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Charter Schools: A U.S. Case Study and Implications for Brazil

Paula Louzano
Universidad Diego Portales
Chile
&
Lara Simielli
Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV EAESP)
Brasil

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Abstract: This article analyzes the case of school choice in the United States and its implications for the Brazilian context. This discussion is important to Brazil, given the fact that key actors are starting to advocate in favor of introducing charter schools and vouchers in the country. Evidence from countries that introduced this model can help shed some light on this debate. In this article, we will analyze the overall performance of school choice in the United States, especially charter schools, focusing on its implications on educational equity. The Brazilian educational system is highly unequal. Thus, if charter schools are not helping to enhance the

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overall quality and equity in the United States, it may not be a policy to be pursued in Brazil. In this scenario, focusing on the idea that school choice is the answer may divert the attention from systemic policies that can contribute to improve education such as high-quality early childhood education, increased education funding, after-school programs, and teacher professional development.
Keywords: School Choice; Charter Schools; Equal Education; Comparative Education; US; Brazil

Escuelas charter: Estudio de caso de EE. UU. y implicaciones para Brasil
Resumen: Este artículo analiza el modelo de escuelas *charters* en los Estados Unidos y sus implicaciones para el contexto brasileño. Esta discusión es importante para Brasil, toda vez que importantes actores políticos empiezan a abogar a favor de la introducción de escuelas *charter* y cupones (*vouchers)* en el país. La evidencia de los países que introdujeron este modelo puede ayudar a informar este debate. En este artículo, analizaremos el resultado de los modelos de elección en educación de los Estados Unidos, especialmente las escuelas *charter*, enfocándonos en sus implicaciones en la equidad educativa. El articulo presenta evidencias de que escuelas *charter* no están ayudando a mejorar la calidad y la equidad educativa los Estados Unidos. Al considerar la gran desigualdad del sistema educativo brasileño, la adopción del modelo de elección en educación no parece ser una política a ser implementada en Brasil. En este escenario, centrarse en la idea de la elección en educación desvia la atención de las políticas sistémicas que pueden efectivamente contribuir a mejorar la educación en este país, como la educación infantil de alta calidad, el aumento de los recursos para la educación, los programas extracurriculares y el desarrollo profesional de los docentes. Palabras clave: Elección de escuela; Escuelas charter; Educación equitativa; Educación comparada; Estados Unidos; Brasil.
Palabras clave: Elección en educación; Escuelas charter; Equidad educativa; Educación comparada; Estados Unidos; Brasil

Escolas charter: Estudo de caso sobre os EUA e implicações para o Brasil
Resumo: Este artigo analisa o modelo de escolas charter nos Estados Unidos e suas implicações para o contexto brasileiro. Essa discussão é importante para o Brasil, dado que muitos atores estão começando a advogar a favor da introdução de escolas charter e de vouchers no país. Neste sentido, evidências de países que introduziram esse modelo podem ajudar a embasar esse debate. Neste artigo, analisaremos o desempenho geral da introdução deste modelo de escolha educacional nos Estados Unidos, especialmente das escolas charter, com foco em suas implicações na equidade educacional. São apresentadas evidências de que as escolas charter não estão ajudando a melhorar a qualidade e a equidade educacional nos Estados Unidos. Considerando a ampla desigualdade já existente no sistema brasileiro, a adoção deste modelo de escolha não se apresenta como uma boa solução para este país, podendo ampliar as desigualdades já existentes. Nesse cenário, o foco nos modelos de escolha educacional como resposta desvia a atenção do debate de políticas sistêmicas que podem efetivamente contribuir para melhorar a educação, como educação infantil de alta qualidade, aumento do financiamento da educação, desenvolvimento profissional dos professores, dentre outros.
Palavras-chave: Escolha Educacional; Escolas Charter; Equidade Educacional; Educação Comparada; EUA; Brasil

Introduction

In the United States, charter schools – and other initiatives to create or enhance school choice, such as vouchers and tuition tax credits – have recently gained more attention with the election of President Donald Trump. On February 28, 2017, President Trump's speech to the Congress advocated for more choice for families in the educational system:

