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EDUCATIONAL CHOICE IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE FORMER SOVIET UNION: A REVIEW ESSAY

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of school choice with particular reference to policies in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and how these have been viewed by Glenn, in particular.

Introduction

"It is somewhat disconcerting," says David Boaz in his foreword to Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe, (n1) "to realize that even though the United States prides itself on individualism and free markets, parents in many other countries have more freedom of choice in education than do Americans". This irony appears to have been behind the Cato Institute's sponsorship of this book written by Charles L. Glenn. Its interest seems driven by a scorecard: making points for the Republican Party's view of education choice (which includes public financial support for nonpublic schools) as opposed to the Democratic party's view of education choice (which does not include non-public schools). Boaz's foreword refers darkly to the similarities between a repressive education monopoly under Marxism and one under the bureaucrats from Washington, DC. (If he only knew.) This domestic agenda does both the topic of school choice and Glenn's book a disservice, for both are more complex and more interesting.

To explore this question of school choice a little further, I will describe Glenn's book briefly, then provide some background on the choice issue in the former communist countries. Next, I will attempt to summarize some of the dilemmas which school choice brings to this geographical region and, finally, I will make a brief argument in favor of educational choice, but effectively managed so that it may contribute to the two opposite objectives every country holds dear: that of educational liberty and, at the same time, that of social stability.

Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe

As a scholar, Charles Glenn is quite appropriate to discuss the school-choice issue. He began his career in Massachusetts, working on civil rights and the equality of educational opportunity. Following that experience, he shifted away from the view that the common school could provide a single solution to complex social problems. His earlier book *The Myth of the Common School* (Glenn, 1988) helped to summarize what one might assume was a liberal disaffection. He was not alone in that disaffection. His second book, *Choice of Schools in Six Nations* (Glenn, 1989), symbolized his first foray outside the US in search of precedent and guidance on school-choice policy. Precedent was simple to find. The US remains the only country with membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in which non-public (including religious schools) are not, in part, publicly financed.

But guidance was not so simple to find, since precedent for public support of non-public schools was acquired for different reasons in each OECD country. In England and Wales for instance, only private schools associated with parishes recognized by a law passed by parliament early in this century are eligible to receive public money. This ensures support for schools attended by Anglican, Catholic and Jewish children, but not Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist children. Controversy surrounding public financing of Islamic schools in Britain is similar to public financing of religious schools in the US. Thus, even though precedent for the public support of non-public schools in other countries does exist, it should not be interpreted to suggest that the dilemmas surrounding school choice have been resolved. Charles Glenn's understanding of this lesson seems to have served him well in his next foreign foray on the school-choice issue, that of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Here the rationale for school choice was simple, and Glenn gets it exactly right. From the point of view of inquiry, schooling under communism was a disaster. In each chapter researched by Glenn's teams of local consultants from Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Russia, Poland, Eastern Germany and the Czech and Slovak Republics, it is clear that the social sciences--including economics--had been politically perverted, that history consisted of crude reinforcement of ideological principles and that equality was interpreted as uniformity of pedagogy, materials (only one textbook allowed), curriculum and administration (uniform class size in all subjects and age groups). Most importantly, schools were used as the means to circumvent alternative, and therefore suspect, moral authority, namely organized religion and families. As Glenn notes: "It is a fundamental anomaly and injustice when the state sets itself up as a rival to parents in shaping the beliefs and loyalties of children" (p. 9).

Is it any wonder that post-communist authorities quickly reduced central controls, offered choice to parents and local communities, supported religiously-affiliated schools with public resources, encouraged a flowering of pedagogical specialization based on classical tradition (gymnasias, lyceums, foreign languages, dance), religious beliefs (Catholic, Orthodox, Islam), pedagogical philosophy (Steiner, Montessori, Dewey, Schiller) and economic demand (business education and economics)? Radical by most standards, these choices were put into place in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union with an enthusiasm and speed similar to that of the privatization of state-owned enterprises. Freeing education from central control was interpreted as a requirement to prevent such control from being reinstated: break it quickly and thoroughly so it cannot be put back together. Given the resentment that grew from treating children as ideological conduits, the speed and the certainty of these reforms might have been understandable.

