a different story would emerge when they did not fear telling me what they felt. I realized that in providing information about the experience of the charter school, often the information is "shaped by the professional knowledge context in which teachers work" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, p. 24). Through the "cover" story, it is understood that teachers might be upholding the rosy picture of the school in order that the school appears to be running smoothly and they, as teachers, are

doing a good job. The retelling of the story is contextualized within the "working landscape" of the school, and although they may understand the complex nature of the school, they may be unwilling to relay that story. Personal "secret" stories are very rarely told as teachers are unwilling to risk the consequences. Candid stories that reflect the school are dangerous to tell as they may cause negative implications for the school and for the teacher. As a result, those stories are usually only told in the confidences to more trusted colleagues. In this study the candid "secret" story was told when the school had reached drastic working conditions.

However, this was a rare moment. In some cases, the feeling I received was that the stakeholders wanted to be left alone and not brought to the public's attention. Part of this was because they felt that they were always being observed in a "fish bowl" (Bosetti, O'Reilly, Gereluk, 1998), being constantly watched, analysed, and assessed. In other cases where internal problems were occurring, the charter schools refused any access to the research. In cases where access was denied, much of my research and analysis had to be done through public documents on labour relations' disputes, media clippings, and through informal discussions with various people who were involved with the charter school and had left.

## **1.6 The Kids are Silent**

While I have attempted to allow the multi-vocal nature of charter schools to come forward, I have "silenced" the most important stakeholders in the charter schools. Students are not represented in this study and their voices are not heard. While I am uneasy with this, I did not include students for two reasons. First, the study would have increased

tremendously by adding students to the study. Second, the charter schools that I interviewed catered mainly to early and middle elementary levels. I believed the students would have little knowledge of the topic, and that they were unaware of the policies and politics that surround this issue. I believed I would not compromise the integrity of the study by excluding students.

It would be interesting to return to the schools. As I continue on with this research, I hope to allow them the opportunity in which to create a space for them to speak, addressing another component of the charter school movement.

### 1.7 Emergent Themes

*It will be difficult at times to decide which is the main trail and which is the aside, for all of the threads do wind together in an interweaving web of interdependencies. It will depend, in part, on where you want to go and on where you have been.*

(Jardine, 1994, vii)

As I interviewed various stakeholders within the various charter schools, I began to see an emerging trend, common to all charter schools. Everyone, it seemed, felt strongly that they had the opportunity for providing input in how choice would be implemented in charter schools. However, this was not always the case. How choice was implemented varied widely according to the stakeholders' visions of what charter schools were supposed to offer and achieve. Participants' perceptions of choice appeared as wide and diverse as the number of interviews that I conducted. Struggles between the various stakeholders often surfaced due to the competing goals and intents within the charter school. In their views of choice, each interviewee held a different value as to what aspects of choice were paramount. These

conflicting and contradictory visions often disrupted the notion of how choice was to be implemented. As far as I could see, this became a major, unresolved issue in the management and operation of charter schools. Subsequently, my research became more focused on analysing the emerging discourse of choice and the play of values within charter schools through the experiences of my participants.

In looking at the competing values, I attend to the voices in the charter schools. Gannett comments, "Coming to voice is a central epistemological metaphor for intellectual development..." (Gannett as cited in Tarule, 1996, p.178). It is through dialogue that meaning begins to occur. Through the exchange of ideas, a dialogue emerges which brings shape and form around a topic. In listening to the competing voices, I recognize the complex relationship between the various stakeholders and their divergent voices. It is through their perspectives, that I interpret the values they hold in the charter schools.

I am reminded by qualitative and feminist researchers that as these voices emerge, my voice will also come forth, as I cannot remove my participation in this research (Ricoeur, 1980; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, 1986; Britzman, 1991; Tarule, 1996). I cannot ignore my upbringing, nor can I ignore the teaching experience that influenced much of my thinking. I have told my story to locate it in the context of the personal, demonstrating the complex, messiness of contested spaces in the school. My voice remains present throughout the research, weaving with other voices that emerge in charter schools.

In the following chapters, I contextualize the participants' experiences by situating their experiences with the experiences of others. In so doing, multiple agendas begin to emerge as each stakeholder group voices differing underlying values and assumptions within

the charter school movement. This is shown in chapter two as I analyse the multi-vocal nature of charter schools. Chapter three explores the competing play of values and power between the various stakeholders within the charter school movement. Chapter four frames the charter school movement within the discourse of choice and the “New-Right” political agenda. Chapter five frames the charter school discussion into the larger Alberta political context. In the final chapter I conclude by exploring lessons that can be learned and possibilities that may be taken from this research.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MULTI-VOCAL NATURE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

#### 2.1 Listening for Voices

*Whilst the pace of change at the moment is rapid, a good deal of evidence points to an increasingly aggrandizing centre or state-sponsored "voices" at the level of interest groups, localities and peripheries.*

(Goodson, 1993, p.1)

As I sort through how choice is experienced by the participants in charter schools, I hear voices emerging, telling different stories, with common beginnings but different endings. The people I interviewed might have all begun their story with *Once upon a time there was a charter school. And at this charter school, the dream to provide choice had finally been realized...* Other literature reaffirms this belief that while choice may be implemented successfully, the "local conditions" in which choice is practised may vary widely (Fuller, Elmore, Orfield, 1996; Smith, 1995).

In this chapter I set out to illustrate how the stakeholders that I interviewed have come to be involved with charter schools. I begin with their voices, allowing the multi-vocal nature of charter schools come forward. At the conclusion of the chapter, my thoughts and perceptions interject with the voices that prevail in trying to make meaning of the values stakeholders bring to charter schools.

##### 2.1.1 The Voice of Parents: Diverging Interests and Goals

Much research shows that parents choose to send their children to charter schools (Cookson, 1994; Goldring, 1997; Gerwitz, Ball, Bowe, and Buckingham, 1995; Molnar,

1996; Kohn, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Little Hoover Commission, 1996; Hudson Institute Project, 1997). These researchers argue that parents make a conscious decision to search for alternative schooling notwithstanding that such facilities may not be conveniently located, may have insufficient transportation services, or may be substandard (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Despite these short-comings, many charter schools are oversubscribed with long waiting lists with parents trying to enroll their children (Little Hoover Commission, 1996; Hudson Institute Project, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). What is the attraction for parents to send their children to charter schools?

Some parents that I interviewed focused on the sense of empathy that their children receive at the charter school:

There is an atmosphere of respect, responsibility for one's actions. It's not a hands-off types of things. The minute the school day is over, the care and concern for the child goes on from there. It even extends into if there are problems in the home environment that the parent may be concerned about, the teachers will take that into consideration. The teachers - generally I found- if I have a question or a concern, are very willing and open to discuss that with me and both working it out together to address what needs to be done with the situation that might be going on whether it is academic or emotional with the child.

(Interview 4.2, 10/24/97)

These parents portray a close relationship with teachers. One parent comments on the pleasant and close family atmosphere that is present at the charter school:

I like the teachers. They are great. They are so motivated. They are just so into the kids. I think that classes are small enough so that they know each one. They know the family situations and that type of thing and it all matters to them and that is a real important factor to them. Teachers care about the school. Class size is definitely wonderful. It is more like a family - it really is. Everyone knows everybody.

(Interview 1.6, 10/02/97)

The comfort level is further enhanced when one parent relays the sense of energy prevalent in the charter school:

I like the enthusiasm that goes with what everything the children do. Anything that's done here is done with a great deal of empathy and passion... I like the fact that the principal was very welcoming. We are new immigrants and we have moved around and coming to a new place. I thought it was very nice that the children felt the warmth immediately.

(Interview 1.4, 10/02/97)

Perceived individual attention, care and empathy become critical factors for these parents' reasons in choosing charter schools.

In contrast to parents who speak of the caring environment of the charter school, other parents that I talked with voice their concerns and frustration with public education. In an attempt to escape or challenge the public education system, these parents come to charter schools with the hope of finding something better. Their experiences also are congruent with parents surveyed in the *National Study of Charter Schools* (U.S. Department of Education, 1998) which states, "Many parents with students in charter schools were dissatisfied with their experience in other public schools" (p. 97). Is it that parents run away *from* public schools rather than run *to* charter schools? One parent explains the lack of voice she felt at the public school:

As parents, I just didn't have a good view going into [the public] school with the administrator. The principal, some days would speak to you, some days wouldn't. You just never really felt very comfortable. Their policy of parents being welcome in the school was completely lip service because I never felt welcome in my son's classroom... and he was unhappy with the teacher. And I just never felt comfortable enough to go to the principal and talk to him about it, nor did I have the confidence that he would do anything about it.

(Interview 1.2, 10/02/97)

This parent has been let down by the public school, feels silenced and unable to voice her concerns. For her, the charter school is an outlet which creates a space for her to be considered in a meaningful way. Another parent hopes to provide a competitive edge which she believes is not prevalent in public schools:

I just think that children were not encouraged to find their potential in the public school system. And the fact they [the teachers] had no time for them. I found that the children were being overlooked.

(Interview 1.4, 10/02/97)

Other parents share similar concerns, expressing their lack of confidence in public schools. Their perceived crisis in public education is apparent as these parents do not view public schools as a viable option for their children:

Well, we had lots of choices available to us. First of all, our kids were at Mountain View<sup>2</sup> Academy which was a private school. We were happy with the education they were receiving there. Alternatives that we had discussed before that - we had gone to the Catholic school in our neighbourhood. We had written off the public school system immediately.

Interviewer: And why is that?

Parent: It wasn't going to meet our needs.

Interviewer: And what are your needs?

Parent: For our children to be educated. To be with a group of children who are arriving at the school to basically be looked after and cared for, who are fed before they come to school, who are dressed properly, who don't have behaviour problems due to a lack of discipline or input from the parents or control or whatever. So we wiped out the idea of going to the public schools. The Catholic school system, even though it professes to be a religious organization, only thirty-three per cent of the students who go to Catholic schools are actually Catholic and church-going people. And the teachers don't even have to be church-going people after two years. They can leave their religious background behind. And I am just finding that they are not meeting my expectations with education either.

(Interview 2.4, 10/03/97)

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<sup>2</sup> Name of school has been changed to maintain confidentiality.

This particular parent addresses some of the religious values that she believes is lacking in the public and separate schools. She further expresses concerns of her children to be associated with “other” children who are not well-dressed, not well-cared for, or not well-disciplined. For her, the charter school is an escape to protect her children from other “undesirable” families who do not share her values and commitment. Other parents share similar stories in search of alternative forms of schooling. The lack of care and time for students, and the lack of trust and confidence in public schools lead many parents to turn to charter schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Nathan, 1996; Lawton, 1995).

The last common trend that emerged from the discussions with parents was their attraction of charter schools having shared values, goals, or ethnicity prevalent in the charter statement. One charter school caters to students who require extra instruction in English as a Second Language. A large Arab community has been attracted to this charter school. This may be as a result of the majority of founders and charter board members having Arab descent. Such language instruction often attracts particular ethnic communities. The educational philosophy of the school also attracts certain parents. One parent describes how she wanted a school that taught fundamental “Back to Basics” education that uses a highly-structured, teacher-directed learning model with a strong emphasis on phonics and math drills to augment the curriculum:

I was interested in finding a school that taught reading through a phonics first approach, and Z school advertized that they were going to be using the Spalding method to teach phonegrams starting in kindergarten. So purely phonics-first approach which was what I was looking for.

(Interview 6.3, 01/08/98)

Another parent explains that the attraction to coming to the charter school is to find a specific

educational need to meet their children's needs:

My wife and I became aware of the charter school and we had identified the needs for one of our children related to gifted education, but we didn't independently identify a need for a charter school. We took advantage of one.

(Interview 3.4, 10/23/97)

Instances where the charter school has been developed from a previously existing Society<sup>3</sup> often have parents who attend because of the clearer educational niche. If Societies are solely created in order to establish a charter school, most of the rules, regulations, and procedures are not in place for the charter school to adopt. Further, the Society may not have a solid philosophical foundation from which to guide and advise the charter school. However, those schools that were established from previously existing Societies often have a better chance of developing a solid charter proposal. Furthermore, the premise for these charter schools appear to be established to further extend their mandate of targeting a particular population of students rather than to create an autonomous school.

Depending on the breadth of the mandate of the charter school, parents may have varying reasons for enrolling their children. Thus, it is important to contextualize parents' experiences which lead them to choose charter schools. Preconceived notions of public education in crisis may lead some parents to look for effective, safe and caring environments (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Henig, 1994; Barlow & Robertson, 1994). Other parents believe that the public education system does not foster an environment of discipline, respect, and

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All charter schools must be incorporated under the Societies Act, Companies Act, or Financial Administration Act. Presently, most charter schools are incorporated under the Societies Act.

rigour (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lawton, 1995). Some parents look for an alternative school as a result of the negative experience they may have had at previous schools (Nathan, 1996). Others search for a school which will allow them to become active participants in their child's education, thus allowing their voice to be heard. Other parents look for "cultural and ethnic values" which reflect their personal philosophy (Martinez, Godwin, Kemerer, 1996; Wells, 1996). Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield (1996) point out, "... the effects of choice programs are highly dependent on local conditions: the organizational structure of the particular choice initiative, the community situation facing parents, and parents' range of resources and educational commitments" (pp. 12-13). This finding is congruent to parents that I spoke with in their experiences of choosing charter schools.

Similar to findings in other studies (Hudson Institute Project, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Little Hoover Commission, 1996), it appears that the parents that I talked with are active decision-makers in their child's education. For many of the parents, the reasons for choosing charter schools are not necessarily to find a more innovative educational program. Surprisingly, many of their answers focus on non-academic reasons for choosing the school (Carnegie, 1992; Wells, 1993; Cantrell, 1998). I stop and reflect. Would the parents who want a friendly, family atmosphere conflict with parents who are disgruntled with public education? Would the educational mandate be compromised by parents who send their children to the school for non-academic reasons?

As parents bring differing values to charter schools based on their past experiences, I wonder how that would influence charter school policy and practice? I further question whether the differing premises lead to differing expectations and outcomes of the charter

school mandate?

### **2.1.2 The Voice of Teachers: Trying to Reclaim Teaching as a Profession**

Why do teachers choose to work at charter schools? What aspects of the charter environment do they value as teachers? How is teaching at the charter school different? With these questions in mind, I spoke to teachers to inquire about the teaching culture of the charter school and their attraction to it.

The primary response that I received from teachers in choosing charter schools was to receive a teaching contract. As one teacher explains:

Well, I was looking for a job. As a new teacher, there were not a lot of opportunities and I applied everywhere and it just so happened that there was a job opening here. And I didn't know a lot about charter schools. So, before my interview I looked up information and researched a bit. Then I started to get really excited about the possibilities of working here.

(Interview 1.2, 10/02/97)

With the exception of two teachers, most were recent graduates with little teaching experience. One teacher admits, "I didn't have any teaching experience in the public system other than the practicum" (Interview 4.4, 01/08/98). Some teachers who came to charter schools had temporary contracts with other school boards, but few had continuous employment contracts. Another teacher thought that charter schools would provide the opportunity to develop and enhance her potential as a teacher:

For me personally, that it [the charter school] will not just provide me with employment, but a chance to improve in my own satisfaction within a job. To continue my learning as a teacher, and to continue my exploration - different ways to work with the children.

(Interview 2.1, 10/03/97)



While this appears to be the common reason for choosing charter schools, other teachers relinquish current teaching positions to work at a charter school. Their hopes vary, but are all connected to finding better work environments.

These teachers hope that charter schools will be creative, which will facilitate a more innovative teaching environment. One teacher states:

The idea of working with gifted children appealed to me because I have always been a special ed.[ucation] teacher. I worked with a few gifted children, but generally children with remediation. So this facet of special ed. really appealed to me. And I noticed that there was a gap in education as far as support service for bright children. So the whole concept of working with something new in education for gifted children appealed to me and was challenging.

(Interview 3.3, 10/22/97)

Teachers are attracted to the educational vision of the stated charter mission and the opportunity for perceived innovation in the classroom.

In trying to create such an environment, teachers believe that the autonomous governing structure provides more freedom to explore alternative teaching methods within the classroom. One teacher states that “it [teaching process] is very individual to the teacher. The teacher is given a great deal of control over what they do” (Interview 4.4, 01/08/98). Through this autonomous structure, teachers perceive that they have more control in policy decisions:

And budgeting, we are very involved with. We are all aware of what the budget is and how it is being spent. We are involved in all of the policy decisions. They go to the board obviously and the board votes on them, but the teachers have a great deal of control here unlike administration in most schools. The teachers are basically the administration. We have a principal, but the principal really doesn't do much without consulting the teachers.

(Interview 4.4, 01/07/98)

Another teacher reiterates this same level of input that he believes he contributes to the charter school:

A lot of times I was kind of afraid of - eventually I was just going to become really bored with teaching because a lot of times you are just teaching and then you go home. And I was looking for more - a little more challenging. And I guess I could have found it there, but this seemed to be more of a challenge not only as far as a teaching challenge - just a stimulation - a stimulating challenge to become more involved, to be thinking about how we are going to do this policy instead of waiting for someone to come and tell us. It seemed to be more of an active, total profession you can often see in whatever you are doing. You can often see things that could change or that you would like to do different. I think that with a charter school, with something that is starting up, that you can actually become a part of that.