> (…) But to achieve this future, we must enrich the mind — and the souls — of every American child. Education is the civil rights issue of our time. I am calling upon Members of both parties to pass an education bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African-American and Latino children. These families should be free to choose the public, private, charter, magnet, religious or home school that is right for them. Joining us tonight in the gallery is a remarkable woman, Denisha Merriweather. As a young girl, Denisha struggled in school and failed third grade twice. But then she was able to enroll in a private center for learning, with the help of a tax credit scholarship program. Today, she is the first in her family to graduate, not just from high school, but from college. Later this year she will get her master's degree in social work. We want all children to be able to break the cycle of poverty just like Denisha. (*New York Daily News*, 2017)

In the beginning of March, President Trump´s fiscal 2018 spending proposal showed a US$ 9 billion cut on the Department of Education budget, while increasing school choice programs in US$ 1.4 billion. The increase in school choice programs were supposed to go to three main initiatives: "$ 168 million for charter schools, $ 250 million for a new choice program centered around private schools and a $ 1 billion increase for Title I, the largest federal K-12 program that provides school districts with funding for poor students" (*U.S. News*, 2017). According to the article, Title I would be used to "push for the adoption of an education funding system that allows students to use funding to go to a public school of their choice, including charter schools." This proposal was rejected by important education associations in the United States, such as the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and the National School Boards Association.

In Brazil, researchers, policymakers, and politicians have also been advocating for the introduction of charter schools. More recently, the state of Goiás has introduced a similar model to manage public schools: since 2016, the state has opened a call to social and private organizations (OS, from the Portuguese *Organizações Sociais*) to manage 200 public schools in Goiás. A smaller experience also took place in Pernambuco, where a private institution, in partnership with the state, managed 20 schools from 2001 to 2011.

It is widely known that Brazilian public education is not performing well. According to SAEB, the Basic Education Evaluation System, only 27,2% of the students have at least an adequate performance in Reading, while only 9,3% of them have at least an adequate performance in Math (MEC, 2016). Among the many solutions to overcome these problems, some actors are pushing for the introduction of charter schools or other school choice initiatives, such as vouchers. In 2010, eight institutions organized an event to discuss ways to improve Brazilian education and published a document containing the final recommendations, which included "enabling the existence of public schools in Brazil with independent management", citing the United States as one of the examples[1].

[1] In 2010, eight institutions organized an event called "Transforming Proposals to Enhance the Quality of Basic Education" (*Propostas transformadoras para melhoria da qualidade do ensino básico*), with suggestions to the president and state governors that were recently elected. The document can be accessed in the following website: http://www.parceirosdaeducacao.org.br/evento_propostas/pdf/transformacao.pdf.

Evidence from countries that introduced this model of schooling, such as the United States, can help shed some light on this policy debate in Brazil. It is important to understand their rationale, obstacles, successes, failures, and limitations in the US, but it is also necessary to analyze this policy within the Brazilian national context.

In this sense, it is necessary to understand if charter schools, or other school choice initiatives, are delivering higher quality education, as proposed by those who promote this policy in the United States. It is also key, when considering countries like United States and Brazil, which are socially and economically unequal, to understand how charter schools impact educational inequalities. These findings might help Brazil shape its charter policy or simply reject the proposal.

In this article, we will analyze the overall performance of school choice, especially charter schools in the United States, focusing on its implications for educational equity. To introduce the discussion, we will start by giving the theoretical framework that involves this debate, briefly presenting issues regarding school reform, educational choice, and public choice system. We then address some recent research and studies of the overall performance of charter schools and its implications on educational equity. The third section is devoted to final considerations.

Theoretical Framework

The present discussion about school choice is based on the proposal made by Milton Friedman (1962), who argued that there was no reason why governments should operate schools, replacing the system with a free-market perspective, instead of a monopoly. He believed that public and private schools should compete in a dynamic market, providing higher quality education (Levin, 2002).