Glenn, of course, is not the first scholar to have described this (Anweiler, 1992; Medlin, 1960) and, to his credit, he pays substantial attention to local reformers and local analyses. Among the more influential, for instance, was Edward Dneprov, the ax-minister of education in the Russian Federation, who defined and promoted three principles: that of 'humanitarianism' (instruction according to individual needs and interests), 'humanism' (the teaching of humanities and social sciences without politicalization) and 'educational democracy' (making educational decisions by parents and teachers at the school level).(n2)

On the other hand, Glenn seems to have missed the fact that a voucher plan existed (just) prior to the break-up of the former Soviet Union, one which had several characteristics without Western precedent (Heyneman, 1991). As in all choice systems, per-capita funding of education was to follow a student's school choice. But the per-capita/ion grant itself was divided into three parts. The first part was to come under the authority of the federal government and targeted to the three areas of highest interest to federal authorities: mathematics, science and (Russian) language. The second part was to come under regional authority and be allocated to any aspect, but for the most part was expected to target subjects of regional concern: history, languages, humanities and social sciences. The third part was under the authority of each parent and was determined at the level of each school.

This third part, in turn, had three unusual characteristics. It could be allocated either to recurrent expenditures or capital expenditures (to reward an excellent teacher, purchase a new computer or fix a roof). It could be combined with other parent-controlled portions to open a new curriculum (Hebrew, computer science, etc.), but it was also designed to grow over time. The portion under parent control constituted only 8% of the total per-capita/ion grant in grade one, but 16% in grade nine. It was designed to grow to raise the 'personal stake' so that individuals would wish to remain in school longer. In sum, the plan was designed so that educational consumers could express preferences in different ways. National authorities had purchasing power, regions had purchasing power and parents had purchasing power. In the latter case, not only could parents express their purchasing power by changing schools, but also by bargaining for specific educational policies within whatever school they chose.

Glenn makes it evident that the topic of school choice in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is heterogeneous. Nevertheless, several different patterns emerge. In one pattern, well-established religious authorities founded whole new systems (Hungary and Poland). In another, school-choice policy implied a devolution of authority to local officials in conjunction with parallel fiscal and administrative decentralization (The Russian Federation). In other instances, school choice was interpreted as new schools based on national ethos and national language (Armenia, Baltic states). And finally, in many instances, private schools have arisen in response to the demand for new specializations (particularly in business and commerce) and in response to new purchasing power on the part of families with new wealth.

However diverse the patterns, and however creative and justified the school-choice reforms might have been, the story of school choice in Eastern Europe does not end simply with the decentralization of decision-making (Heyneman, 1994). Each country has its own story, and today each has its own reasons for reflecting on the consequences of school-choice policies. This is where the story gets interesting.

Consequences of School-choice Policies

Problems were first reported in the legal sphere (de Groff, 1993, 1994). There were inconsistencies between one law and the next and between education laws and educational components of the national constitutions. There were also definition problems within the school-choice legislation itself (Coons, 1993). There were deep divisions over school property. Who in fact owns school property: the region? the sectoral ministry? the education ministry? the parent? or the governing council? And who should make decisions over this ownership? There have been problems which westerners have rarely encountered. For example, a school director tries to sell auto parts out of a public school building. Is this 'educational privatization'?

Complexities and inefficiencies have resulted from the multiplication of managerial authority: how many school districts should there be in a small country like Estonia? Problems have resulted from suddenly having numerous sources for certification, teacher licensing and curriculum standards. One can now purchase degrees on the open market. New problems of equity have arisen. Universities may set entrance examinations so that only courses offered in the specialized secondary schools serve as pre-requisites. These schools can be afforded only by a small portion of the secondary-school population. Also, there have been the inevitable problems associated with the general collapse of public education expenditures (Heyneman et al., 1995).