(Interview 2.2, 10/03/97)

For these teachers, the perceived ability to be involved in policy areas only occurs within charter schools. Not only does this create a greater sense of value as a teacher, but it gives the teachers a sense of empowerment previously not felt.

Other teachers stated that they feel empowered by the collegiality and unity among the staff in their philosophical views on education:

I personally have felt that it is a wonderful chance to grow as a professional to be encouraged to use different teaching techniques which I found in some schools - administrators would say 'Hey, great! Go ahead.' And the other staff would be threatened by them. They would be critical of me and it wasn't that. I just wanted the kids to be given wings to fly. Here, I still believe that, but the teachers are not threatened by outdoing me or whatever. We are all experiencing that. We can teach in innovative ways and not be criticized by our peers. I think that empowers us to be more confident when they are perfectly good and acceptable. So I guess in that sense it does feel more empowering. I guess I need to think about that more often. Offhand that is what I feel right now.

(Interview 3.3, 10/22/97)

For this teacher, the sense of unity and comradery from fellow colleagues creates a professionalism by valuing the work she does in the classroom. Another teacher agrees:

We have the power to talk amongst ourselves, that we have a good situation where somebody can directly relate to what I am saying is a problem because it is right here and how it is a problem - their solution are solutions that can fit our whole school. We really believe that.

(Interview 2.1, 10/03/97)

According to Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek (1998), teachers are searching for an educational option that will enable them to grow as professionals and meet their teaching potential. They feel that they are more effectively meeting a certain educational need with a particular grouping of students. Teachers feel more valued and empowered at the charter school which attempts to allow their voice to be heard. In doing so, the teacher gains a feeling of professionalism, in a more than “deprofessionalized” (Hargreaves, 1994) educational environment.

In listening to the narratives of teachers, I learned that they are attracted to charter schools because they have perceived greater freedom in the way that they are able to teach and in their welcomed participation on school policy issues. I wondered what must be going on for teachers, and realized that some teachers may feel devalued, de-skilled, and de-professionalized by the public education system. Charter schools appear to be their escape in finding a professional alternative.

Teachers have often complained about the inability to teach because of external hindrance from the ever-constraining bureaucracy (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lawton, 1995; Nathan, 1996). They feel unimportant in the hierarchy of the educational institution, and disregarded in terms of their input toward curricula and school policy (Barth, 1990). Such arguments suggest that teachers are increasingly being de-professionalized when they are handed standardized tests, centralized curriculum, and step-by-step lesson plans (Apple,

1989; Apple & Jungck, 1992). This argument is fortified by understanding that “teachers’ work is portrayed as becoming more routinized and de-skilled; more like the degraded work of manual workers and less like that of autonomous professionals trusted to exercise the power and expertise of discretionary judgement in the classrooms they understand best” (Hargreaves, 1994, pp. 137-138).

While teachers purport to be tied down by bureaucratic institutions through external policies which affect them, their workload has also intensified both inside and outside the classroom (Hargreaves, 1994). With increasing demands such as larger class sizes, fewer teacher aides, and inclusive classrooms, teachers are put under considerable strain in trying to cope with these conditions (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 1993). Further, as more accountability is externally imposed, teachers must also manage the extra demands placed on them. The intensification of the workplace has caused many teachers to be pulled in multiple directions, leaving teachers with the feeling that they are unable to carry out their primary job of teaching adequately (Hargreaves, 1994).

In listening to the teachers’ stories, I could relate to what they had said, thinking about the need to be more empowered through the charter school structure. I, too, had wanted to have a voice that was respected as a professional (a title, I believe which is often challenged by other established professions). Despite my understanding and hope that these teachers would be professionally fulfilled in charter schools, I had difficulty understanding what benefits charter schools were offering to teachers. These teachers talk of their ability to innovate in the classroom, to be unrestrained by bureaucratic constraints, and to be empowered. Yet, in each of these areas I do not see how charter schools have fulfilled these

values.

Teachers at the charter school talk of the ability to explore alternative instructional methods. Yet, they are still required to follow the Program of Studies and give the provincial standardized tests. How would a charter school “free” teachers to be more creative and innovative compared to a public school? Teachers in a public school could develop an individual teaching style so long as it followed the Program of Studies. Where does the difference lie? Two teachers who had previous experience with other public schools admitted that their change of teaching practices were negligible (Interview 3.3, 10/12/97, Interview 4.3, 10/24/97). How they had taught in previous settings, was similar to how they now taught. As one teacher commented, “I teach this way no matter where I am teaching” (Interview 3.3, 10/12/97). As teachers speak of the absent bureaucratic institution, I reflect as to how their experiences have changed in a charter school setting.

In 1993, the government of Alberta legislated that all public schools across Alberta have a school council (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997). Principals, teachers, parents, and community members are represented in an attempt to encourage school-based management and to make public education more responsive to the needs of staff, parents, and community. In enacting this legislation, I wonder if teachers have the same input at the public school as they do with the charter school?

Lastly, as teachers discuss creating a unified educational philosophy amongst staff and parents, I wonder whether other stakeholders would hinder this goal. I could not help to think of how in one sense I had been part of a unified staff that taught a specific student population. However, our strengths as a staff quickly dissipated when the parents’ agendas

challenged us both inside and outside of the classroom. Although there is great power in a unified staff, I cannot ignore external pressures and challenges that can still bring about dis-empowerment in other forms.

If the charter schools are about creating a better quality of work for teachers, I wonder if this is just a “honeymoon” ideal in which teachers are looking through rose-coloured glasses, and are blind to the other aspects of the charter schools. After the excitement of teaching in an alternative school has dissipated, I wonder if the differences these teachers proclaim will be as great as they purport? I also worry that the ability to teach in these classrooms may not be easier, but harder, feeling the pressure from the other stakeholders too great to bear.

### **2.1.3 Charismatic Leadership and the Educational Vision: The Administrators’ Quest**

Conversations with administrators led me to believe that they had left the regular public school system to work in charter schools in hopes of providing alternative educational programs for those students who are not getting their educational needs met. The voices of these educators communicate a common notion about the need for charter schools. A typical response is, “It [the impetus for creating a charter school] stems not so much for the need of a charter school but the need to address a particular need for students that were not getting their needs addressed through the regular public and separate schools” (Interview 5.1, 10/29/97). Although there is an inherent critique of public education embedded in administrators answers, they do not want to explicitly condemn the public education system nor do they want charter schools to be viewed in direct competition with public schools. In

this sense, they feel that charter schools create a specific educational niche within the existing public education structure:

If they [charter schools] are set up to provide an option, then that's definitely there. That is what is happening. They are not duplicating existing programs. They are not really competing in any way with what is already there. We are offering an option that is different from what's already there. Right?! So there is no rivalry, but people want to see it there. And of course, there are a lot of misconceptions out there. So charter schools are doing exactly what they were set up to do. To improve education and to provide an alternative.

(Interview 1.5, 10/02/97)

Charter schools are viewed by these administrators as a vehicle through which educational alternatives and enhanced public education are provided.

If the impetus comes from administrators who have previous professional and educational expertise, then greater attention is often given to the planned pedagogy in charter schools. They hope to ensure that the educational plan is not compromised:

They [founders of the charter school who had educational expertise] were very specific in the charter application in terms of what they wanted board members to have expertise in. So they were looking for people who had a background in gifted education because that is what our school is. So they were quite specific in that it had to have a background in curriculum development, one that had a background in research in gifted education.

(Interview 5.1, 10/29/97)

With strict guidelines and clearly defined expectations, these charter school administrators have a greater sense of providing a strong instructional program with support from staff and parents. Moreover, if these people were employed at the charter school, they would be better able to carry out the charter vision in both policy and practice.

In listening to the administrators' stories, there also appears to be a visionary component in their comments. Administrators speak with charisma and educational vision

in what they deem to be progressive educational thinking. Their visions are reflected in these passages:

I think if you consider the public school system as a structure, the need for charter schools is in many different areas, and ours is just one area. Very quickly, we have experimented for years with different ideas, different goals. And I think as a result, parents are becoming more demanding, more watchful. I believe that the education system has to meet the needs of all children, not the norm. But school systems are an evolutionary process, not a methodological process. We did not sit down two hundred years ago and decide where we are going to be in 1997. And as a result, we are seeing shifts and changes in education and the demand for education has changed, and not just education. You could get - sixty years ago - get away with grade five. You don't even consider that as having an education today. Learning to read and write was enough at that time. Now the education system is being pressured to do many more things. As a result, we have never been able to say no. And the public school system is a part of that. If there is a wind going in one direction, they are going to go with it because public education says we have to go with it. Charter schools are not going to go away I hope, unless there is some political sparks that start to fly and there will be. It is political and it is becoming politically volatile.

(Interview 3.2, 10/22/97)

For this administrator, the education system has evolved from a variety of beliefs, practices, and policies. There is no emphasis on consistency in educational policy and practice in public schools, and as a result, has been overwhelmed with the diverse tasks it is now called upon to do. Expectations have arisen, and public education is being called to the task of meeting many of those demands.

For another administrator, public education does not meet the needs of all students.

Charter schools are thus an attempt to cater to specific student populations:

There were situations that I would like to believe that the system did not work for some. And therefore I believed that there needed to be a place that would cater to the needs of these students for whom the existing structure did not work. And for each one, the reason was somewhat different... It is not a school for the best. It is not a school for the rich and famous. It is not a



school for any particular group of religious convictions. It is a school for anyone for whom what has been available from the existing systems has not worked.

(Interview 1.5, 10/02/97)

While this administrator comments that public education does not meet the needs of all students, another administrator explains that the public education system cannot meet the needs of all students due to the diverse values inherent in society:

I think that public education all across North America is in chaos. I am not talking about anybody's will or ability to do their job, I am talking about a question of capacity. And I guess what I mean by that is there are some parents who want rules and some who don't. Some want uniforms, some don't. Some want family life education, some don't. Some want discipline, some don't. Some want framework, and on and on it goes. It is at the point where I don't think that anybody can make a decision anymore without getting your ear shot off by somebody. I think that this is the type of chaos that has really crept into education. I think all of the ills of society have been left at the doors of education to respond to. But when you look at it in that framework, the beauty of a charter school is that defining a very clear program, well founded and researched, educationally sound, parents make an informed choice about having their child at this school, teachers doing the same thing. To me gives an incredible vision and incredible flow in that we are all pulling in the same direction and there is a lot of power in that.

(Interview 2.5, 10/03/97)

The visions of these administrators demonstrate something larger than only creating a charter school. However, little mention is made in asking why such philosophical planning for education cannot occur at the public school level. Instead, they see charter schools as a vision of how public education should be responsive to society's needs. Not only do they comment about the need for their charter school, but they comment on the need for changing the public education system. They also place charter schools in a positive light to be viewed as a viable option to provide effective learning within an "overwhelmed" public education system.

Charismatic leadership is critical to the charter school movement (Wells, 1998). In each charter school, there are often key leaders that provide the vision and direction in mobilizing the charter school. Many of the administrators that I interviewed demonstrate this attribute. Administrators hope to provide a clear vision and strong drive to provide an educational alternative supported by staff who share a similar educational philosophy. They speak of their tireless efforts by which to realize their educational vision. Furthermore, administrators speak of the significant personal sacrifices they make in order for the charter school to succeed:

It isn't for the money. I worked for nothing for three years. My first pay cheque was two days ago and it wasn't much. And I had forgotten what it was like to get a pay cheque. My whole house has been brought in here. All the materials I gathered in fifteen years in education and more are in here - filing cabinets, my kitchen table - everything is in here. Computers. So my husband and I really placed our own financial situation at risk to make this place go.

(Interview 1.5, 10/02/97)

Other administrators talk about working "night and day" (Interview 2.5, 10/03/97) in order to manage the school. Their commitment to the charter school is tremendous and is demonstrated in their resilience and determination. While their motivation and perseverance is noted in their conversations, I wonder whether or not administrators would be able to fulfill their educational vision in practice? I could not dismiss the fact that every administrator said their workload had increased at the charter school. Despite the focused educational vision, administrators must assume more responsibilities through site-based management (Ball, 1994). One administrator notes the encompassing role as an administrator of the school:

I think that any time these people can understand the management and the multi-faceted nature of this business of education and in particular in this school where we have no services that are offered by the school board. We are doing everything - purchasing, the finance, payroll, benefits, and all the substitute teachers, curriculum, program, keeping in touch with Western Canadian Protocol for example, designing our own report card. But if you start to look at it, people do not understand all the demands of the school.

(Interview 2.5, 10/03/97)

I found this to be true at the charter schools I visited. The very real, pressing day-to-day operations of the school are all-encompassing, at times overwhelming. One charter board recalls the strain on a former administrator:

... she probably worked too hard. I mean it was a big, big job. And she was teaching half time, and trying to get a school off the ground. Get teachers in place, and all of these sorts of things... I think she actually wore herself out. The following year she came back and in December she resigned, but agreed to stay on a part-time basis until we could replace her and hire someone.

(Interview 3.1, 10/22/97)

Providing an educational vision is just one of the many duties that administrators must contend with. Other responsibilities are intensified by the very nature of the autonomous governing structure in which the administrator must now perform. Would administrators be able to devote the time necessary to provide an innovative educational program? Ball (1993, 1994) is skeptical that administrators have such time to focus purely on the educational plan. As site-based management and increased devolution of responsibilities are passed down to the administrator, Ball (1993, 1994) contends that the role of the administrator shifts from that of an educator and mentor to that of a business manager.

Nonetheless, these administrators have given much of their energy to trying to make a charter school work. Many have worked "night and day" making the charter plan possible. Was the personal investment so great that administrators would become too attached to the

vision, not allowing other voices to emerge? One charter board member comments:

I think because people put so much time into developing the proposal, that personal stake becomes part of that in the success of that charter proposal. And often it is very hard to take a step and let the charter run its course.  
(Interview 2.7, 10/30/97)

Another charter board member adds:

Oh I can understand, but it becomes detrimental to the growth of the school by hanging on to the past.  
(Interview 2.7, 10/30/97)

The administrators' visions are driven by their tireless drive and effort. Would this same drive quiet other voices trying to speak to the vision of the charter school? Can the voice of the administrators override the other voices? In one charter school, the administrator has situated herself amongst friends to reduce any problems between the stakeholders:

As far as I know, there have not been any problems between myself and the board. And I know the people personally. I have known them for a long time. They've known me for a long time. And they are heavily involved with the school in the daily operation of the school. One of the things that I wanted to avoid was a group of individuals working separately and oblivious of the others. There is a lot of communication here. Sometimes overlapping but at least everybody knows what everybody is thinking and doing.  
(Interview 1.5, 10/02/97)

Conflicting voices do not seem to emerge in this charter school because it appears that the principal has aligned herself with colleagues that share her vision. Yet, in other schools where the student population may be greater or more diverse, other administrators do not share the same scenario. In such cases, a conflict may arise where the administrator's vision competes with the other voices within charter schools.

One administrator explains the various requests he receives from the stakeholders, diverting attention from the educational program that he envisions:

I think in our first year, I had fifty separate requests for differing types of programs related to the instructional program that goes on in the classrooms. So for example, teams at noon, activities, science clubs, so on so forth. Fifty separate requests is a lot. And to me, that is getting pulled in too many directions. And unless you manage your growth through a clear set of objectives that everyone has to agree to, it can spread your energies in too many directions and cause you to not do well. Our core purpose, our objectives is to get better results with kids, and to provide leadership in an innovative educational purpose. That is our purpose. Anything that detracts from that, we really don't question. Plus the fact of what a very school looks like in the eyes of very many parents.

(Interview 2.5, 10/03/97)

How does an administrator reconcile these various requests? In order to provide a clear vision, the administrator often becomes a gatekeeper of the school in approving or rejecting programs. Yet, under the perceived concept of shared governance and voice, does the administrator have a right to make decisions unilaterally?

It seems unclear how to resolve these dilemmas. What is the balance between having a charismatic administrator in providing a vision for the school and the threat of creating a "one-person" vision with little input from other stakeholders? Can balance be achieved? Can clear educational plans be developed under a structure that purports to include all voices?

#### **2.1.4 The Voice of Charter Board Members: Accountability in Action**

Frustrations and concerns about the perceived deteriorating nature of public education resonate throughout Canadian society (Freedman, 1994; Lawton, 1996). The low perception of public education has consequently created an outcry for greater accountability in education to meet the demands of the competitive global market (Lewington & Orpwood, 1993;

Freedman, 1994; Raham, 1996). The Economic Council of Canada (1992) report entitled, *A Lot to Learn*, rates Canadian students as achieving only mediocre results. In order for students to compete in a globally competitive market, it states that education will have to become more efficient, effective, and demanding on its students.

Part of the allure of the charter school movement, is its measure for increased accountability and efficiency through outcomes-based indicators. With no capital funding, charter schools must provide enhanced delivery of education with less funding. Furthermore, charter schools must demonstrate that students are showing increased levels of achievement. The charter school must also be financially viable and meet the requirements of the School Act. Charter schools are then only given a three to five year contract to demonstrate all of these performance-based outcomes. If the charter school fails to meet any of these requirements, the charter agreement is threatened to be revoked.