In the 1980s, the debate on education reform in the United States was characterized by severe criticism of public schools' capacity to meet the nation's educational needs. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983, pointed out that America's global competitiveness was in danger and the cause was the deterioration of schooling (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hirth, 1996; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The fear of economic and social decline in the United States, as well as the increasing gap between high and low wages, have been great enough in the 1990s to promote education reform to the national policy agenda. One of the major ideas to emerge from the debates was the need to restructure education, focusing on fundamental changes in the school and/or the school system. Changes should be focused in the expectations for student learning, in the practice of teaching, and in the organization and management of public schools. These three main ideas organized the political discourse about school restructuring from then on. Although reform proposals could address more than one of those changes, Elmore defined three models corresponding to the three leading dimensions of restructuring proposals: technical model, professional model, and client model (Elmore, 1990).

The client model approach to restructure education is related to the idea of choice and focuses on reforming the relationship between schools and the most interested parties: their "clients." An important assumption at the core of this model is that the clients, or the educational service consumers, such as parents and students, are the ultimate target of public education; therefore, their needs and preferences should play an important role in schooling. At the school level, the appropriate structure would be the one that rewards educators for making decisions consistent with the desire of clientele (Elmore, 1990). In this restructuring model, specialized knowledge – either systematic (educational expertise) or judgmental (teacher) – plays an instrumental role. The educator in this type of school resembles a market manager in a consumer service firm, since…

> …the educator's expert knowledge lies in discerning what the clients want, which of those wants can be accommodated within existing resource constraints, and which package of services will attract a clientele sufficient to support the organization on the scale at which it chooses to operate. (Elmore, 1990, p. 20)

Proposals around choice in education thus derive from this model. Proponents claim that changing the structure of public schools from a centralized and often bureaucratic model to schools chosen by the clients can improve education and, consequently, help to reverse the nation's perceived crisis. In other words, the more responsive the school is to the clients' needs and preferences, the better it is. Regulations, governance, and accountability are shifted from a centralized perspective to a decentralized one. Schools will change their internal structure in response to changes in their external incentives (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Elmore, 1990). To accomplish this new structural model in education reform it is fundamentally important to think about school finance structures, and how to adapt them to fulfill these expectations of better schooling.

Educational Choice

Based on the client model approach to restructuring, educational choice has been one of the major themes in school reform. Consequently, it is rooted on the same assumption: education improvement comes from changing a centralized model into a decentralized one. This assumption united different people in the United States who were willing to have a better education based on the idea of parental choice. Although, for those pursuing this new type of structure in education, the agreement among interests and general ideas on how to reform school is not enough to guarantee a consensus in the policy agenda. The variety of options, points of view, and frameworks within what is considered to be parental and student choice in education, or even within a specific movement like the charter school, clearly show the existence of conflicts.

One of the reasons for such a controversy about the same school reform approach can be explained by the definition of "choice." According to Levin, "choice is one of the major tenets of both a market economy and a democratic society," and it is considered "a crucial indicator of the freedom of the people" (Levin, 1991, p. 137). Therefore, different approaches to establishing school systems based on this idea are possible. One of the approaches is the market choice system, which includes educational vouchers and tuition tax credits. For instance, Lutz argues that "a policy of educational choice is grounded in the thought that parents should have the freedom to choose any public or private school for their children, with state funding supporting all or portion of the costs" (Lutz, 1996, p. 49).

Another approach is the public choice system, which includes school-site management, magnet schools, open enrollment, and charter schools. To Bastian, "choice only works well when there is a prior and steadfast commitment to equity, adequate funding, and internal school restructuring" (Bastian, 1996, p. 58). Deborah Miner, a public choice advocate from District 4 in New York City – a district with a public choice plan – said in an interview with "Rethinking Schools":

> When I have argued for choice, it has had nothing to do with abandoning public education. It has been a way to argue against the factory model of education. It has been a way to create more diverse and coherent educational communities. It has been a strategy for invention and innovation. There are many places in this country where choice means giving families wider choices among public schools. (Miner, 1996, p. 7)

Proponents of each of these two systems to reform education through choice tend to stress their differences rather than their similarities. The literature produced by the supporters of public choice system radically opposes choice programs that include private schools. Even if they agree with such programs within a single public school district, or interdistrict and statewide public schools' plans, they reject vouchers. According to Bastian, "vouchers deserve the most critical scrutiny as a threat to public education" (Bastian, 1996, p. 58).