Meeting these requirements are taken up by charter board members to ensure successful “accountability” in charter schools. Charter board members enforce the values that are congruent with ensuring accountability such as: develop and review policy; operate the budget; fulfill all legal and accounting requirements; and hire personnel. Charter board members are responsible for ensuring that the charter school fulfills its mandate and remains accountable to the School Act requirements. Although the *Charter School Handbook* uses outcomes-based language to monitor and evaluate the success of schools, little research has been done to examine the measures used to evaluate charter schools. At present, provincial standardized tests are used to rate students’ performance. Annual audited statements and business plans are monitored by external evaluators.

Advocates of charter schools believe that charter schools will provide the competitive edge for other public schools. One charter board member states:

I think here in X charter school, this charter school is providing some badly needed competition. I think that charter schools are fighting to exist, and the public school system is not really doing their job to educate... I think that it [the local school board] should force them to examine themselves and change...

(Interview 1.1, 10/02/97)

The outward display of accountability becomes a key feature of charter schools.

Subsequently, charter board members pursue values of “accountability”:

We are responsible for the government grants, and accountability of those expenditures. We reserve the right to solicit all donations, and I qualify that with corporate, and disperse those funds in a proper manner. Policy - responsible for enforcing and establishing for the overall operations of the Y charter school within the terms of the charter, and in regards to the guidelines of the Y Society. Charter - responsibility and accountability for the fulfilment of the terms and guidelines of the Society. Those are the functions of the board. We have a duty to make sure that it is running, and the government itself, and to ensure compliance with Alberta Education.

(Interview 2.7, 10/30/97)

Assuming similar roles of the local school district, board members have considerable power and control over the governance and operation of the school in the name of accountability.

Overriding all other perceived notions of autonomy and freedom of the school, it appears that the eyes and ears of the school ultimately resides within the board members' control. One charter board member comments:

Well, what role does the board play? Well, we have the ultimate responsibility of the going-on in the school, as you know and we very much feel that. And so I speak with [the principal] and we discuss a lot of things, just on-going things: how things are going. We talk about individual students and parents and the teachers and so on forth. See where things are at, what are the areas of concern. Try as much as we can to be a “one mind” - is to deal with things such as hiring and firing - are joint decisions by the principal

and the board.

(Interview 1.3, 10/02/97)

Charter board members feel the resounding pressure to ensure that the charter school is held accountable:

And I guess that is where we are trying to educate customers that we have to be responsible, we have to follow the rules, we have to comply to legislation, and that's the bottom line. That is where you need the dedication.

(Interview 2.7, 10/30/97)

As a result of the accountability structure monitoring the charter school movement, charter board members feel that they must be the watchful keeper of the school. Consequently, the voice of charter board members resound throughout the school, influencing and voting on most or all school policy decisions.

As charter board members delve into these issues of accountability, how does that affect other values that are brought to charter schools?<sup>4</sup> Will issues of accountability overshadow values of innovation and choice? Will outcomes-based indicators compromise some educational goals which may resist such indicators? Does the voice of charter board members override the voice of others in maintaining an "accountable" school?

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My intention is not to question whether charter board members are right or wrong in ensuring that they have fulfilled their measures of "accountability". They have been given this responsibility and must fulfill their role. Rather, the intent is to question whether the value of accountability compromises values of choice and innovation. Questions of whether accountability is an accurate reflection of a successful school and what it means to use outcomes-based measures to evaluate charter schools, are research topics unto themselves.



## 2.2 Voice, Choice, and Power

Each voice brings values to the charter school. In the discourse of choice, stakeholders embrace different elements of choice they hope for within the charter school. Although common threads connect the voices together in hopes of fulfilling their personal and professional needs, there is also significant variance within the stakeholders that must also be considered in examining the discourse of choice in practice. This becomes problematic in examining how voice is heard and practiced in the charter school. However, can all voices be accommodated under the model of charter schools?

Accountability, achievement, and educational vision encircle the topic of charter schools. There are a multiplicity of voices claiming that charter schools meet the needs of student populations underserved by the failing public school system. But I take pause - I question the range of voices that I am hearing. I am listening for what I am being told by the silences, by the things that are being left out. As Belenky et al. (1986) states, voice is "more than an academic shorthand for a person's point of view" (p. 18). Voice not only includes what is heard, but what is also silenced. Fiumara (1995) contends that it is the reciprocal relationship between voice and listening that meaning and understanding can occur. However, in examining voice, I wonder if charter school individuals also listen for silence. In reflection, I wonder to what degree certain voices are heard and others silenced? Does listening occur within charter schools to hear the competing voices, and still be able to come together in unity? Although choice is projected by giving voice to individuals in charter schools, very little is said about the concept of listening. I reflect and consider whether silence is interpreted as being satisfied or in agreement with the existing values. Those who

challenge or question existing values or voices, may be seen as resistant or disgruntled.

I understand how one's voice may silence others. I had taught in a school where the parents' voice had caused the teachers to be silenced. Their voice had been privileged at the expense of teachers' voices. Teachers did attempt to challenge the parents, but were resisted. Unable to be heard, teachers became exhausted with the battle, and removed themselves from the situation. This is, as I see it, because voice is connected to power and power is connected to control.

In the difficulty in challenging powerful voices, Wells (1996) notes that individuals who do not "fit the mould" soon leave the charter school environment. The act of silencing often leaves those individuals dis-empowered. They feel unable to impact the system which they thought would grant them choice, voice, and power. One board member states:

... there are families in the school that do not believe in differentiation. And the charter is based on education being delivered that way. Either you support it, or you look somewhere else. You can't change that. That is a given.

(Interview 2.7, 10/30/97)

This seems to be quite common in most charter schools that have been studied (Wells, 1996; Levin & Riffel, 1997; Martinez, Godwin, and Kemerer, 1996). If certain individuals challenge existing values, those individuals are either encouraged to leave, or become disgruntled and leave. Other people who believe that charter schools are an attempt to have more input, and are silenced, also tend to leave the school in search of something better:

I had been on the board with these people for the eight months and I found them to be very intense, and at one point, this meeting in January - the parent meeting - Mr. W. said this is all about power, and this wasn't for me, it was all about my children getting a good education... These people were very

independent. They wanted to have the final say.

(Interview, 6.1, 12/15/97)

This raises the question of whether all individuals should be heard, and whether all voices can be heard? Without questioning the values that underlie these voices, it is difficult to decide which values and stakeholders are privileged over others. Furthermore, in the attempt to push values of individual choice over the collective good, there is little consensus as to the values the charter school should project.

Kohn (1998) suggests that charter schools privilege the voice of “pushy” parents while silencing others. Furthermore, there is also a sense that such parents “are not concerned that all children learn; they are concerned that *their* children learn” (Kohn, 1998, p. 570). This is reiterated by one parent who felt that parents on the charter board were biased in their decisions. “I think we need everyone to look at it from - as parents, even though we try not too, we always think of our kids. And I feel some of the decisions are being made because of their child” (Interview 2.3, 10/03/97). The need to decide what is best for the school appears to be pushed aside in deciding what will be “best” for their child. Not only is this concept individualistic, but it is dangerous in that it can create considerable strife in the daily working environment for parents, teachers, and administrators.

While equal voice may be both unrealistic and undesirable, nonetheless, proponents of charter schools portray a picture where parents, teachers and administrators share in the ability to make school decisions (Chubb & Moe, 1990). This unproblematic portrayal appears both naive and simplistic. In examining the meaning of choice through the voices of participants, it appears that charter schools may create an environment that fosters (and

festers) competing visions and values. The potential for manipulation and abuse of individuals pushing personal agendas is all the more apparent in charter schools, where individual choice is encouraged and valued over the common good. Individualism encourages individuals to become more assertive in pushing *their* values over others. To gain voice in charter schools means to gain power and strength over others. Competing values and the play for power often becomes the overwhelming weakness in most charter schools (Dawson, 1998c). Stakeholders strive toward building a successful charter school with a strong charter, yet the ways to achieve this are ambiguous and undefined. The *Minnesota Charter Schools Evaluation: Final Report* (1996-97) notes this concern as it states, "Position titles may be superficially similar, but the expectations of what will be done by people in the roles of student, parent, teacher, or administrator may be quite different"(pg. xiii). As a result, the charter school may become fragmented and disunified in setting a course of action toward meeting the objectives of the charter mandate.

Some speculation can be made as to the diverging interests and competing visions that are exacerbated in charter schools. As some parents attempt to "escape" from public schools as a result of their dissatisfaction, many show signs of assertive behaviour to ensure that the current school meets the needs of their children. Some teachers discuss the "neediness" of parents to be frequently informed and have constant involvement in their children's education (Interview 3.3, 10/22/978). One teacher comments on the very close line between parents being interested and involved in their children's work, and becoming too intrusive:

It is very, very personal. I mean people can be too personal because they

know what you are doing all the time, and ask if you are getting married soon, and what your love life is about.

(Interview 4.4, 01/0898)

This constant pervasiveness of parents appears to be prevalent in charter schools. Other researchers have also commented on the number of disgruntled parents flocking to charter schools (Rofes, 1998). The trend in a Massachusetts study (Rofes, 1998) indicates that there appears to be a departure of “families with a long history of complaints against the local school district and students who have had disciplinary problems in the traditional public schools” (p.6). Although superintendents from this local school district call it a blessing in disguise to be rid of such unsupportive parents, can charter schools be successful in satisfying these same parents?

Although the charter school proponents portray the movement as neutral and apolitical (Freedman, 1995; Nathan, 1996; Vanourek, Finn, Bierlein, & Manno, 1998), certain values and voices prevail over others (Apple, 1995, Cookson, 1991a). In the following chapter I show how the voices I heard compete to perpetuate the values that they bring to charter schools.

## CHAPTER THREE

### COMPETING VALUES AND THE PLAY OF POWER

#### 3.1 Controlling the Agenda

*What are the central agendas of social purpose which contend for the power to shape our society? What are their counterparts in educational purpose? What alternatives do these agendas suggest in how we sponsor, organize and judge learning? Finally, what issues do these alternatives raise for our schools and for the society which creates, legitimates and empowers them?*  
(Paquette, 1991, p. 4)

In trying to gain an understanding of individuals' perspectives in their experiences of charter schools, I now must contend with the competing voices that I heard in their stories about charter schools. I explore competing visions of how voice is heard, and how stakeholders attempt to "name" (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993) and claim choice. How choice is represented and put forth by various individuals may become the defining features of what is valued in charter schools. Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) raise this issue in what is represented or "named". It is the issue of the privilege of voice and the play for power that may result in stakeholders' attempts to define choice. I return to the participants and listen to their experiences of their perceptions of choice in charter schools, and who decides how choice is defined.

##### 3.1.1 Governance: The Achilles Heel of Charter Schools

A problematic area of the charter school movement is governance. Most charter schools across Alberta, with the exception of one or two, have had to resolve conflict between the charter board and the administration (Dawson, 1998c). Difficulty appears to lie

in the shared responsibility of administration and the charter board to manage and operate a charter school. The *Charter School Handbook* (1996) clearly states that the charter board is responsible and held accountable for the management of the school.

The time commitment of the board is tremendous with frequent meetings and large levels of responsibility. Few people are willing to commit to such involvement, and many find the responsibility overwhelming:

... you are dealing with a combination of parent volunteers and educational professionals. The parent volunteers who give their time and energy, and the level of commitment and understanding wasn't perhaps sufficient in and of itself to carry this thing through the approval process that we needed to go through... You need someone who will really carry the ball on that.

(Interview 2.6, 10/09/97)

... I really think that it is difficult to find people in the community who have the time and the will to commit to something like this unless they are educators. So if they have the interest - otherwise, it doesn't appeal to a wide base.

(Interview 2.7, 10/30/97)

In most cases, the composition of boards are made up primarily of parents who are willing to make this commitment for their children. While these parents may be able to give many hours in trying to run the charter board, they may not have the knowledge or expertise to effectively run a school. The *Minnesota Charter Schools Evaluation: Final Report* (1997) noted that, "For many Minnesota charter schools the challenges have been particularly apparent in the areas of participatory governance and in the development and implementation of student evaluation and accountability systems..." (p. xiii). The Little Hoover Commission (1996) concur, "The formation of some charter schools has been needlessly more difficult as they have struggled to reinvent the wheel with little knowledgeable assistance" (p. 9).

Studies recommend that external mechanisms be offered to train and support board members who may not have the professional, financial, or legal expertise to interpret the School Act for which they are held accountable (U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Little Hoover Commission, 1996; Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, 1997).

However, the administrator still remains accountable to the board, and further, is usually an employee of the board. This becomes problematic in the working relationship between administration and the charter board:

I think that [the] fundamental error in the concept of governance of the school is the degree to which parents can become involved in making decisions about what is going to go on and what the curriculum is going to be. Certainly I think that they have to have input, and that is very important to consider their input. But it is also important for parents to realize that someone who is involved with education for a long time and understands what works and what doesn't in terms of administration, in terms of time tabling, supervision, and legal requirements with the School Act and so on, that those opinions also have to be respected. For myself personally, although they were well-meaning these people, there was potentially, and proved to be correct, that there was going to be a constant conflict between the professional side of the organization and a small group of parents who were in the situation of being in the founding group therefore very, very influential.

(Interview 7.1, 01/22/98)

The administrator is held responsible for the operation of the school, and yet often has his or her hands tied by the decisions of the charter board. In trying to name who is ultimately accountable for the success of the charter school, one charter board member relays a source of conflict between the board and administration:

We [the charter board] have to be accountable in ensuring that the program is being delivered. And that is a good role for a charter board to have. It is enough in and of itself to be accountable. Having said that, I think other people on the board see themselves - because they are board members - having some authority to intrude on administration issues. To get involved with the administration of the school. Now, personally and philosophically,



I have a real difference of opinion.

(Interview 2.6, 10/09/97)

Some charter schools have tried to address this problem by attempting to make clearer distinctions between administration and governance with the administration managing the day to day operation of the school with the charter board focusing on long term policy, strategic planning, and legal and accounting issues. However, even with clearer roles and responsibilities, there are many times where these roles become unclear. Another charter board member states:

At the philosophical level, I believe the principal should be managing the day to day operations of the school, and that includes your human resources. I would fully expect that many charter schools would disagree with that position. And I know that some of our membership disagrees with that position. So that is very much a personal opinion. Where the distinction between the role of principal and board become rather blurry has to do with some aspects of strategic planning. We are looking at a number of alternatives of establishing a high school. For example, we are looking at associations with IBM around some form of corporate sponsorship. There is the possibility of negotiations with the business consortia which might involve facilities of the school as well. All of those kinds of things have to involve the principal. And the fact is that the principal is usually the point of first contact, but they must also involve the board. And the board has to be actively involved on these issues. So there we cannot make a clear distinction other than to say when push comes to shove the principal acts on the board's decisions.

(Interview 3.4, 10/23/97)

Despite attempts to define roles and responsibilities between charter board and administration, there is still significant volatility in charter schools (Dawson, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d; Marshall, 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Marshall & Stewart, 1998; Stewart & Marshall, 1998b; Thomson, 1988a, 1998b; Toneguzzi, 1998a, 1998b). The tension between charter board members and administrators is noted in most charter schools. Charter board members

feel that it is their responsibility to ensure that the school is held accountable in all areas. In the name of accountability, charter board members often restrain administrators from managing the school. Consequently, one charter school administrator resigned from her position due to the board's actions because she felt that the charter board had become intrusive in all of the administrators' duties (Dawson, 1998b). Other charter schools have had charter boards resign in protest because of the ambiguity of roles and responsibilities between board and administration. Constant energy is given to try to alleviate conflict among boards and administration. This, however, remains a constant source of contention and energy depletion.

### **3.1.2 Parental Values: Fragmenting the Charter School Vision**

Parents choose charter schools for different reasons. The Hudson Institute Project (1997) lists fifteen various reasons that parents choose charter schools ranging from "Small size of charter school" to "My child was doing badly in regular school" (p. 6). I think and ponder how these values may alter the purpose and goals of the charter school.

This is felt by one teacher who points out the difficulty in trying to provide the educational plan of the charter school when parents come to the charter school for various reasons:

I guess one obstacle, I guess, would be that there are some families that have chosen this school, not necessarily for what the school stands for or what it is trying to achieve. They may have chosen the school because of whatever history they had with public education, or whatever kind of education - if it's just a bad teacher or - So I think that there is one obstacle in that there are some parents who really haven't bought into the program shall we say.

(Interview 2.2, 10/03/97)

Many parents I talked to comment on the atmosphere of the charter school. They like the small class sizes, the individual attention given by teachers, the sense of safety and discipline. Yet, relatively few parents focus on the educational program offered. One parent states that she would have sent her child regardless of the program. For her, it was just an avenue “out” of the public education system. She recalls how she fears public schools:

One of the other things that I have become increasingly concerned about in the public system is violence. It is not appearing to be addressed. Kids are starting to carry knives to school. I have a niece in junior high and she excelled in sports. She was beat up on the way home from school one day by a bunch of other girls. Those kind of things, and I am just horrified what we saw in the United States ten years ago may be starting to happen here, and I don't see anything. It's like the public and separate school system are just throwing up their hands. Well, guess what? It doesn't happen in this school and it is not because anyone says you are not bringing that. It just isn't discussed because of the basic philosophy that you are expected to have respect for yourself and others around you.

(Interview 4.2, 10/24/97)

For this parent, the charter school has become a haven to shelter her child from the perceived and real violence she has felt within the public education system. Other parents hope to find a school where common morals and ethics are practised in the school (Wells, 1996).