The same can be observed among advocates for market choice. A good example is the report "The Empire Strikes Back" produced by Pacific Research Institute. The authors qualify teachers' unions and school districts that are against market choice as "the Eastern Bloc whose socialist structure and inflexibility it resembles, [but] the system is beginning to crumble" (Billingsley & Riley, 1996).

Public Choice System: Charter Schools

Nathan's 1996 book, *Charter Schools: Creating Hope and Opportunity for American Education*, defines the concept of charter schools as follows:

> Charter schools are public schools, financed by the same per-pupil funds that traditional public schools receive. Unlike traditional public schools, however, they are held accountable for achieving educational results. In return they receive waivers that exempt them from many of the restrictions and bureaucratic rules that shape traditional public schools. (Nathan, 1996, p. 11)

A charter school is, therefore, a public educational entity that operates under a contract – the charter – negotiated between whoever organized and runs the school (teachers, parents, for-profit enterprise or any group from the public or the private sector) and whoever is responsible for sponsoring the charter in the state (local school board, state board of education). The schools may vary widely in terms of their educational program and governance structure from one state to another, and from charter to charter. However, a charter school is supposed to remain public in concept: publicly funded, accountable to a public body, and non-discriminatory.

One of three ways can create charter schools: converting an existing public school into a charter one, converting an existing private school or starting a new school from scratch (Bastian, 1996). In the United States, each state has its own regulations on how to create a charter school. In California, a charter developer must address 13 points detailing what students will learn, how students' progress will be assessed, how the school will operate, and other important topics. Although exempted from many state rules and regulations, such as class size, class time, and curricular sequence, if approved by the local board (the sponsor in the state of California), the school may operate for five years. During this time, the sponsor district must evaluate the school's performance and decide whether to renew or revoke the charter.

Minnesota was the first state to implement a charter school. The law allowing deregulation in publicly funded schools was approved in 1991. The next year only California had joined in to establish charter schools. However, by the end of 1995, 19 states had approved charter laws and at least another 16 had considered them. As of July 1997, 29 states and the district of Columbia have adopted legislation creating charter schools. Congress passed the first legislation about the issue in 1994, authorizing grants to states to support charter school efforts (Nathan, 1996; Yamashiro & Carlos, 1996).

In the United States, 87% of school-aged children are in public schools: 71% in traditional neighborhood schools, 4% in charter schools, 4% in magnet schools, and 8% in other types (inter- and intra-district transfers). Non-public schools represent 13%: 10% in private schools, 0,5% in private schools with vouchers and 3% homeschooling. This means that 16% of the school-age

population is attending public schools of choice, and 13% is attending non-public schools – therefore, the majority of students attends publicly ran schools, even after more than 20 years of school choice policies (NSBA Center for Public Education, 2017). Nowadays, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), in the United States there are over 6.800 charter schools serving about 3 million students in 43 states and the District of Columbia – "67 percent of all charter schools are independently ran non-profit, single-site schools; 20 percent are run by non-profit organizations that run more than one charter school; and just under 13 percent are run by for-profit companies" (NAPCS, 2017, p. 1).

The current literature stresses the desire for greater parental and community control of schools, as well as the expansion of school choice, as the main factors to unite charter supporters. However, reasons to create charter schools may vary. They have been started around specific educational philosophies and methods (Montessori, Accelerated Schools), particular populations (i.e., high school dropouts), and underserved communities such as Native Americans or hearing-impaired students (Rofes, 1996). Advocates argue that charter schools expand educational choices, especially for parents and students whose needs may not be met by traditional public schools. More choice, in theory, would lead to competition, forcing schools to either present successful models or close down (Yamashiro & Carlos, 1996).

Accountability Under School Choice Programs

The case for choice rests on the notion that competition among schools by giving choice to families would improve the effectiveness of schools. Besides that, disadvantaged students would be better off by accessing opportunities beyond those offered by their assigned public schools (Hill, 1997). Therefore, the debate on choice usually revolves around issues of effectiveness and equity. The more policymakers seek to introduce greater choice and competition in education, the more the complexity of the design decisions. Charter school programs, for example, represent an approach that seeks to ensure that schools receiving public funds are open to all and are accountable for student learning. Under public school contracting, schools would be operated by independent organizations under explicit and legally enforceable agreements with school boards or state legislators.

Both charter schools and voucher plans transfer funds from centralized bureaucracies to individual schools and give families the possibility to choose among institutions. However, accountability issues differ in many ways among charter schools and voucher plans. Charter schools, for example, establish some agreement between the local school board and individual schools about goals, basic modes of operation, problems to be remedied, sources of assistance, and performance requirements.

According to Hill (1997), the agreement is the essence of the accountability mechanism. It establishes the district's right to expect the school to admit students by known rules and criteria, to serve all students enrolled, and to attain specified student outcomes. The agreement also establishes the schools' right to operate without interference, receive specific forms of assistance, be paid for pupils enrolled, be free to enroll students from a given catchment area, recruit teachers, and have its agreement continued and renewed if it meets all specified criteria. Schools are usually accountable for five types of outcomes: (i) compliance; (ii) controversy; (iii) student performance; (iv) ultimate student results; and (v) family satisfaction.

Though some teachers will have rights of transfer to other public schools, their jobs will be defined more by the individual school's mission and student needs than by district-wide work rules. In the case of charter, teachers and administrators might work for individual schools and have no formal employment relationship with the school district.

On the other hand, most voucher defenders rely only on the market system. According to Friedman (1962), schools should only comply with sanitary regulations. Since his first educational voucher proposal, analysts have noted that government's effort to improve public education by creating successive layers of regulations has made schools into compliance organizations. Shifting the accountability system would be a way of restoring student results to the center of the accountability process (Hill, 1997).

However, Hassel – who argues for charter schools rather than vouchers – believes that it is not enough to ensure that disadvantaged students have access to schools funded publicly:

> Taxpayers should also demand that the schools they fund be effective at educating young people. In any system of choice, we might expect parents to hold schools accountable for effectiveness. If students are not learning, parents can exit, choosing other schools. Or they can use their potential to exit to magnify the potential of their voice, pressing schools to improve. (Hassel, 1998, p. 41)

Studies have shown that families consider a whole range of factors, both academic and non-academic, when choosing schools for their children. By looking at the choices families are making in these contexts, it becomes clear that factors other than academic quality are at play. Many families stay where they are in the public system despite poor academic quality because of factors related to the schools themselves or, more likely, related to job opportunities, affordability of housing, proximity to family and friends, or other non-academic considerations. According to Hassel, a system of accountability is necessary under any choice system, where taxpayers should be able to demand that as a condition for receiving public subsidies, families enroll their children in schools that can demonstrate effectiveness. Despite the reason for particular family choices, "taxpayers should not be expected to subsidize them when they choose schools that contribute little to students' learning" (Hassel, 1998, p. 43).

Different from most voucher programs, charter schools always have an accountability system outside the market place. Most of the studies on charter school accountability analyze and compare regulations across the states, describing the degree of autonomy in different pieces of legislation. Usually, they compare the degree of conflict and tension between the issues of autonomy versus accountability. However, not many studies have been conducted on how effective accountability systems are set up in different states. For instance, when a charter school is closed for not complying with the regulations, the literature considers that the accountability system has worked. Bad schools will always exist, but there will be a way of closing them down. It would be important to understand what has caused the school failure and the link this can have with the design of the accountability system.