Disgruntled parents of the public education system often flock to the charter school in which they can have a voice in the education provided (Rofes, 1998). However, as Rofes (1998) contends, such disgruntled parents often find little satisfaction at the charter school and continue to shuffle their children around looking for more “suitable” forms of schools. One parent I interviewed earlier in the year, became frustrated by January and threatened to take her child out of the charter school because she felt that the charter school practices were unethical (Personal Fieldnotes, 01/12/98).

Other parents have been accused of deviating from the educational program to suit their own personal agendas. One charter school board member recalls such incidents:

One of the fathers, or the husband of a lady who was running for the facilities, was telling everyone 'Please vote for my wife because then we can get the school moved up into the North.' That is a very strong agenda right there. Another one was a fellow, the same fellow who wrote the letter about the bussing. In his very first meeting in one of the committees was 'I want to write a policy that says that we can have more than five votes.' You can't do that, you know.

(Interview 2.7, 10/30/97)

Another charter school board member similarly states:

... we have had situations where different parents or different groups of parents felt that their view point on day to day operations should carry the day with the principal, not realizing that their view points - assuming that their view points are those of all the parents in the school - when in fact they were not. And we have had problems with that, and some kids were pulled from the school because of those types of parental concerns. Now, I don't have any background in educational administration. I can't say how typical that happens in a public school. Probably more than it once did, with it being easier for parents to move their kids from school to school. I suspect that the tendency in charter schools for that kind of problem is much greater.

(Interview 3.4, 10/23/97)

Parents who come with different premises to the charter school concept may pursue agendas to fulfill personal needs. As a result, competing values may result between parents in determining which values prevail in the charter school.

### **3.1.3 Parental Involvement and Teacher Freedom**

The provincial government has encouraged parents to become more involved with their children's education. In attempts to make parents more active partners in education, they have mandated that all public schools create school councils with the principal, teachers,

parents, and community members as representatives (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997). Parental participation takes on many other forms which directly involve them with the activities of their child. Often parents spend time in the classroom, assisting the teacher in various projects. Fund raising is a major aspect of the charter school movement in order to buy necessary and supplementary resources for the school. In some charter schools, parents are required to sign a contract which states that they will be an active participant in their children's education. At what point, however, does a parent's involvement infringe on the teacher's capacity to teach?

Charter schools try to implement innovative educational plans to enhance the existing public education system. Thus, change occurs at the various levels of the charter school in areas of governance, administration, curriculum, and instruction. This involves experimenting with new procedures, new instructional methods and techniques, and new ways of viewing education. Change may also occur by turning back to traditional and conservative practices not practised in schools.<sup>5</sup> In both instances, significant change is difficult to implement without significant resistance from various stakeholders:

I think that change is the number one obstacle. I think as a society we don't handle it very well. I ask questions like do we really need a library? And you know - being a new school - that is a major focus by the parents. Our library would be not even average at best I would venture to say. And yet on the other hand, do we need a library when you look at the technological information highway that you can access for research? When you look at it that way, why would you spend four thousand to five thousand on a set of encyclopedias. It doesn't make any sense to me. If we look at the literature

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Some of the charter schools have created curriculum that reflects a "Back to Basics" philosophy. The schools emphasize teacher-directed instruction, regimented homework, phonics instruction and math drills.

component of the library, maybe the best way to look at it is to house all of those materials right into the classroom. It would be aligned with the themes that are being taught. Does it make more sense? Is it more functional? So the questions, do we need a library? And if we need a library, what should it look like? So I think when you start asking questions like that, that you really upset people. I think that if I brought up the issue of the calculator with the parents' council, I would still have the war. People still argue about the new math, and the new math is thirty years old.

(Interview 2.5, 10/03/97)

Levin and Riffel (1997) examine how schools respond to parental choice and market influences. They conclude that schools are poor at responding to parental concerns and market influences. These authors suggests that one of the reasons for unresponsive schools is because people still view the educational institution in a very conservative nature. Change is not only difficult for administrators and educators who have been trained and socialized under the current status quo, but the general public also has a conservative view of how schools should educate. "Change doesn't come easy, particularly in education because we have all been through it, and have some pretty strong ideas about what ought to happen. So I think that is more the problem than anything" (Interview 2.5, 10/03/97). Thus, administrators and educators within the school often have a difficult time projecting significant change without tremendous resistance from various parents.

This dilemma is beginning to emerge in the charter school debate. With the exception of one parent, all others stated that they came from other schools as a result of having had negative experiences. They made a conscious decision for their children to attend a charter school and they have chosen to "take back" their kids education. Weary of public education and concerned about their child's future, many of the parents state that they have become very involved and informed about the learning of their child so as not to repeat any

negative experiences. One parent comments about volunteering on a daily basis at the school which she never felt comfortable in past schools. She feels that now she is directly in touch with her child's learning. "I like being able to stand outside of a teacher's door knowing that I'm going to enjoy what I am hearing what is going on inside" (Interview 2.4, 10/03/97). While this may prove to be a positive step toward encompassing parents into the learning process, it does present other problems.

Moving aside from an assisting and supportive nature, parents also challenge and question many of the teachers' actions and instructional methods. This may be viewed as the potentially negative perspective of parental aggressiveness and intrusiveness (Kohn, 1998). While input is encouraged, it does become problematic for teachers to take risks in the classroom. One assistant principal at a charter school questioned parents as to how teachers are to experiment and explore new educational methods when "parents are breathing down the teachers' back with every step that they take" (Interview 7.3, 01/12/98). Other teachers have questioned where the boundary lies between parents and teachers. One teacher comments on how he receives daily phone calls to his home from parents with various concerns and questions (Interview 5.4, 01/08/98). While he is pleased with the close interaction between parents and him, he concedes that often parents go too far in questioning his teaching practice.

Due to the large parental influence at both a personal and board level, teachers have concerns over the degree to which parents have control over the classroom. While the teacher may be responsible for instruction taught in the classroom, it is nonetheless a "parent-run" school. Decisions made in the classroom have ultimate repercussions at the board level.

One teacher describes a situation when she decided to leave the school because she was being manipulated by parents who held her teaching contract over her head. Receiving a contract for the following year often depended on the special “requests” from parents being met by the teacher:

The expectation was please the parent, make the parent happy, even if it went against the curriculum - whatever - it was keep the parent happy. So you as a teacher, I think it puts the profession - well, it's not a profession when its like that because they are telling you what to do and you are supposed to smile and nod. Also, it doesn't build any continuity or teamwork within your structure.

(Interview 7.4, 01/22/98)

As one teacher put it, “People should be aware of what I am doing and I have to be accountable for it, but it should be under my control. That is why I was hired. That is what I went to school for” (Interview 5.4, 01/08/98).

Many of my interview discussions noted an uncomfortableness in the relationship between parents and teachers, and is echoed in the debate over professional and non-professionals. One teacher who left a charter school felt that those teachers who willingly comply to all parent requests are kept with the charter school. Unfortunately, she felt that many such teachers are young and inexperienced, and appear to be manipulated and exploited in order to receive a positive evaluation and a renewal in their contract (Interview 7.2, 12/15/97). Furthermore, teachers that resist some of the parental demands are often challenged by a strong parental group and urged to resign or transfer to another school (Personal Fieldnotes 01/22/98).

I wonder whether teachers' ability to practice new and innovative teaching methods are put in a precarious position as a result of the influence and power of parents? Parental



involvement in charter schools has taken a step further toward not only assisting teachers in their roles, but pushing for more input and control over many of the aspects within the classroom setting. Is the decision-making control within the classroom a contested space between teachers and parents, and between competing ideologies and interests?

### **3.1.4 Corporate Culture versus Teaching Culture**

The popularity of charter schools, supporters purport, will be as a result of a system which is accountable through “consumer-driven market forces” allowing parents to have the freedom in choosing the type of school their children could attend and the type of education that they could receive. The results claiming innovative schools which meet the needs of individuals. By enticing the parent with more opportunities, more innovation, and higher student achievement, many stakeholders believe that charter schools are the panacea for the ills of the public education system. Key terms such as accountability, performance, excellence, opportunity, higher student achievement, innovation, and choice play an integral role in the charter school movement. The Alberta government creates this discourse around charter schools promising desired outcomes to the consumer, and further framing achievement within a particular paradigm assuming that such qualities are not only desired but required in order to be competitive in the global marketplace.

Alberta has developed this reform agenda in shaping the way education is implemented. Over the last five years in education, Alberta has seen significant fiscal cuts to public education. In 1993, the Alberta provincial government pushed forward a deficit elimination program in attempts to balance their budget. At the roundtable discussions held

during 1993, the provincial government intended to cut all department funding by twenty per cent (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997). However, education challenged this reduction by stating since “Alberta had one of the highest pupil/teacher ratios in Canada and one of the lowest expenditures per pupil outside the Atlantic provinces... that Education be spared the deep cuts to spending that were generally anticipated at that time.” (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997, p. 383). However the financial effects were still great within public education. Alberta Education’s budget was to be cut by twelve per cent. All teachers were asked to take a five per cent wage roll-back to buffer the cutbacks. Schools boards across Alberta were reduced from one hundred and forty-one boards to sixty-eight over the course of two years. Funding for Early Childhood Services were cut from four hundred hours to two hundred hours per child per year.

Other structural and philosophical changes paralleled the financial cutbacks that were being made to education. The Economic Council of Canada (1992) issued a report entitled, *A Lot to Learn*, stating that Canadian schools were in a state of mediocrity. To combat this complacency, the report concluded that “achievement can be improved in the public-school system by reducing interference, increasing the principal’s freedom, disseminating the results of assessments and increasing parental freedom of choice among schools” (1992, p. 13). This has been the case in Alberta. The Alberta government enacted legislation that would reflect goals of accountability, performance, and choice (Alberta Education, 1993, 1994b, 1995a, 1996a, 1996c). It brought forth the establishment of school councils which gave more power and involvement to parents in all schools. School-based management was also developed in order to give both parents and principals more decision-

making control at the school level. Further to this decentralization, the latest educational reform put forth by the Alberta Provincial government is its legislation on charter schools which grants even more autonomy and flexibility in exchange for accountability and performance through three to five year contracts. In its latest push for further decentralization and individualism, the Alberta government has increased funding to private schools across Alberta despite large opposition. As the Alberta provincial government has embraced market-driven principles within the public education system.

The *Charter School Handbook* (1996) is shaped by the language of accountability. The charter school's success is further determined by outcomes-based indicators (Alberta Government, 1997). However, often market-driven language may be seen as incongruent to the practice of teaching and learning. The clash between corporate and teaching culture often ensues.

One principal states the clash between educational philosophy and the corporate vision:

Typically I think where we could get really side-tracked, which is one of our worries, is the product which is the child and the educational process, guaranteeing that you run the business side of the school in a highly excellent and efficient manner may not necessarily give in to the product of the child. And I think we need to work in those areas to make sure that we are acting responsibly in the business area and yet our thrust and our focus and our time and our energy, innovative thought areas and educational areas, we get pulled into the business area. And we are trying to resist. And unfortunately, educators do have a lot of knowledge about how things are done, but we also don't have any knowledge about the accounting and the levels of accountability... My view is that the kid is at the top. And when you have business people and accountants, lawyers, all skilled people, we have them coming from that culture and top-down management. When we read the legislation, the ultimate responsibility is the boards. And you have conflicting philosophical thrusts which really need to be worked out. We are

in the midst of that kind of thing right now.

(Interview 2.5, 10/03/97)

However, at the same time, there is an opposite thrust from charter board members to remain accountable:

One of the things that has come out of the reports is that the failure of charter schools is finance. It is not the program, it is the business part of it. If you are not fiscally responsible in any business, you go bankrupt.

(Interview 2.7, 10/30/97)

These values set different tones in determining school policy.

One charter school has mandated small classroom sizes. However, to compensate for the lower student/teacher ratio, teachers' salaries are significantly lower as compared to the local district:

... unfortunately we have teachers this year who have substantially lower than union rates, and that we really find difficult. And I think we can't always be doing this. We have to find ways down the line, no doubt by increasing our classroom sizes. There is no other way to come to at least a reasonable remuneration. It's working its way up, but we have to get those loans paid off so we can put some of that money to teacher and aide remuneration - salaries. Then we will bring them up quite a bit, so that they are in the range. And I don't think that wages are going - are operating in the classes - we could ever fully pay ATA rates because we are certainly providing services for, to some extent, you probably know about the high need students here which is a very nice thing.

(Interview 1.3, 10/02/97)

While many parents are attracted to this feature, it is difficult to attract teachers who are willing to work under such circumstances. One administrator concedes this problem:

And of course the most obvious reason that people don't look at teaching at this school or have not accepted positions is because the salaries. And that of course is understandable. Bills have to be paid, food has to be bought, and utilities have to be paid or else the heat is cut off and you freeze. That's

understandable.

(Interview 1.5, 10/02/97)

In developing a competitive edge in regards to class size, the president of the Alberta Teachers' Association worries about the charter school compromising the level of expertise of the teaching staff willing to work there:

They [charter schools] have exploited young teachers because that is basically who is teaching in the charters schools in many instances are young teachers who couldn't get jobs elsewhere. They want to teach so badly that they will teach for nothing. But this is exploitation and it is unfair.

(Interview 8.2, 12/16/97)

She contends that a corporate, competitive agenda pushed by charter board members overrides staffing considerations which may affect the quality of the educational program.

Some charter boards have attempted to introduce accountability measures practised in the business community:

What happens, which I am sure you are aware of is the board is being perceived of doing something that is not supported by administration. For example, the review of administration which is totally within business practice of any organization. Bad feelings come up and you start getting people who are second guessing you. Why are they doing this to us? Why? Why? Why? And we say because we want to improve to make this work. We want to make sure that it is moving forward. And so these voids get filled with rumours. We are probably getting a bit killed right now with rumours.

(Interview 2.7, 10/30/97)

Another charter school is trying to create merit or performance pay to ensure more effective teachers and administrators (Alberta Labour Relations, 1996). The attempt to implement performance pay has faced much resistance among the teachers at this charter school. As a result of trying to put forth private industry mechanisms to measure and evaluate teachers' performance, these teachers have taken their dispute to the Alberta Relations' Board and

have won their bid to become organized. Consequently, those teachers have asked the Alberta Teachers' Association to become their collective bargaining agent.

Another school faces slight different issues of accountability. One charter school caters to students requiring English as a Second Language. Despite this student population, the charter mandate states that all students will pass provincial standardized tests, with fifteen per cent achieving excellence. The high level of student achievement seems unrealistic and unattainable in the eyes of teachers. At present, the school has been unable to meet the standard, and has consequently received a poor external evaluation (Dickson, 1998). Another charter school's philosophy is to foster the students' development through an environment of collaboration (Bosetti, O'Reilly, Gereluk, 1998). Formative evaluation is used more frequently, emphasizing graduated improvement and progression. Schools that use primarily formative evaluation find the outcomes-based measurement problematic. Some charters schools compromise their educational philosophy in order to meet the outcomes-based requirements as set out by the *Charter School Handbook*.

Do corporate driven agendas infringe on educational goals? How does the value of accountability affect the educational purpose of charter schools? Are some charter schools set up for failure in that some student populations cannot meet such expectations? Will accountability measures set up a certain "type" of charter school that are able to meet such criteria? These are some questions that arise in the play of voice between corporate and teaching culture. These questions are easy to ask, but difficult to answer. Yet, such exploration and discussion need to occur.

### 3.2 Competing Values/Competing Interests: Contradictions in Practice?

*Relations of dominance, then, and of necessity struggles against them, are not theoretical abstractions, somewhere out there in an ethereal sphere unconnected to daily life. Rather, they are based on and built out of an entire network of daily social and cultural relations and practices. Dominance depends on both leadership and legitimation.*

(Apple, 1995, p. xv)

How does a charter school deal with the different values that are evident in the discourse of choice? Which values do you consider in determining school policy? Can you enhance individual diversity through charter schools, and at the same time, create a unified vision within the charter school? As I asked the participants about their reasons for choosing charter schools, how they believed choice and innovation were practiced in the charter schools, and opportunities for providing input, I became entangled in a web of voices, all in apparent contradictions to others who had voiced their experiences. How did individuals' experiences of choice rub up with the voices of others?

Providing an innovative educational program to enhance student learning, and being held accountable through performance-based measures appear to be the two prevalent agendas of the charter school movement (Alberta Education, 1996a). All evaluations and assessments are based upon these two criteria for charter renewal. Although charter schools strive for success in these areas, would they be led astray by the numerous values that are attached to the movement? Would stakeholders vie for power in the pursuit of "naming" choice?

Internal conflicts may contribute to the ineffectiveness of charter schools in developing innovative educational programmes (Smith, 1995). Henig (1996) suggests that

despite the attempt to create a unified educational vision through a charter mandate, individual interests often fragment a collective vision. Finally, instead of creating an atmosphere that “empowers” individuals, charter schools may exacerbate power differentials (Ball, 1994).

### **3.2.1 Question of Innovation?**

In policy (Alberta Education, 1996), charter schools are said to be an outlet to enhance the existing public education system through innovative practices. In practice, this is not always the case. In some cases, innovation is difficult to pursue. Three main obstacles seem hinder innovation in charter schools: outcomes-based accountability measures; resistance from stakeholders who may not agree with the educational plan, and; some charter school founders who do not want to pursue innovative educational practices. Instead, charter schools may be seen as a vehicle to implement a traditional instructional programmes. The espoused purpose of providing an alternative, innovative educational programme does not seem to be a defining feature at most charter schools from conversations that I had with my participants..

A corporate culture mentality may compromise innovative practices in the charter school. Some of the stakeholders have evaluated the school’s success in terms of its financial viability. Their concern is for governance rather than the educational program, and this is reflected by the time expended on matters of accountability. One charter board member believes that the longevity of the charter school remains in making it accountable like a well-run business rather than as an educational programme (Interview 2.7, 10/30/97).



Gramsci (cited in Apple, 1996) critiqued schools that saw their role as only “satisfying immediate, practical interests under the guise of egalitarian rhetoric... By limiting the school curriculum to only the practical problems of daily life, such schools left access to the skills of *critical* reasoning only to those who were already in dominance (p. 103).” The influx of corporate culture into the school has caused tension among teachers who must constantly defend the curriculum and methods that they use to parents (Interview 2.1, 10/02/97, Interview 2.2, 10/02/97), and administrators who are pulled in managerial areas away from educational matters (Interview 2.5, 10.02/97). Considerable debate has emerged as to costs spent on items such as marketing brochures, playground equipment, and facility, when the budget could have been spent on support staff, personnel, and school resources (Personal Fieldnotes 10/02/97, 10/29/97; Sheppard, 1998). In the case of one particular charter school, it appears that the market profile of the school has taken precedent over other perceived educational needs. At the end of this school year, the school is reported to have “nothing but outstanding bills: \$35,000 for school uniforms; a long-term contract for leased computers, with only the interest paid over the two years of operation; and an unsettled portion of a \$50,000 playground that, someone, perhaps the province, is going to have to pick up (Sheppard, 1998, p.52).” Not surprisingly, the Minister of Education has recently decided to close this charter school because it was not meeting the educational mandate and had allegations of financial mismanagement (Mar, 1998; Marshall & Stewart 1998b; Mitchell, 1998b). The educational vision was interpreted differently by parents, teachers, and administrators and “it became clear after a while that not everyone understood the idea [the educational mandate] the same way, even the teachers (Sheppard, 1998, p. 53).” Some of

the school teachers and administrators I interviewed noted the lack of professional development or emphasis on the educational program. As one teacher commented about the charter board members, "A lot of people who put this thing together don't have the skills necessarily to know what educationally is required of us" (Interview 4.4, 01/08/98). This is partly as a result of the little emphasis on development of the educational program. Teachers commented on the sporadic professional development in the school. One teacher noted the one professional development day that occurred on a Saturday (Interview 4.4, 01/08/98). Another teacher stated that although attempts were made to collaborate among teachers, much of the discussion was brief either before or after class (Interview 2.1, 10/03/97). Differing philosophical thrusts focusing on management, finance, and marketing over educational programs often become contested sites for administrators who are required to spend much time adhering to market-driven agendas (Ball, 1994; Apple, 1996).

Other charter schools are hindered by the use of outcomes-based indicators to assess whether the school is accountable. One principal states that although the charter school encourages collaboration and cooperation, and formative rather than summative evaluation<sup>6</sup>, the school is at a great disadvantage meeting the accountability requirements as stated in the *Charter School Handbook* (Interview 4.3, 10/24/97). Although portfolios may demonstrate performance, often they are not seen as "reliable" indicators of student success. At present,

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This particular charter school uses portfolios as part of the student evaluation. Student evaluation is assessed over a period of time, emphasizing student progress rather than outcomes. Standardized forms of testing such as unit exams, provincial exams, etc. conflict with the school's educational philosophy of shared learning, mutual cooperation and respect.

most charter schools demonstrate increased student achievement through standardized provincial examinations. These schools must often compromise the objectives of their educational program by adhering to the outcomes-based indicators set out by the provincial regulations. Goals of competition, performance, and achievement supercede goals of innovation and creativity. Outcomes-based indicators and the accountability framework within charter schools place value on quantitative, definitive achievement indicators. In contrast, holistic and qualitative data is rarely seen in charter schools. This is prevalent in Alberta charter schools where a large proportion of schools cater to highly-structured programs that value frequent forms of testing and evaluation (Bosetti, O'Reilly, Gereluk, 1998).<sup>7</sup> While increased student achievement may be an important indicator for showing increased learning, it appears that in the case of charter schools, student achievement is equivalent to achievement tests and outcomes-based indicators. Innovation appears to be limited under this narrow vision of accountability in student achievement.

Innovation may also be resisted by the stakeholders within the charter school. Although charter schools hope to attract individuals who agree with their particular educational philosophy, this does not often occur in practice. Staff members may choose the school for reasons of employment or perceived notions of gaining more power, rather than the educational philosophy. This may weaken the educational mandate if teachers do not believe necessarily in the program. Parents also choose charter schools for a multitude of

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This is demonstrated in charter schools through the frequency of homework, tests, and numerous reporting periods. Only one charter school demonstrates increased student achievement through other means such as increased student attendance, applied life skills, and portfolios.

reasons, not necessarily based on the charter mandate (Carnegie Foundation, 1992; Wells, 1996, 1998). Consequently, charter schools may have difficulty trying to implement innovative practices within the charter school due to the resistance of the various stakeholders (Levin & Riffel, 1997).

Many charter schools are returning to past traditional educational practices suggesting that charter schools are not innovative. The term innovation implies something new, progressive, a change, some movement; however, over a third of the schools, have elements of very traditional, conservative teaching practices. These schools implement teacher-directed instruction, phonics instruction, math drills, a reduction of time in the “soft” courses (such as music, health, and physical education), regimented homework and dress codes. These attributes address particular traditional notions of discipline, respect and rigour. The values reflected in these charter schools foster a hierarchical, linear education environment where the teacher transmits knowledge to the students. While the neo-liberal agenda<sup>8</sup> is followed in the charter school movement by decentralizing governance and using market-driven concepts to monitor them, an alliance with neo-conservative influences appears in many of the charter schools, instilling traditional notions of the “good” family, “good” values, and rigour (Apple, 1996). Despite the attempt to portray charter schools as visions of innovation, it also allows conservative “Back-to-Basics” advocates an avenue to establish traditional educational schools.

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The Neo-Liberal and Neo-Conservative agenda are explained in greater detail in Chapter Four.

### 3.2.2 Unity in diversity?

The charter school movement has been based on the assumption that parents can choose a school that emulates their beliefs. In attracting like-minded individuals to a particular school, the concept of community changes from one of geographics to one of common values. In practice, the messiness and complexity of choice portrays a different picture. In projecting a discourse of choice to build public support for charter schools, proponents have embraced neo-liberal notions of individual rights and freedoms. In doing so, the charter school movement neglects to embrace notions of the common good and the collective voice that represents the larger community (Ball, 1994; McMurtry, 1991). In effect, the potential for the balkanization of education is exacerbated under charter schools where community is fragmented to serve individual agendas (Apple, 1996). Instead of maximizing common aims of education, charter schools minimize common aims, embracing goals of individualism, competition, and accountability.

Personal agendas attempt to "name" and interpret the educational mission of the charter school. One particular charter school had considerable conflict as parents, teachers, administrators, and charter board members appeared to have different interpretations of the educational mandate of the school (Sheppard, 1998). This created a disunified educational vision and weakened the effectiveness of the programme. To combat competing visions, the stakeholders vied for power, each trying to project a "louder" voice. Individuals try to gain influence and position within the charter school hierarchy to instil their values. One charter school has experienced such turmoil as a result of competing agendas by parents, administrators, and charter board members, that a provincially appointed trustee has

recommended to the Minister that the school be closed at the end of the school year (Marshall & Stewart, 1998). Such rumblings are beginning to emerge in other charter schools as past administrators and teachers are coming forth with their stories as to the constant conflict between parents, staff, and charter board members (Interview 2.6, 10/03/97; Interview 6.4, 01/22/98; Interview 7.1, 01/22/98).

The diversity of stakeholders becomes apparent as they state their reasons for choosing a charter school. The majority of parents choose non-academic reasons for sending their children to the charter school. Parents are dissatisfied with public education and hope to escape to charter schools as a viable alternative. Some parents wish for a return to traditional notions of discipline, rigour, and respect. Other parents are looking for what they perceive as a safe, caring environment. Some parents want more voice and power to play a key role in their children's education. Very few parents look for the innovative educational program, with the exception of a few that cater to a specific student population. Teachers look for either employment or more input in school policy and curriculum. Administrators often pursue their own educational dream, unwilling to relinquish control and power over the school (Interview 2.7, 10/29/97). Charter board members enforce the "accountable" school. While all these stakeholders may have valid reasons for choosing charter schools, it is unrealistic to think that all of these aims can be accomplished.

Charter schools value notions of individualism over community. Valuing the rights of the individual makes it difficult to create a unified community. In most charter schools, significant conflict has arisen trying to deal with contentious situations. One charter board suspended the principal, and the vice-principal resigned in protest (Marshall, 1997a, 1997b).

Another principal resigned without reason, after a pending external consultant report (Stewart & Marshall, 1998). In another charter school, the chairwomen of the charter board “mysteriously resigned” with suspicions of conflict in school governance (Dawson, 1988b). The auditor general has also criticized the incompetence of having parent board members governing school affairs, unable to handle financial and managerial issues (Dawson, 1998c). In another instance, administrators and parents have been in conflict over the amount of parental influence on curriculum. As was reported, the vice-principal said the parents were “off the wall”, while one parent felt that “this is more dictatorship than anything” and was considering taking legal action (Toneguzzi, 1998b, B5). Conflict between staff and the charter board has resulted in one group of teachers taking their grievances to the Alberta Labour Relations Board and becoming organized with the Alberta Teachers’ Association as their collective bargaining agent (Alberta Labour Relations’ Code, 1997). Power struggles between all stakeholders are prevalent in most charter schools. The attempt to provide a unified, stable school vision is rare in a movement that values diversity over unity.

Is this an issue of diversity or an issue of fragmentation? The charter mandate does not appear to provide the foundation for building a unified community within the school. It is apparent that unity in a charter school does not rest with the building of an educational vision (though it can), but instead, a commonality of disgruntlement from past negative experiences. The stated premise of providing an educational alternative within the public education system is obscured by issues of power, autonomy, and governance. Unity through diversity is difficult to realize among an often malcontent grouping of individuals.

### 3.2.3 Question of Empowerment?

There is much hope given by advocates of charter schools in trying to “empower” all stakeholders. Friedman (1980) believes that in order to build a stronger education system individuals should have the freedom to choose, and the ability to resist being coerced and monopolized by centralized government. He also suggests that parents, who have the most interest and best intentions for their children, would make better decisions for children than other external agents. It appears that Friedman’s belief rests on the assumption that despite the various levels of intelligence and understanding that parents may have, they will still make the “right” decisions for their children because they know them the “best”. Building on Friedman’s philosophy, other proponents suggest that through charter schools, parents would have the ability to “vote with their feet” and have considerable say in the type of education their children would receive (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Nathan 1996). “Via school choice, it is claimed, parents will become education consumers [who] will force the school(s) to shape up or lose customers (Condliffe Lagemann, 1993, p. 678).” The success of charter schools depends upon their ability to attract students away from other schools (Braid, 1996; Butt, 1997). This competitive relationship among schools is hoped to create more effective, accountable schools that are responsive to the consumer needs. “Schools that are not chosen, according to this theory, will go out of business, because they are bad schools. The good ones that are chosen will thrive” (Howe, 1991, p.171). Thus, there is little collaboration or cooperation among charter and public schools, when the public school system view charter schools as a threat (Mah, 1996), and the charter schools feel alienated by the local school boards (King & King, 1996). In the attempt to establish successful charter schools,



competition among students and schools often becomes a key factor in achieving this goal. The ability to choose and be “unshackled” by bureaucracy has also been an attraction for teachers and administrators who have felt constrained. They would be empowered by having more direct input toward school policy and curriculum as a result of the site-based management and elimination of centralized bureaucracy. Finally, in theory, the charter board is said to be an outlet for community members to have a voice in school matters. Notions of empowerment are prevalent throughout pro-charter school literature espousing the benefits of all who partake in these schools.

In listening to many voices within the charter school movement, I question the degree to which stakeholders are “empowered”. The term remains elusive in meaning only to suggest that “the promise of autonomy and the capacity to shape work” (Fielding, 1997, p.178) empowers the individual. In this sense, empowerment is paralleled to rhetorical notions of increased professionalism and responsibility, despite the appearance of a decrease in teacher decision making as a result of increased parental power. Gore (1990) notes that this use of the word empowerment is common among conservative discourses that espouse increased professionalization with “little shift in relations of power” (p.5). Little mention is made of empowerment that discuss notions of interrupting societal and political power relations common in critical and feminist discourses (Ellsworth, 1989; Fielding, 1997; Gore, 1990). Conservative notions of empowerment “treats the symptoms but leaves the disease unnamed and untouched... It gives the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature... intact” (Ellsworth, 1989, p.306). Proponents ignore the problematic notion of this use of empowerment that in *promising* autonomy, it requires “those with power

giving those whom they decide are appropriate recipients greater capacity to make decisions” (Fielding, 1997, p. 178). To empower requires a reciprocal relationship between an “agent” who possesses such power and relinquishing that power to the “other”.

As I reflect on the charter school regulations, I do not see how individuals have been “empowered”. The charter school movement is still heavily mandated by a centralized curriculum and standardized provincial examinations (Alberta Education, 1996). This is common in other similar educational reform movements, such as grant-maintained schools in Great Britain and self-managing schools in New Zealand, where decentralized governance and site-based management are linked with stronger centralized governmental control (Ball, 1994; Apple, 1996). Furthermore, charter boards have been given the ultimate responsibility for the charter school’s success. This gives parents greater voice and influence in charter schools. Thus, within the charter board one group of individuals has a greater voice than others. While it is apparent that the charter board may be empowered by having significant control, we must not assume that other stakeholders come together “as if” it were a “power-neutral partnership” (Fine, 1993). “Questions of *power*, *authority*, and *control* must be addressed head-on within debates about parental involvement in public schools (Fine, 1993, p. 684).” As I reflect upon the conversations with parents, teachers, administrators, and charter board members, all appear to state that it is a often small grouping of committed parents who have overwhelming power and influence. Furthermore, it seems that this body may not necessarily be representative of the views held by the larger population of parents. Empowerment may not be a notion shared by all or even one particular stakeholder group, but rather by only a few. Ross (1990) notes, “It’s paradoxical that a situation which has led

to the slow erosion of teachers' control over their jobs has been combined with the rhetoric of increased professionalism" and further "in this case teachers find themselves making more technical/management decisions, working longer hours, and having less control over the curriculum they teach" (p. 11). The illusion of creating an environment that is empowering for teachers through a process of autonomy, appears both naive and unrealistic. It seems that advocates of charter schools have used catch phrases to entice teachers and administrators to join the charter school movement without creating an environment where they have the power or authority to make significant change (Smyth, 1987; Fielding, 1994).

Empowerment for all is also problematic and must be questioned. Proponents have unquestioningly proposed "empowering" all individuals at the local level in gaining greater voice. Yet, little discussion has occurred as to whether all individuals should attain equal voice. Ellsworth (1989) cautions her readers on the seductive nature of empowerment, reflecting on the question: "Empowerment for what?" (p. 306). Should all individuals have equal voice on all students' futures? I suggest that proponents of charter schools assume that because parents want the "best" for their children, they will necessarily make the "right" educational decisions. However, this does not necessarily follow. Just because a parent may love and care for the child, does not mean that they have the necessary information or knowledge to make informed decisions on a certain type of education or school policy issues. I am not convinced that equal voice is either desirable or attainable in schools.

Despite assumptions that equal voice is attempted and delivered in charter schools, it appears to be difficult to attain. Empowerment thus becomes an issue of those with the "loudest" voice (Kohn, 1998), those who are assertive or who are able to rally support.

Sometimes, small groups of individuals have gathered momentum around a cause by having “phone campaigns” (Interview 5.1, 12/18/97) or petitions drawn up (Interview 2.3, 10/02/97). Although many of the interviewees suggest this is not representative of the majority of individuals in charter schools (Interview 2.7, 10/30/97; Interview 3.4, 10/23/97; Interview 5.2, 10/18/97), their assertiveness often overpowers other voices and thoughts. Furthermore, many such individuals often search out positions of power on the charter board to have their values met (Interview 5.4, 01/22/98). As a result, only selected individuals who hold positions of power are “empowered” and are able to implement their values. Others are often silenced and left out of the discussion.

Charter schools speak of empowerment without addressing the route of dis-empowerment. Sarason (1991) addresses this when he states:

The point they miss is that the classroom, and the school and school system generally, are not comprehensible unless you flush out the power relationships that inform and control the behaviour of everyone in these settings. Ignore those relationships, leave unexamined their rationale, and the existing ‘system’ will defeat efforts at reform. This will happen not because there is a grand conspiracy or because of mulish stubbornness in resisting change or because educators are uniquely unimaginative or uncreative (which they are not) but rather because recognizing and trying to change power relationships, especially in complicated, traditional institutions, is among the most complex tasks human beings can undertake.

(As cited in Fine, 1993, p. 706)

In charter schools, there still appears to be a hierarchical structure within the charter school, with charter boards holding the position of power and teachers and administration being under-represented and/or silenced. Empowerment becomes a distant hope for most, unrealized and unattainable in charter school practice.