According to Hill, charter programs embody performance accountability in two forms: the requirement that the schools obtain authorization (charters) to begin receiving public funds, and the requirement that the schools live up to the terms of performance contracts to keep receiving funds. In contrast, voucher plans only require minimal certification, mostly procedural grounds, and do not impose performance contracts.

Charter schools also enforce a third form of accountability: they require all charter schools receiving public funds to be non-religious. Some voucher programs might accept religious schools within their range, given that nearly 85% of private school students attend religious schools. Chubb and Moe agree with the inclusion of religious schools in a choice program "as long as their sectarian functions can be kept clearly separate from their educational functions" (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 55). This means that schools would be required to restrict religious instruction to voluntary sessions, perhaps outside of the regular school day. But such a restriction might obscure the distinction

between a voucher plan and a charter program, introducing accountability outside of the market place into a voucher proposal (Hassel, 1998).

The Debate over Quality and Equity

Many studies have shown that charter schools and vouchers do not have an important impact on achievement compared to traditional public schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel & Rothstein, 2005; CREDO, 2009). One of the most emblematic cases on the implementation of school choice was the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), a voucher plan targeted at low-income students. After the introduction of MPCP, Milwaukee has been a good example of a "choice school district", giving students the possibility to choose between traditional public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, and private voucher schools – it is the second-largest and longest-standing United States voucher program. According to Carnoy et al.'s (2007), evaluation of this program, there are two main findings: i) Milwaukee public schools made a one-time gain compared to other schools with the same social composition; ii) students in Milwaukee schools facing more competition made no significant gains. They conclude, based on the results, that "the observed improvement in public school test scores associated with the implementation of a greatly expanded voucher plan in 1998 was probably a response of increased competition." There wasn´t a more consistent and sustained improvement in student learning – which leads to the conclusion that choice can, at best, produce a one-time improvement, which could probably be produced by other policies and incentives (Carnoy et al., 2007, p. 3).

The Stanford Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) launched a new study in 2013, showing that charter schools results improved, both for reading and math, when compared to the 2009 report. The improvements, however, are not significant: the report revealed that, in reading, 25% of charter schools are doing better than traditional public schools – but 56% of charter schools have no significant difference, and 19% were significantly worse; in math, 29% of charter schools are doing better, while 40% have no significant difference, and 31% are doing worse (CREDO, 2013). Comparing these results with the 2009 report, more charter schools are doing better, or demonstrating no significant difference, than traditional public schools. CREDO's new report, in this sense, shows that there is "slow and steady" progress in the charter schools' achievements, but there is still a pronounced heterogeneity inside the charter school sector.

Besides the debate over the quality of charter schools, researchers are concerned about the inequalities inside the educational system and are trying to understand if the charter schools are helping to improve or diminish the achievement gap among students of different backgrounds. In this context, new research is focused on understanding the characteristics of the population of students enrolled in charter schools, and the achievement gaps for these groups between charters and traditional public schools, among other questions.

According to Wamba and Ascher (2003), since *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), the United States has developed three points to consider for equity: i) whether there is a balanced distribution of students by race and socioeconomic status within and across schools; ii) whether there is an equal access to high-quality learning within and across schools and districts in educational provisions that influence student achievement; iii) whether the distribution of student outcomes is unrelated to race/ethnicity or social background.

Regarding the first question, it is important to look at the characteristics of the students attending charter schools, compared to those attending traditional public schools. According to the CREDO report (2013), charter schools are educating more disadvantaged students than in 2009. Regarding income, 54% of charter students live in poverty, a greater share than in all of the United States' education system, and an increase for charter schools since 2009. Regarding race/ethnicity,

charter schools have fewer white and Hispanic[2] students, and more black students than traditional public schools, but the proportion of Hispanic students is increasing and approaching the proportion of black students. According to CREDO (2013):

> These shifts reflect growth in the proportion of disadvantaged parents that is aware, informed and comfortable exercising their options for school choice. The typical charter student arrives at a charter school with lower levels of education performance than was the case in 2009. (p. 10)

The analysis conducted by Chudowsky and Ginsburg (2012) indicates that the most notable jump, between the subgroups, was for the black students: the percentage of grade 4 black students attending charter schools grew from 2% in 2003 to 7% in 2011; in grade 8, it rose from 3% in 2005 to 6% in 2011. Looking specifically to large cities, the growth for black students was even larger from 2003 to 2011: from 4% to 12% in grade 4, and from 8% to 13% in grade 8.

Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley and Wang (2011) did an extensive literature review over the racial isolation theme and concluded that charter schools, in general, serve higher percentages of black students compared to traditional public schools. The authors analyzed the data from NCES 2007-2008 and observed that black students were 32% of the overall students in charter schools, compared to 16% of the overall students in traditional public schools – in all regions, black students are over-enrolled in charter schools as compared to their regional public school percentage. The opposite occurs among the white students: they are 39% of the overall students in charter schools, and 56% in public schools. For the Hispanic, Asian and American Indian students, the percentage was practically the same in charter schools and traditional public schools. According to Carnoy et al. (2005, p. 2), the fraction of students who are black is higher in charter schools than in public schools – the difference is, black students attending charter schools tend to be "disproportionally better off socioeconomically" than those black students attending regular public schools.

Regarding the third point (whether the distribution of student outcomes is unrelated to race/ethnicity or social background), Chudowsky and Ginsburg (2012) found that, despite the fact that there is a consistent pattern of higher achievement gains in traditional public schools compared with charter schools, when analyzing specifically large cities, where most charter schools are located, "the picture changes in favor of charter schools." Focusing specifically on black and Hispanic subgroups, the results are even better, confirming the results seen in the CREDO 2013 analysis: in charter schools, the black and Hispanic students are performing better than in traditional public schools. Hispanic students, in 2011, performed significantly higher in charter schools than in regular schools (in grade 4 reading and grades 4 and 8 math), and black students, in 2011, had higher achievement in grade 8 reading and grade 4 math in charter schools. In 2011, the only findings favoring the traditional public schools were for the Asian subgroup (grade 4 math) and the white subgroup (grade 4 reading).

Given this scenario, it seems that charter schools are specializing in enrolling certain profiles of students, as the demographic results show. Carnoy (1993) analyzed this when he pointed out that low-performing schools would not compete with high-performing schools since the two would be competing in different niches of the market. Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley and Wang (2011), based on several education studies, conclude that unrestricted choice results in stratification (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; McEwan, 2008; Morphis, 2009, in Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley & Wang, 2011). On the other hand, schools may have incentives to enroll a certain clientele, especially the students who would achieve higher performance. Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley and Wang (2011, pp. 1-2) conclude

[2] CREDO (2013) and Chudowsky and Ginsburg (2012) use the term "Hispanic". Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley and Wang (2011) use the term "Latino". In this paper, we are going to use the term "Hispanic."

that "charters currently isolate students by race and class. (…) As charters represent an increasing share of our public schools, they influence the level of segregation experienced by all of our nation's school children."

Wamba and Ascher (2003) point to the fact that charter school legislation allows for the creation of charter schools tailored to specific populations or having particular curriculum content. For the authors, "the failure to enforce equity provisions in the charter law has given rise to hybrid forms of segregation," in that it allows some charter schools to serve particular clienteles. They continue the argument by saying that:

> There are, indeed, social reasons for the creation of such schools, especially for minority parents who for a long time have felt cheated by the public school system. Proponents of charter schools point to the inequities existing in the public school system and suggest that charter schools enhance equity by offering new options for underserved populations (Vergari, 2002). However, despite this good intent, it is difficult not to assume that allowing the creation of such schools furthers the isolation of minority students. Opponents of charter schools argue that this isolation, by design, undermines the socialization functions of public education in a democratic society. (Bosetti, 1999, as cited in Wamba & Ascher, 2003, p. 473)

Although charter schools are bridging the achievement gap by better serving disadvantaged groups, this collection of research shows that they are, at the same time, contributing to the problem of racial and socioeconomic segregation. As a result, equity is being defined merely as a match of students' needs and the educational programs provided (Finn, Manno & Vanourek, 2000, as cited in Wamba & Ascher, 2003), rather than as equal access to educational opportunities for all.