### **3.3 Simply not a Matter of Choice**

The charter school movement is far from being politically neutral. Charter schools are not just about providing more choice and innovation to an existing public education system. Issues of power, and voice come into the forefront as “choice” is played out in charter schools. From my research, it appears that internal conflicts and competing visions often create much instability in charter schools in the attempt to “name” choice.

*Charter schools are embedded among emotive and controversial issues that are rooted in the fundamental question of how education is to serve society. The next chapter brings in the political and philosophical underpinnings in the “choice” debate, and further looks at how the “choice” language can position individuals from challenging such reform measures.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE HEGEMONIC DISCOURSE OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

#### 4.1 The Discourse of Choice

*... educational choice can be presented as a universal goal, opposed only by those so mean-spirited and daring as to claim allegiance to repression, suppression, and force.*

(Henig, 1994, pg. 21)

Analysing the data collected from my research, I find myself grappling with the participants' views on choice and how that is situated in the larger public education debate. How can I critique a movement that fosters greater choice, when I have experienced many choices within my own education? By critically analysing the charter school movement, would I be necessarily aligning myself with values of "anti-choice" and a monolithic, unresponsive public education system? Gutmann (1987) comments that contemporary liberals want to place the educational debate within the dualistic framework of "dichotomous choice" (1987, p. 36). She states:

*Either we must educate children so that they are free to choose among the widest range of lives (given the constraints of cultural coherence) because freedom of choice is the paramount good, or we must educate children so that they will choose *the* life that we believe is best because leading a virtuous life is the paramount good. Let children define their own identity or define it for them.<sup>9</sup>*

(Gutmann, 1987, p.36)

Gutmann asks why the discourse needs to be framed in a "tyranny of dualisms" (Gutmann,

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My intention is not to defend the philosophical debates on the virtues espoused by John Stuart Mill who valued individual rights as opposed to Socrates who espoused a common good for society. Rather, the purpose is to show how education is often pitted between these two views.

1985). Can we not have an educational system that encompasses elements of both? Must our “disagreement over common standards favor the side that argues for minimizing our common standards?” (Gutmann, 1987, p.67)

This is the kind of discourse the charter school movement is creating and consequently the kind of discourse which is being scrutinized. Educational systems are being framed as either embracing or dismantling choice. The supposed success and effectiveness of charter schools is said to be in the autonomous governing structure, unencumbered by bureaucratic constraints (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Nathan, 1996). This gives the illusion that implementing choice can only be achieved under narrow, limited circumstances. Why do proponents suggest that choice can only flourish under an autonomous governing structure? Can alternative schools<sup>10</sup> provide choice just as effectively as charter schools?

Davies (1992) writes of the dualistic paradigm in which males and females are compared and contrasted. She explains that women need to create new stories and break free from male/female dualism. I too, need to break free from the myths that the discourse of choice puts forward. From my discussions with stakeholders, charter school movement is not a dualistic issue of choice or conformity, but rather a multi-layered issue convoluted by the language of choice. By opening up this discourse, I see the competing values and the play of power between the stakeholders in the charter schools.

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Alternative schools in Alberta are public schools which provide “choice” programs. The difference between alternative schools and charter schools is that alternative schools are still directly monitored and regulated under the local school district. Charter schools are more autonomous, having charter board governance.

One of the factors that perpetuates the popularity of the charter school movement is the use of language. Proponents of charter schools have taken full advantage of paralleling the charter school movement with the democratic symbol of “choice”. Henig (1994) charges that “[i]ts connotations of personal freedom and abundance of opportunities make it a slogan that is easy to rally around” (p. 21). By tying the charter school movement with taken-for-granted notions of liberal democracy, individuals believe that choice will bring them closer to their democratic rights and freedoms (Henig, 1994; Howe, 1991; Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996). Under this discourse, individuals believe that charter schools restore the freedom to choose under the rights embedded in their individual liberties (Kenway, 1990).

Hall (1988) points out that often dominant classes create this perception of ideological consensus among society:

Ruling or dominant conceptions of the world do not directly prescribe the mental content of the illusions that supposedly fill the heads of dominated classes. But the circle of dominant ideas *does* [sic] accumulate the symbolic power to map or classify the world for others; its classification do acquire not only the constraining power of dominance over other modes of thought but also the initial authority of habit and instinct. It becomes the horizon of the taken-for-granted: what the world is and how it works, for all practical purposes. Ruling ideas may dominate other conceptions of the social world by setting the limit on what will appear as rational, reasonable, credible, indeed sayable or thinkable within the given vocabularies of motive and action available to us. Their dominance lies precisely in the power they have to contain within their limits, to frame within their circumference of thought, the reasoning and calculation of other social groups.

(Hall, 1988, p.44)

A hegemonic discourse is created that shapes the type of dialogue which is to occur.

Educational institutions do not escape from such discursive practices as Hall describes.

Issues are “appropriated” (Ball, 1990, p.3) through the dominant discourses in schools.



Through power and knowledge, the hegemonic discourse can control the discussion and the difficulty for others to question such discursive practices:

But we know very well that, in its distribution, in what it permits and what it prevents, it follows the lines laid down by social differences, conflicts and struggles. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and power they bring with them.

(Foucault, 1972, p. 46)

This has been done by charter school advocates who portray choice and innovation as the only solutions for healing a mediocre and decrepit public institution (Chubb & Moe, 1990, 1992; Economic Council of Canada, 1992; Manno, Finn, Bierlein, Vanourek, 1998). It is their projection of charter schools as offering the only viable solution for choice that perpetuates a discourse, which gains in momentum and popularity, and resists others from entering into the discussion.

Unfortunately for me and others who want to challenge the discourse of choice, charter school proponents create a framework where certain individuals are given authority and power, and others are cast in subject positions through the “naming” or “representation” of certain issues (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993). Knoblauch and Brannon (1993) demonstrate that discourse is molded through “naming” or “representation” of a certain issue: “... how things are named, who gets to do the naming, what motives are involved, what consequences follow, what possibilities for alternative naming have been forgotten, or gone unrecognized, or been ignored, hidden, or suppressed” (p. 3). Representation gives power and authority to those within the discourse by perpetuating and fulfilling the vision through simple, stable truths, and further forcing other people to conform and accept the

discourse at hand. Although Knoblauch and Brennon are concerned with how the school world is “represented” with specific attention to how it influences the teaching of reading and writing, “representation” can be used in the case of the charter school movement by demonstrating how certain words such as choice, innovation, performance, and accountability position those involved and imbue them with certain values.

Pearson (1993) alludes to her positioning through the “representation” of charter schools through the “naming” of choice, and her difficulty in creating a voice in which to challenge. In Pearson’s book entitled, *Myths of Educational Choice*, she recalls the resistance she faced by not having a corporate foundation, political organization, or academic institution to validate her concerns. She was concerned with the rapid growth of the charter school movement especially because there was little understanding about how choice would affect public education. Yet after writing her first article on the concerns of educational choice, many people quietly responded that they too shared her concerns. She reflects on this in the following passage:

Why me? One short article, a mere classroom teacher from northern Minnesota - what’s going on here? Where are the big names, the prominent titles, the significant affiliations? While I was asked to represent the sceptical perspective in these panels and interviews, the pro side included politicians, published professors, highly paid consultants, and ‘fellows’ from institutes. I knew from the responses I received to the article that many prominent politicians, professors, and educators shared my concerns. Why were so few speaking out? What is it about the political atmosphere surrounding the issue of choice that is closing off debate?

(Pearson, 1993, pp. xi - xii)

She realizes that the framework does not allow for such debate. The speed and intensity of the choice movement provides few opportunities for one to step back and challenge the

concept of choice. She feels intimidated by the high-profile people representing the choice movement, and isolated in her attempt to open up the choice discussion.

Charter schools are framed within a discourse of choice, making it difficult to critique the implications of implementing choice. As Howe (1991) put it:

The word *choice* has a nice sound to it. It connotes freedom. It fits into assumptions of democracy. It awakens feelings of personal responsibility. It raises dreams of fairness. What could possibly be wrong with it?  
(Howe, 1991, p. 171)

It would be difficult to believe that people would not hold any value in providing choice in education. Most people want education to be responsive to society's needs and for people to have choice (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996). Further, most people believe that education should make an attempt in trying to meet all students' educational needs. However, in purporting choice to be the panacea of education, the messiness of choice in practice is left at the wayside only to espouse the supposed benefits. Wrapped in rhetoric, choice becomes the all-encompassing vision for reforming education:

Choice is a self-contained reform with its own rationale and justification. It has the capacity *all by itself* [sic] to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in myriad other ways. Indeed, if choice is to work to greatest advantage, it must be adopted without these other reforms, since the latter are predicated on democratic control and are implemented by bureaucratic means.  
(Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 217)

What is not asked is whether people's perceptions of choice can be realized in practice. From my data, participants had varied perceptions of what choice meant in charter schools. I stop and consider how that would play out in practice. However, such questions are often not brought into the debate among advocates of charter schools. Rather, the choice debate

is framed into issues favouring individual rights, decentralized government, and the “accountable” school.

In order to challenge such discourse, I refer to aspects of poststructuralism, creating a space for dialogue. Poststructuralist theory contends that language is the site of political and social struggle (Weedon, 1987). Weedon states that “[o]nce language is understood in terms of competing discourses, competing ways of giving meaning to the world, which implies differences in the organization of social power, then language becomes an important site of political struggle” (1987, pg. 24). In naming the charter school movement through the discourse of choice, poststructuralism contextualizes the meaning of choice. Walkerdine (1995) contends that one must construct a way in which to go beyond the dualism and the “oversimplification of the text-based work.” (pg. 324) In creating a competing discourse, choice must be extracted from the “individuals’ right to choose” discourse into “what does it mean for education - for the common good, for students, teachers and communities” discourse. In asking this question I open up the discussion to analyse and contest the concept of choice.

The “oversimplification of text” (Walkerdine, 1995) may be how it has made major thrusts forward in gaining the popularity of many people. Yet, it is like a double-edged sword in that it may also be the downfall of charter schools. Through an ambiguous concept of choice, stakeholders bring contradictory goals to the charter school when choice is put into practice. Smith (1995) talks about the lack of consensus around the concept of choice within schools. He argues that while everyone agrees to the ambiguously defined concept of choice, there is very little consensus as to what choice means in specific, concrete ways. “Should

choice involve private and religious schools? Should it involve single-sex schools? Single-race schools?" (Smith, 1995) This raises questions in my mind as to seductiveness of charter schools in theory, and the problematic nature of relying on an ambiguous notion of choice to deliver effective educational alternatives in practices. By perpetuating the discourse of choice under an elusive concept, I wonder whether my participants' expectations can be met with others viewing choice in a different manner.

## **4.2 The New-Right and the Loss of Community**

The focus for many actively-choosing parents is finding a good education in order that their children can compete in the employment market. One parent reflects the attitude of many parents as she states:

I want the children to achieve higher standards than in the public system. I think that school, all schools I believe, as we approach the 21st century should be doing a better job of preparing them for the global community. I didn't get that at a public school.

(Interview 1.1, 10/02/97)

This parent comments on her need to be less complacent in sending her children to the nearest neighbourhood school, and instead "shop" around for schools that can give them a competitive edge. Kohn (1998) notes that although privileged parents may worry about education overall, their primary concern is their child and how education will affect him or her. They fear that if they do not actively choose a specific program to meet their child's needs, they will be "negligent" as parents for accepting what other "regular" children receive. And so in their ability to choose "what is right" for their children, they embrace the values of choice to fulfill their individual needs.

Through the discourse of choice, the charter school movement aligns itself within a political context. The impetus and drive toward the charter school movement stems from the “New-Right” political agenda. The New Right influences civil, economic and political society (Kenway, 1990). New-Right thinking in education has taken on two separate ideologies within the New-Right movement. The Neo-Liberal view on education is to value goals of individualism, monitor education through market-driven principles, and decentralize and reduce state intervention (Apple, 1996). Decentralization, economics, and efficiency drive the Neo-Liberal agenda in education. The Neo-Conservative approach, while embracing some economic aspects of Neo-Liberalism, also adds the notion of returning to traditional and moral forms of schooling to combat the moral crisis eroding society. They wish to instil moral values of tradition, authority, and hierarchy back into the educational system. This is often accomplished by adhering to a strong influential central government while at the same time being allowed to have site-based management (Ball, 1994; Carl, 1994; Demaine, 1993; Kenway, 1994; Labaree, 1997). The Neo-Liberal and Neo-Conservative agendas align itself with the choice discourse combining two languages: “(1) of the children as ‘future workers,’ of privatization and market choice for ‘consumers,’ of business needs, and of tighter accountability and control; and (2) of ‘Christian’ values, the Western tradition, the traditional family, and back to ‘basics’” (Apple, 1996, p. 14). The New-Right is able to gain considerable support under an ideological umbrella wherein individuals, who normally do not agree philosophically, can come together and create a strong lobby group. Furthermore, the alliance of these two coalitions often creates a “hegemonic culture”(Apple, 1996) that gains considerable power and control over other subordinate groups.

From a historical standpoint, a strong “New-Right” agenda has become prevalent in public education system during the 1970's and 1980's (Carl, 1994). As societies faced global economic recession, publicly funded schools have felt the effects of fiscal restraints. Furthermore, education is often to blame for the decline in student achievement, and an increase in student violence and corruption (Carl, 1994). Changes to public education began to emerge in the 1980's as public education began to shift from values of an egalitarian, comprehensive education model to that of market values based on competition, accountability, and performance (Ball, 1994). It becomes apparent that public education goals have shifted from democratic equality, focusing on preparing citizens to live within a democratic society, to that of social mobility and efficiency, based on individual and economic needs (Labaree, 1997).

Educational systems and reforms are built on certain values. The same is true of the charter school movement. It is apparent that New-Right agenda has been the main impetus for fostering and perpetuating public support for the charter school movement (Apple, 1996; Ball, 1993, 1994; Kenway, 1990; Kenway, Bigum, & Fitclarence, 1993; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Benton-Evans, 1997; Barlow & Robertson, 1994). It places values on market-driven forces which changes the emphasis from equity in education which was prominent after the Second World War to excellence and efficiency through competition which became prominent in the 1980's and 1990's:

... proponents of school choice - assume that the post-Depression age of great public ideas that once unified civil society is over. The government has simply gone too far in pushing equity and the redistribution of income and jobs, in homogenizing the basic structure and content of public schooling, and in creating school institution that protects the interests of teachers and

managers but seem unresponsive to children's needs and parents' particular ways of raising their children.

(Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996 p. 13)

Using market-driven principles of competition and marketing, Chubb and Moe (1990) suggest that schools must now 'sell' their educational plans to the consumer-conscious parent. Those schools that are able to attract students to their program will be successful; those schools who do not attract students will be closed down (Chubb & Moe, 1990). These principles are hoped to become the checks and balances for public education in weeding out the inefficient and mediocre schools through the concept of supply and demand. At the school level, performance of schools also shifts to outputs and products, basing student evaluation on outcomes-based performance indicators. The argument continues that the parents' ability to choose schools will create more accountable schools. Values of choice and individualism prevail over issues of equity and community in the charter school language.

Young (1995) talks of the opposition between individualism and community. Often the individualistic ideals hold values of "self as a solid, self-sufficient unity, not defined by or in need of anything or anyone other than itself" (p. 239). However, in allowing individuals this right, they forget that their desire to uphold multiplicity and diversity through the discourse of choice, must also come together in unity. The relationship of "other" is often forgotten, valuing individualism over community, and self over others. Each stakeholder feels an inherent right to have voice in the charter school. Yet, as is seen from the sometimes contradictory and/or contradictory goals, people may play for power in an attempt to have their values instated.



The difficulty ensues as values of individualism pervade over collectivism. The possibility for providing a unified educational direction may be overshadowed by the multi-voices that come into play. Enormous time and energy may be expended in trying to reconcile competing voices and visions. How does the charter school resolve the multi-vocal nature inherent under the discourse of choice?

Charter schools provide a model in which individual rights and freedoms are purported to be upheld under the discourse of choice. Charter schools also want to portray the vision that stakeholders will be unified as a result of the common values and goals. Despite these positive notions of choice, differing values and goals are prevalent in charter schools. In valuing the individual over the collective, the charter schools becomes a site of contested space in which individuals compete in trying to put forth their values.

When charter schools purport to foster the ability for individuals to freely choose, can the school create a sense of community at the same time? This is a difficult question to answer. In one respect, participants that I talked to suggested that charter schools create a sense of community by bringing people together who share the same visions of education. The parents that I spoke with looked for the educational philosophy, the atmosphere of the school, the class and school size, and the comfort level experienced. This, in their minds, creates a sense of community, bringing together parents who share similar ideological beliefs.

Although charter schools may only want to attract people who believe in the charter mandate, this is not always the case in practice. In discussion with teachers, some may come to the school looking for employment rather than as result of the educational philosophy.

Parents stated various reasons for sending their children to charter schools. Some reasons pertained to the educational vision, but others did not. Some administrators or charter board members wanted to establish a charter school in attempt to enhance public education, but others were in attempts to challenge the existing public education system. I reflect and listen to the multitude of individualistic values appropriated under the discourse of choice. Is the foundation of collectivism and community lost in the multitude of individual voices?

By showing the multi-vocal nature of charter schools, the “naming” of choice becomes problematic in charter schools. Each stakeholder comes to the charter school bringing some element of choice hoping for it to be realized in practised. While some of the values may be complementary, others may contradictory and conflicting in nature. It is unrealistic to think that all values be upheld. Consequently, stakeholders compete amongst themselves in an attempt to put forth their values.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE UNTOLD STORY: POLITICAL UNDERCURRENTS IN THE

### GENEALOGY OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT

#### 5.1 Pieces of the Puzzles

*...[W]e learn much more than we realize through stories. They help us make sense of our world. It is hard to appreciate that stories are so important, because we have been taught since grade one that the important things to know are facts and theories. But much of the time what we really do is arrange what we experience to suit stories we already know.*

(Taft, 1997, p. 82)

I have examined how choice is played out in charter schools by interviewing parents, teachers, administrators, and board members. Throughout the discussion, it appears that charter schools have many, often overwhelming, internal obstacles to overcome. This portrayal of internal turmoil could lead one to assume that the stakeholders have created their own problems, and to some extent, they have. However, this does not paint an entirely accurate picture. In order to more accurately examine the difficulties charter schools face through the discourse of choice, I must also look at the larger context surrounding this reform movement.

It is not that easy to simply relay the story of the political context of charter schools. Government documentation outlining their rationale and policy directives for charter schools is sparse. Legislative house discussion was limited as most of the charter policies were developed through regulations. Few key people who were involved in the implementation of charter schools are willing to be interviewed. Finally, the speed of the movement leaves little for interest groups to respond to the movement. As a result, I have tried to put pieces

of the puzzle together, taking bits and pieces that relate to charter schools and place them in some chronological order. This story is speculative and tentative as it is difficult to provide the chronology of Alberta charter schools without an abundance of evidence. As such, I tell this story as a possibility, where I attempt to bring key factors together and hypothesize the implementation of charter schools in Alberta.

In this chapter I set out to look at four major themes that appear to play a role in the implementation of charter schools: political and economic climate in Alberta; key political figures and advocates of charter schools; house debate in the legislative assembly; and the implementation of charter schools. In the first section, I will highlight a theoretical framework using critical policy analysis and the “politics of interpretation” (Peters & Marshall, 1996). This framework emphasizes the importance of examining the political context surrounding educational policy issues. The second section will then examine the four themes that have emerged in the Alberta charter school context.

## **5.2 Politics of Interpretation**

In telling the genealogy of charter school policy implementation in Alberta, I am hesitant to begin. Many facts and circumstances have yet to be unearthed. Bits and pieces appear, but the story is sketchy and somewhat unattainable. Furthermore, I am conscious of the fact that how I choose to portray this speculative analysis is value-laden and politically-loaded. One may assert that all policy analysis is not politically neutral; however, to acknowledge that it exists reminds the reader that research is always perspectival and should be read with that in mind. The acknowledgment that policy analysis is partial is reiterated

by a number of authors in educational policy analysis who emphasize the importance and recognition of the inherent political and value-based research recent policy analysis entails (Goodson, 1986; Prunty, 1985; Mitchell, 1982; Marshall & Peters, 1996).

Central to analysing policies as “texts” is the notion of a “politics of interpretation” (Marshall and Peters, 1996). Politics of interpretation acknowledges that policy analysis is not politically neutral. Recognizing this, this form of policy analysis examines the underlying values, norms, and interests that underlie policy initiatives with the intent to give “new light” and meaning toward social change (Mitchell, 1982). Thus, it is arguable to suggest that such implicit “rules” comprise of the political and social context surrounding policy.

Critical policy analysis differs from previous forms of social policy research. Traditional types of social policy research often followed similar procedures for policy analysis. The first step of policy analysis often identified the problem - often defined as problem specification or problem orientation. This located the problem within the policy context to illustrate “official” values and interests within the dominant discourse. The second phase would then entail the development and structuring of alternative approaches. During this period, parameters would be explored as to the possibilities of implementation and development of the policy. The third step often analysed the ratification and acceptance of proposals into policy. Stage four examined policy implementation with the final stage being evaluation of the policy. However, this form of policy analysis has often been criticized for being too linear, not allowing for feedback and interpretation throughout the process. What appears to be neglected is the ability to “undergo considerable shifts in

meaning” (Marshall & Peters. 1996, p. 141). Marshall and Peters further state:

In the field of policy analysis defining the problem is both an interpretive and inherently politically loaded activity. Practitioners are frequently confronted with the dilemma of serious incompatibilities between rival accounts or interpretations of what constitutes ‘the problem’. Discrepancies are often most serious, in some cases unresolvable, when practitioners are faced with interpretations of a problem proposed by policy-makers on the one hand and those of recipient populations on the other.

(Marshall & Peters, 1996, p. 142)

To combat this problem, Marshall and Peters (1996) take a critical stance to analysing policy through a process of “evaluative context”. Evaluative context takes into the policy context by considering the rules and values, explicit and implicit, and the diverse interest groups that define concepts and policies. Evaluative context then looks at “identifying the rules” by examining the dominant discourse and how it is played out in the articulation of policy directives. The third consideration looks at the larger community of interests and wider socio-political context and the interplay between policy and those interest groups. The fourth area analyses the “paradigm context” and “public interest” through poststructural inquiry of showing the relations between concepts and underlying assumptions. The last consideration creates a cycle by reflecting and reconsidering the original problem for further interpretation. This allows for further insight within the policy analysis.

In the following section, I intend to use elements of critical policy analysis and politics of interpretation as outlined above to provide a possible reading of the political undercurrents in the genealogy of Alberta charter schools. As evaluative context implies in the final consideration, it is open for debate and further insight. Further, the following reading may shift in meaning and the problem may be redefined as more information is made

available to the public. Perhaps it is a beginning, the opening of a door to understand the complexities surrounding the charter school movement and the problematic nature it encounters both internally and externally.

### **5.3 The Political and Economic Climate prior to Charter Schools**

It is safe to claim that Alberta has been governed traditionally by right-wing political parties. Although Liberal parties have had brief moments of power (with the first provincial government being Liberal led by Alex Rutherford), for the most part, the province has only seen two major parties, the Social Credit party elected in 1935 until 1971, and the Conservative Party since that time. The apparent low-turnover of governmental power may suggest that the Albertans may be receptive to many right-wing fiscal and social reforms recently introduced (Mansell, 1997). The apparent lack of strong opposition to such policy initiatives may further create a conducive climate for massive, reforms with little resistance.

To understand the massive budgetary cuts of the 1990's, I must first briefly step back in time to set the stage for "Klein's Revolution" (Taft, 1997). With the changeover in government in 1971 from Social Credit to the Conservatives, premier Lougheed attempted to diversify the province's Gross Domestic Product. Realizing the potential volatility of relying mainly on the agricultural and petroleum sectors, Lougheed sought other economic opportunities to attract more business and migration to Alberta. Some of the policies were as follow: significant increase in resource revenue was spent; lower property tax; smaller business corporate tax; and, a reduction in taxes for motor fuels and personal income taxes (Bruce, Kneebone, & McKenzie, 1997). This strategy increased the real per capita revenues

in the province. Furthermore, the government was still running fiscal surpluses.

The 1980's took a drastic turn with the introduction of the Nation Energy program, equalizing provinces' wealth, and in turn, demanding transfers out of Alberta to the Federal Government. By 1986, Alberta took another financial hit with the drastic fall in grain and oil prices. In that year, Alberta would change from projecting a fiscal surplus to a fiscal deficit that would continue until 1995. By 1993, the government would run up a deficit of almost \$3.4 billion with the possibility of continuing that figure to \$6.5 billion by 1996/97 (Mansell, 1997). This deficit would be seen by the government as an economic crisis. Others suggest that this was just another "scare-tactic" by right-wing advocates to push for more fiscal restraint and public sector downsizing (Taft, 1997).

With the election of Ralph Klein in 1993, significant fiscal changes would soon follow. In the spring session with the new premier, the budget called for dramatic changes to provincial spending. A general twenty per cent cut across all public sectors was proposed. Fundamental restructuring of all public sectors to reduce spending would occur. Within a four year period, Klein set forth to eliminate the \$3.4 billion deficit by the year 1996/97. Along the way, "sacred" social programmes such as health, education, and social services, would feel the brunt of the fiscal restraints and restructuring policies by taking significant cutbacks. Klein projected this fiscal plan, asking that all Albertans make a small sacrifice for the betterment of the province. This would be contended by Taft who argued that much of the "... debt servicing was rising [as] a result of massive business subsidies, high interest rates, and declining petroleum revenues (Taft, 1997, p. 62). According to Taft, Albertans would sacrifice public services in order to maintain private interests. Since the election of



premier Ralph Klein, “ ... not a month has gone by without a major government budgetary announcement or restructuring initiative” (Bruce, Kneebone, & McKenzie, 1997, p. 5). This would prove significant when analysing the political context and strategy perhaps used in establishing charter schools.

### **5.3.1 Stakeholders**

As major budgetary cuts were being made, restructuring efforts were occurring in every department. As I have mentioned in earlier chapters, major plans to decentralize and devolve the local school board authority were occurring. The Speech from the Throne of February 10, 1994 would be a critical year in restructuring education (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p. 1). It was Klein’s second year in power, and in the second year of a four year plan to balance its budget, it would target four public sector areas: health, education, advanced education, and social services (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p.1). The next four months would prove to have rigorous debate in the Assembly over Bill 19 that brought in major amendments to the School Act, of which one was to establish charter schools.

To understand this development of proposing charter schools for Alberta, I have tried to step back for a moment and attempt to examine who the key stakeholders were. I have already mentioned premier Ralph Klein who set a mandate to balance the budget by 1996/97. This would have major implications for public education on how they would be governed, financed, and taxed. It appears that under this public sector restructuring, many proposals or alternatives would be considered that would fit with the fiscal policy in place. Charter schools could be set to fit in with the fiscal plan by creating site-based management, remove

the middle layer of bureaucracy, and reduce expenditures by only giving per pupil grants without any capital funding.

During 1993/94, the Minister of Education was Halvar Johnson and Deputy Minister Reno Bosetti. Both were key players in the development of charter schools. After the June 1993 election, the Minister began investigating the concept of charter schools from the literature that was prevalent in the United States. By August 17, 1993 at an Education Officials Meeting, minutes show that the Minister requested the Deputy to study the concept of charter schools (Bosetti, 1998c). In September of 1993, the Policy and Planning Branch within Alberta Education produced a document entitled *Charter schools: Provisions for Choice in Public Schools* (1993). Within another two months, charter schools would be added to the discussion for the proposed Education Roundtables. By January 1994, The Minister of Education announced his intent to introduce charter school legislation. This announcement would soon be followed with another public document *Charter Schools Information Update: "What can we do while we are waiting for our details?"* (1994c) that would provide suggestions for interested groups who were considering making a charter school application. The intentions made by the Minister of Education through memos and information documents shows the clear indication that charter schools would be implemented before the proposed legislation was even brought to the Legislative Assembly.

Other vested advocates of charter schools are more difficult to locate in looking at who provided the catalyst for charter school legislation. Joe Freedman is a possible prominent Alberta business figure who, in 1993, wrote a critique on failing attempts to provide quality public education (Freedman, 1993). He later wrote a book on charter schools

in 1995 advocating their potential in reviving the quality of education. This project would be financially supported by the Donner Canadian Foundation, an organization that appears to be a strong advocate of charter schools. In his acknowledgments, Freedman would also express the contributions of Honourable Halvar Jonson and known United States charter school advocate, Ted Kolderie for their assistance (Freedman, 1995, p. 4). One could easily assume that Freedman was a strong advocate for charter schools in Alberta. Further, one could speculate that he was an instrumental player in Alberta charter reform and later creating public awareness to the movement.

Sir Roger Douglas, a leading government official in New Zealand's reforms, was also brought to Alberta in 1993 for consultation. Although charter schools are similar to the New Zealand self-managing school, it is unclear how much of an impact Sir Roger Douglas had in Alberta's charter school reforms. However, similar strategic tactics used by Sir Roger Douglas appeared to be very similar within Klein's reforms in that they would be made "deep and quick" (Mansell, 1997, p. 57).

What is interesting to note, is the lack of any organized parent groups that were advocating the establishment of charter schools. While one may argue that many parents may have been dissatisfied with public education due to a variety of reasons such as funding cuts, larger class sizes, the appearance of more violence in public schools, there does not appear to have been any organized lobby group that advocated for charter schools. It was not until the introduction of the concept of charter schools that parents began to examine this potential educational alternative. This is significant because many believe that the Alberta charter school movement was a grassroots movement to combat the dissatisfaction of public

education. However, from the documentation that I have collected, it appears that the charter school concept was initiated by a few government officials who may have thought that it fit in with their educational and fiscal policy within what is known as the Klein agenda.

### **5.3.2 House Debate**

With the introduction of Bill 19, much of the former School Act would have major revisions, including section 24.2 that allowed for the establishment of charter schools in Alberta. There has been much speculation that major reforms were done both swiftly and deeply in order that opponents would not have time to mobilize their efforts and challenge the government (Kneebone & Bruce, 1997). This would be a major strategy used by Sir Roger Douglas, who was brought in to Alberta for consultation on the conservative reform agenda. Douglas argued that it was important to “...implement reform in quantum leaps. Moving step by step lets vested interests mobilise. Big packages neutralise them. Speed is essential... Once you start the momentum rolling never let it stop (Douglas, 1990 as cited in Sullivan, 1997, p. 253). This would prove to be an effective strategy as the limited time for debate given in the House and the enormity of the reforms often appeared to overwhelm the opposition. Many members grappled with Bill 19 on both sides of the Assembly, unclear of the policy implications it would have for not only charter schools, but public education. From the introduction of Bill 19 in January of 1994 to May of 1994, members of the legislature attempted to analyse this major Bill within the short amount of time allotted.

Many concerns were brought to the legislature with regards to charter schools. The Liberal Education Critic could not understand the difference between community school

developing a charter outlining the purpose of their schools with charter schools (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p. 619). Other members had concerns that charter schools could bypass their local school jurisdiction and apply directly to the Minister for charter school status. For many of the opposition, this both lessened the role of elected school trustees, and gave considerable power to the Minister (Alberta Hansard, 1994b, pp. 1139-1140).

It was clear from the Minister of Education, that his vision of charter schools was of an experimental nature. Repeatedly, Jonson answered that charter schools would be an experimental, pilot project that would be evaluated at a later date. This was clearly stated during question period when Jonson stated, "I think it's very important to note in terms of the announced plan that we would propose to pilot a number of chartered schools and evaluate them so we do not repeat the mistake that is often made in education of introducing an innovation without adequate follow up" (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p. 9). While the intention was clear from the Minister of Education that only a limited number of charter schools would be piloted and evaluated, opposition still remained concerned that the concept of charter schools had either not been thoroughly thought out by the government, or if they were withholding their "true" intentions from the legislative assembly. This was stated by Bruseker:

I have some difficulty with the proposed outline for charter schools. I've not heard a clear answer from the Premier, I've not heard a clear answer from the Minister of Education as to what it is that's being proposed, even in the case of pilot schools. I guess if we're going to go with a pilot program, the question is: what are you piloting? You've got to have some idea of where you're going, because if you try to be the pilot of a plane and you don't know where you're going, the end result is that you're going to crash. I'm afraid that's what's going to happen... I guess what I'm saying is that if you're going to have charter schools, tell us how you're going to measure it, tell us how

you're going to evaluate it before you begin, rather than simply saying, 'Let's do it and see what happens.' That's what I'm asking for. I'll leave that as food for thought for the members opposite.

(Alberta Hansard, 1994c, pp. 1644-1645)

Despite calls from the opposition to more clearly define the concept of charter schools within Bill 19, very few amendments were considered by the government. In fact, the government invoked closure of all three readings after very little debate. Even after nine pages of amendments to the entirety of Bill 19, closure was invoked the next day after only three hours of house debate (Alberta Hansard, 1994c, p. 2119).

Much of the charter school concept would not be discussed in the Legislative Assembly. With the exception of one section in Bill 19 that allowed the province to establish charter schools, all other details would be discussed in regulations. This meant that the legislative assembly would not have the opportunity for input or debate. Furthermore, it would also display the unconventional manner in which a major policy document could escape public criticism. It appears that the charter school concept, consciously or unconsciously, would be kept away from public exposure by writing up much of the policy behind caucus doors.

### **5.3.3 Implementation of Charter Schools**

Despite comforting words by the Minister of Education who stated that "we do not repeat the mistake that is often made in education of introducing an innovation without adequate follow-up" (Alberta Hansard, 1994a, p. 9), it appears that that is exactly what occurred after the passage of Bill 19. Although the government had assured the House that

regulations would be in place by fall of 1994, no regulations were developed by the spring of 1995 (Alberta Hansard, 1995a, p. 618). This would prove difficult for charter school applicants who were attempting to write an application without the regulations in place. As a result, many of the applicants worked on their charter applications before the regulations were developed. By June, 1995, regulations would finally be released with charter school applicants having only two months to set up their charter school.