Final Considerations

The danger in market choice in education is not the fact that some students might attend private schools with public money – but what this might cause to the public sphere. Charter proponents believe that the number of charters relative to all public schools is too small to make a difference. Detractors, on the other hand, question the wisdom of expanding the number of charters without first determining their impact on students and other schools.

Recent studies over the quality of charter schools indicate that the charter system might be improving its effectiveness throughout the years, but it does not have a better overall quality if compared with traditional public schools. On the other hand, the specialization of charter schools into serving disadvantaged students has led to better results within these groups. However, although minority groups are achieving better results in charter schools, there is an increase in inequality among schools, enhancing racial and social segregation. According to the National School Boards Association Center for Public Education, "school choice can be great for some families and some students. However, the reality is that just because parents choose schools doesn't mean that school will do better for student achievement overall" (NSBA Center for Public Education, 2017b).

When it comes to analyzing charter schools and vouchers in the Brazilian context, it is important to consider some differences between these two countries. Even though the U.S. school system is socially segregated in comparison to its counterparts in the developed world, the Brazilian educational system is even more. The achievement gap between low and high SES students is larger in Brazil and the consequences of introducing choice through vouchers or charter schools could be even worse. If these reforms are not helping to enhance overall quality education in the United States and are, instead, increasing inequality, this may not be a policy to be pursued by the Brazilian society.

While some policymakers are pushing for increased school choice both in the United States and Brazil as a way to improve education, the research does not support this idea.

On the other hand, we could take advantage of the experiences of high-performing schools independent of its sector (public, charter, and private) to replicate its instructional practices and management. Focusing on the idea that the school choice system is the answer may divert the attention from policies that can improve the entire educational system. This can postpone the implementation of public policies that are known to be effective, including high-quality early childhood education, increased education funding, after-school and summer programs, and teacher professional development. The idea that school choice is a silver bullet solution is an ideological debate, without significant proven results.

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About the Authors

Paula Louzano
Facultad de Educación de la Universidad Diego Portales
Email: paula.louzano@udp.cl

Paula Louzano is the Dean of Diego Portales University School of Education, in Chile. Paula holds a doctoral degree in educational policy from Harvard University and M.A. in comparative education from Stanford University. She worked as a professor and researcher at University of São Paulo School of Education and as a consultant at UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Santiago, Chile. Her research interests include comparative educational policies, teacher education and professional development and educational equity.

Lara Simielli
Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo da Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV EAESP)
Email: lara.simielli@gmail.com

Lara Simielli is a Professor at the Public Management Department of Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV EAESP). Lara holds a Ph.D. and Master´s Degree in Public Administration and Government from FGV EAESP. She was a Visiting Researcher at Stanford University. Lara worked as a Project Officer in the UNESCO Education Sector (Brazil) and as a Professor at the University of São Paulo School of Education. Her research interests include strategic planning and public policy management, project evaluation and monitoring, educational policy and equity.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6066-2693

About the Guest Editors

Ângelo R. de Souza
NuPE / UFPR - Brasil
Email: angelo@ufpr.br
Associated Professor and researcher at Educational Policy Research Center and at Education Graduate Program, Federal University of Parana, Brazil. Researcher at National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), Brazil. Areas of Investigation: Education administration; Education Policy; School Administration.
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0246-3207

Sebastián Donoso Diaz
IIDE / UTalca - Chile
Email: sdonoso@utalca.cl
Full Professor at Research Center for Educational Development, University of Talca (Chile). Specialist in Education Policies and Administration. Field of investigation: Education policy; Changes at education and the new modalities of government action in education; Public Education Financing.
ORCID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4744-531X

Joaquín Gairin Sallán
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona - España
Email: joaquin.gairin@uab.cat
Full Professor of Didactics and School Organization at Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain. Manages projects on social and educational development, organizational development, educational change processes, leadership, evaluation of programs and institutions.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2552-0921

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