To complicate the story of implementing charter schools in Alberta the government had allocated one main person within Alberta Education, Ron Babiuk, to develop the vision of Alberta charter schools. Unlike many of the United State's Education departments where often there is an entire department devoted to charter schools (Nathan, 1997), Babiuk did not have a department to work on charter schools. Furthermore, no university within Alberta had created a policy institute to develop research to help support charter schools. These two support systems, often key in most states in the United States, were not prevalent in the Alberta context. It appeared that the charter school vision was left to one person in Alberta Education to develop charter school policy. This would prove to be a serious flaw in the consistency in policy and development of charter schools. In the winter of 1995/96, Babiuk had an untimely death. With his death, a clear vision of Alberta charter schools appeared to be lost with the person. The government quickly needed to find a replacement and hired another person who would be given a 0.4 position to continue to develop charter schools in Alberta. This would appear to be insufficient for many charter schools to receive the required support and assistance from Alberta Education to start-up charter schools relatively smooth.

From the passage of charter schools in the spring of 1994 to the spring of 1998, one also notes the change in the position of Minister of Education, giving uncertainty to the government's vision of charter schools. While Jonson had pushed for the establishment of charter schools through Bill 19, it is unclear whether the current Minister of Education, Gary Mar, holds the same vision. Very little has been said by Mar as to where he believes charter schools are going. At one point, Mar has been reported as saying that, "They're testing grounds for innovative teaching methods that can later be applied to a public-school model" (Kalef, 1998, p.14). This makes some charter school individuals nervous as they feel that much time and energy was not expended only to have their charter assimilated back into mainstream public schools (Personal Fieldnotes, 03/21/98). At another time, Alberta Education stated at a provincial charter school meeting that if charter schools meet their requirements then they would be renewed for another contract period (Personal Fieldnotes, 03/21/98). These discrepancies have proved to be very frustrating for many charter schools, unclear of their future. At another provincial charter school meeting (Personal Fieldnotes, 05/09/98), many charter school representatives stated that they hoped the government would evaluate and reflect on Alberta charter schools, providing a clear vision for the future. To date, no public announcement has been made as to the government's vision is for charter schools and their renewal for the future.

#### **5.4 Uncertainty in an Uncertain Movement**

In reviewing briefly the genealogy of Alberta charter schools, it appears that one should not be surprised at the instability of the movement. Despite the Minister of



Education's stated intention of creating more innovation within public education, I suspect that he did not expect the number of unintended ripple effects that charter schools would create. This, however, should not be surprising. Policy analysts assume that there will inevitably be unintended consequences. Furthermore, the more elaborate the intention, the more room there is for unintended results (Wildavsky, 1987). Wildavsky opens up the notion of intention when he poses a number of questions: "What do rational actors intend to do? Move toward their goals. But in what direction? How can we be goal-directed if we don't know what our goal is until we get there?" (Wildavsky, 1987, p. 135). It is the proverbial tail wagging the dog. One may begin to wonder whether charter schools were well researched by the government. As one charter school parent states, "There were lots of things that weren't done. Whose fault was that? I think there was a trail of responsibility that goes back to the ministry... It was just an idea, a half-baked idea. A good idea, but it was never thought through" (Kalef, 1998, p. 16). Perhaps she is right in saying that the government did not follow through with an initial policy directive with thorough development and analysis of the concept. I speculate that this is a possible interpretation of the Alberta charter school movement. As has happened many times in educational government initiatives, the story rings similar with charter schools. The government may have learned of a new educational reform occurring in both New Zealand and the United States. Seeing that charter schools could fit in with their major educational and fiscal reforms, they may have decided to investigate the reform further and introduce it into the legislature. House debate provided little discussion on the matter as a result of the numerous and tremendous other educational amendments occurring at the same time. Passage was

granted for charter schools, and was then left for a few government officials to further develop charter school policy in regulations. Due to a lack of personnel, time, and funding, regulations did not come out until a year later, and when it did it was arguably very sketchy and ambiguous. As a result, the charter school movement has been left to charter school stakeholders to fend for themselves, unsupported by little or any government assistance. Lack of a clear vision on the government's part may contribute to the instability of the charter school movement.

## CHAPTER SIX

### UNNECESSARY DIFFICULTIES

#### 6.1 “Good” intentions gone awry?

*Once a program is in being it has a life of its own: as conditions in the outside world change, they interact with the preexisting features of the program to create new consequences. A program's characteristics transmit not only decision-makers' values but also convert external factors...*

(Wildavsky, 1987, p. 95)

Throughout this research I have demonstrated how the discourse of choice is played out in charter schools. The ambiguity underlying choice brings a number of concepts that interplay in this debate. Choice can include notions of freedom, individualism, innovation, and opportunity. Advocates of charter schools have used these notions of choice to their advantage, praising charter school reform as a way to develop a more responsive public education system. This discourse has fallen favourably on the ears of parents who hope to provide better opportunities for their children. Consequently, the charter school movement has espoused greater expectations for quality education under the choice rhetoric.

Unfortunately, with most “magical” formulas, the charter school movement appears to not be the panacea of education. These great hopes have also brought great problems within charter schools. This should not be surprising. With any major reform there often follows many unintended results (Wildavsky, 1987). This is such the case with charter schools.

While the stated intention by the provincial government was to provide increased choice and innovation within the existing public education system (Alberta Education, 1996), others suspect that charter schools could be a stepping stone toward a two-tiered education

system (Barlow & Robertson, 1995). Whether or not this is the case, cannot be determined at this point of time. However, what is important to note is whether charter schools are hampered as a result of the numerous external obstacles that they face. Many indicators suggest that there was inadequate amount of House Debate to thoroughly examine the charter school concept. After its inception, development of the regulations and continued governmental support appeared to be inefficient for the needs of charter schools. This would create much instability for charter schools and the movement as a whole in Alberta.

From the interviews that I conducted, there also appears to be numerous internal obstacles within charter schools. Although each individual has a vested interest in contributing towards a successful charter school, the difficulty lies in the route that individuals take to develop their vision of charter schools. As I have shown earlier, participants stated different perceptions of how choice is envisioned. This often creates different priorities and goals which can, at times, be contradictory. Governance issues appear to be the weak link in charter schools where unified policy directives are difficult to attain as a result of the differing viewpoints.

## **6.2 Could it have been done better?**

Underlying any successful reform measure often lies a solid support mechanism in which to give strength to a movement. This appears to be one of the main weaknesses found in the Alberta charter school movement. This has been reiterated since charter schools were first introduced in the Legislative Assembly up to the present date. "Vague and ambiguous regulations are causing problems for Alberta's charter schools and the public schools boards

that monitor them, according to board officials and parents” (Thomson, 1998, A7). The lack of clarity in charter school policy set by the provincial government appears to have caused a ripple effect that reverberates from the ministry down to the individual stakeholders in charter schools. It is further exacerbated by a lack of technical and financial support that is often seen in the United States. In many of the states corporate and private donations are often given towards capital funds for new charter schools. Other states may have a university that creates a policy institute for the sole purpose of developing research on charter schools. For Alberta, little or no external support is given to the struggling charter school. Monitoring appears to be insufficient to maintain the level of contact and support that the charter school often requires (Kalef, 1998).

In looking back over the three years of charter school reform in Alberta, charter schools may not have been in such a tenuous position as they appear to be at present. Greater public awareness and understanding of the charter school concept may have reduced the number of charter schools that appeared to lack a well-defined innovative educational programme. Perhaps more charter board founders would have hesitated having known the amount of difficulty an ambiguously defined charter would create. An understanding of the tremendous undertaking of establishing and managing a school may have lead others to reconsider. Knowledge of other successful and failing charter schools in the United States could have taught valuable lessons to Alberta charter school individuals. Lack of information and thorough understanding of the obstacles faced in charter schools has led many Alberta charter schools to face tremendous difficulties.

To help charter schools overcome some of their obstacles, a support network would

appear to have been helpful. Many charter schools have had problems with governance and management of the school. Many of the stakeholders stated that had they had someone to consult with and give advice, this would have alleviated many of the mistakes that have occurred in the schools. Others sought moral support from other charter school individuals to share ways in developing a stable school setting. The feeling of isolation appears to be common among charter school stakeholders where they do not receive support from the local school board, the under-staffed personnel at Alberta Education, the superintendents, and the local universities. From the perspective of charter school individuals, there appears to be no vehicle to seek guidance. Consequently, many charter schools appear to flounder in their daily operations of the school.

Although there appears to be many obstacles in the Alberta charter school movement, some of these difficulties could have been reduced had there been sufficient support at the government level. Many of the inconsistencies and ambiguities appear to result from the weakness of charter school regulations. One may note the difference of regulations by merely comparing regulation documents from Alberta to the Minnesota regulations and note the difference of documentation. Alberta regulations are written in a twenty-five page document as opposed to a more substantial document found in many of the American chartered states. While this in itself may not accurately measure the development of regulations, it makes me wonder to what degree the regulations have been developed in Alberta. The weakness in regulations combined with inadequate government personnel to further develop the charter school movement creates weak government policy and reform. This is noted by opposition members throughout house debate on the establishment of charter

schools that charter school reform had not been thoroughly thought out. Unfortunately, the speed of house debate and closure on Bill 19 did not allow for many of the complexities of the movement to come out during debate. Problems are now beginning to surface, forcing government officials to try to work out many of the charter school flaws.

It should be of no surprise that the charter school movement appears to be floundering. Had the charter school concept been more clearly defined and developed before charter schools were established, this may have reduced the number of problems that are occurring in the schools. Unfortunately for charter school stakeholders and government officials, it appears that they are trying to put out one fire after another as difficulties arise continually.

### **6.3 Taking a Step away from Charter Schools and Toward Public Education**

*There is little reason to believe that market mechanisms will be able to overcome the structural inequalities that characterize American [sic] society and the American school system. Sensitive and sophisticated choice policies that balance the rights of individuals with the rights of the community offer us one avenue of school reform that may be extremely fruitful. Choice policies that ignore educational and social realities are unlikely to succeed and may even prove harmful.*

(Cookson, 1991b, p. 166)

Perhaps, it is time to address some of the concerns that the individuals in this research have raised and address them in public education. Many parents in this study have commented on the need for individualized attention accomplished through small class sizes. Instead of only creating eleven charter schools that promise to have smaller classes, perhaps all public schools and our provincial government should be addressing this problem.

Presently, charter schools serve less than one percent of the Alberta student population. Only a few have the opportunity to have the luxury of small class sizes. If smaller class sizes are an attraction for most parents, which I would assume that they are, then perhaps it should be considered for an entire school system. Similar to this, other parents may be concerned with safety issues and the large enrolment of many public schools (many reaching over five hundred students - a size of a small town), perhaps public schools need to reconsider some of the potential difficulties in creating safe, caring environments under such conditions. Charter school reform creates a movement that takes *some* students away from public schools without addressing the root problems that may be occurring in public schools, leaving the majority of other students at a disadvantage (Connell, 1993). Molnar (1996) concurs, "No state's charter schools, under laws strong or weak, will make an appreciable difference in the educational experience of most of these children" (Molnar, 1996, p. 167). I, too, sense a reform movement that is a superficial attempt that appears to ignore larger educational issues such as the implications of budget restraints, intensification of teacher workload, and erosion of providing comprehensive education to all.

I do not suggest that education to return to the past, ignoring the cry for education to be responsive and responsible for all its students. Connell reiterates this as he states:

justice cannot be achieved by distributing the same amount of a standard good to children of all social classes... That 'good' means different things to ruling class and working class children, and will do different things for them (and to them).

(Connell, 1993, p. 19)

I, too, recognize that achieving equality does not mean creating a common school with the same objectives. However, I am reminded by Gutmann (1987) that in being responsive to



varying student needs, education should not deny our potential commonalities. The fine balance between providing an education that is responsive to specific individual needs and providing an education that enhances *all* must be constantly revisited. Any programme that benefits certain students as a result of socio-economic and/or class advantages must be challenged. Choice programmes that require committed parents disadvantage those that cannot commit. This appears to be the case of charter schools where certain practices (such as transporting, or significant volunteering) can reduce or exclude lower socio-economic families who do not have the ability to make these commitments.

If the charter school movement only attended to enhancing public education through alternative programs, then I may be much more supportive of the idea. Yet from my observations, it appears that the charter school movement has been appropriated to fill a larger New-Right political agenda as was explained in chapter four (Kenway, Bigum, & Fitzclarence, 1993). The potential for creating a stratified education system that privileges certain parents who are assertive (Kohn, 1998), appears to be much more prevalent under the charter school movement that values individualism and competition. Furthermore, it encourages an environment that brings together a large group of malcontent individuals wanting something more than only an alternative program. Often it is a quest for power and authority under the framework of the charter governing board. Teachers become further marginalised as charter board members hold the power and authority. Confrontations between parents and professionals appear to be common, with professionals often having to compromise their agenda to suit personal parental needs. One past administrator compares an alternative public school to a charter school:

An alternative program within the public system is likely to be a better guardian of these types of 'goals'<sup>11</sup> than the charter movement... One of the reasons why I believe that charter schools will never achieve, unless there is the odd charter school that comes up recognizing governance issues, will never achieve the potential - and I think there is tremendous potential. The problem with parental governance of schools is the same problem at a micro-level, I guess, at school councils and school council administration. There is too much decision-making authority placed in the hands of parents. The problem then becomes a problem of consistency from year to year. Parent groups have to change their composition annually, and your little ship can taking a different path every year and are not able to build a consistent culture or community and can be very stressful for teachers, and a nightmare for administration.

(Interview 7.1, 01/22/98).

He concludes that the alternative school is much more effective in meeting the educational mandate because the mandate may not be appropriated to suit numerous agendas. The charter governing board often went against the suggestions of the administrator. To illustrate the point, the administrator explained that the board had chosen the school facility based on the high-profile location, rather than on the appropriateness of the facility. Despite concerns of the facility not meeting school safety regulations, the board chose to pick the location because of the ability to attract students from the nearby high-income neighbourhood. The past administrator stated that this example would not have occurred within a public or alternative school setting (Interview 7.1, 01/22/98). An alternative school not only has the financial and technical support (such as capital funding, consultants, training, etc.) from the local school board, but the teachers and administrators have the power and authority to

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This administrator earlier alluded to charter board members who wanted to instil merit pay for teachers and parent supervision and evaluation of teachers - two goals he was uncomfortable with.

maintain the educational vision. The possibility for parents to appropriate the educational mandate to suit other goals appears to be reduced under the alternative public school setting.

I have asked the question of whether choice can only be provided in a charter school setting. I challenge this notion, and suggest that the charter school movement underlies something more insipid than what is brought to the discussion. Embedded in the language of choice, the charter school movement portrays a “neutral” position with visions of choice and diversity, empowering individuals at the local level. However, charter school advocates avoid to bring into the discussion notions of power relations, the promotion of market-driven agendas, and the value of individualism over community. Further consideration is needed to address how choice can be provided in the public education system that truly empowers stakeholders, is responsive to all students, and perpetuates values that are known and agreed upon.

#### **6.4 Possibilities for the Future**

This research has critically examined the experiences of parents, teachers, administrators, and charter board members in their experiences of choice as practised in charter schools. I have addressed notions of power between parent and professional, and the problematic nature that it creates within the schools. However, can we learn from this research and look for possibilities that may include aspects of the choice movement? This final section reflects on some of the positive elements that I experienced during my research. It is with some hope that I can take from these positive charter school elements and suggest opportunities that public education may want to [re]address.

Despite all of the daily obstacles and conflicts that occurred in charter schools, there appeared to be a level of satisfaction and confidence in the school by both parents and staff. The level of commitment and attachment to the school was noticeable. I was struck with awe and wonder at the degree of enthusiasm that resonated in the halls of the schools. As an outsider, I was a bit skeptical and amazed that despite the inadequate facilities, resources, personnel, and competing agendas, there appeared to be relatively little turnover of students. I speculate that as a result of the personal commitments given by each stakeholder to the school, the level of attachment and commitment to the school grew. Further, the level of involvement of parents created a larger educational voice within the general community. I speculate that there has been greater media attention as a result of growing number of individuals that are committed to receiving quality schooling for their children. If educators could redirect these group of individuals to advocate for quality public education, I believe that such interest groups could create considerable political pressure for better educational conditions for all public schools.

Similar to the commitment level of more individuals, there appears to be greater participation of community members interested in educational matters. Although this participation often became intrusive within the daily operations of charter schools, there is some hope that the community is becoming both more interested and concerned about improving education. Again, the level of participation by individuals appears to be a sign that educating our young is an important issue that needs to be debated. The level of interest has put educational discussions near the top of political agendas. It is encouraging to see that people are becoming more involved and more informed about education in society.

Finally, charter schools can be said to have been a catalyst (though not the only) for public educators to reassess their role within public schools. It appears that since the establishment of charter schools in Alberta, some public school boards have been more receptive to creating alternative schools within the public school system to cater to specific student populations not previously addressed. In some cases it has made educational researchers re-address timeless educational questions such as: What is the role of education? Who does it serve? For what purposes? As a result of educational reform movements such as the charter school movement, there does not appear to be a sense of complacency among public schools. Although the charter school movement has created much controversy, it has also raised the issue of creating schools that not only teach to the norm, but also teach to those students who do not fit it.

I do not see charter schools as a viable reform that will significantly improve the quality of public education. However, it has reminded me of the potential influence and power that individuals can have, not only with respect to charter schools, but for public education as a whole. Perhaps it is the right time to redirect assertive parents and professionals and use it toward public education's political advantage in advocating better educational conditions for all students.

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