In spite of its early popularity, school choice today is a controversial topic in the Russian parliament. Should public money be spent on children who attend private schools with a tuition affordable only by families with illegally gained wealth? When schooling for the normal Russian child has declined precipitously in quality, why should public money be spent on the children of the 'mafia'? Nor are debates limited to parliament. Regional authorities in Russia have the responsibility to accredit new private schools. But public finance for students choosing to attend them is deducted from the regional allocation for education. Since regional allocations have declined to the point that local teachers cannot be paid regularly, regional authorities are reluctant to accredit new private institutions. After an initial burgeoning of private schools in Russia, their number has leveled off at about 5 or 6% of the student population, approximately the same proportion in private schools in the US.

As serious as these problems are, the main challenge to school choice in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union is overlooked by the early educational reformers and by Glenn's book. These have to do with national governance and the pre-requisites for social stabilization. But it is these issues which may determine the fate of school choice in the region.

It is wise to remind ourselves that there are grievances in the former communist countries which, for the most part, are unknown in the West and, therefore, complications exist of which Westerners are only vaguely aware (Broxup, 1994; Karavetz, 1978; Kirkwood, 1991; Shadrikov, 1993; Shorish, 1994). With the possible exception of Africans prior to the twentieth century, most minorities in the West have settled in certain places for reasons of personal choice. The Japanese who emigrated to Hawaii and California did so to seek a better life, as did the Swedes in Minnesota, the Irish in Boston and the African-Americans in Chicago and New York.

But in the former communist world, minorities were often moved by force for political reasons. German speakers were moved to Siberia. Korean speakers were moved to Central Asia. Jews, Cossacks, Buriats, Poles, Georgians and many others were relocated to distant and unfamiliar regions. These displaced peoples have had no genuine political voice or authority over matters of what to teach the young. The communist governments intended them all to become 'soviet citizens'.

Today, these peoples have both voice and authority. Among their first desire is to use the curriculum to teach their children about the oppression to which they were subjected previously. Some may even direct blame for this oppression at individuals such as Stalin or to particular groups such as Russians, Romanians or Poles. This development holds great potential for ethnic conflict.

Education, Minorities and Special Interests

What is the role of education in social stabilization? And what is the relevance of school choice? Russia provides one illustration. Including Chechnya, the Russian Federation is currently composed of 89 different regions (roughly analogous to states). About one half of these regions have minorities of sufficient size to kindle a controversy over the language used in instruction and curriculum. Over the past 3 years, the number of languages taught in Russian schools has doubled. In 1987, students could be educated through tenth grade in four languages other than Russian (Georgian, Bashkir, Armenian and Tartar). Five years later, Russian citizens could be educated through compulsory education in nine languages (add Buriat, Urdmurt, Chuvash and Iakut). Today, an additional 87 languages now constitute part of the curriculum in one way or another.

In some instances, non-Russian languages are used in schools where Russian speakers are the minority. This adds a different dimension to the question of protecting 'minority' rights. And how are the basic tenets of a society, such as loyalty and good citizenship, to be guaranteed if curriculum authority over humanities and languages and history is devolved to local communities and schools as the Russian legislation of 1992 guarantees?

Russia has an education dilemma, but the dilemma is larger than Russia. The same issues are relevant in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Bosnia, Serbia, Albania, Kazakstan and Moldova; in fact, throughout the region. This region extends from Germany to the Pacific Ocean. Borders include those with China, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran and Japan. It is an area so vast and so important that the governance challenge constitutes a problem for the world at large. This implies that the policy of school choice cannot be seen as simply an educational issue; rather it is an issue with much broader implications and ramifications.

To his credit, Glenn senses that there is something not quite finished in his original enthusiastic presentation of school choice in the region. Two years after the manuscript was completed he added a new final chapter. In it he points to the problems associated with the new administrative complexities, the collapse of public expenditure and the absence of the ingredients for a civil society. He says:

The growing vitality of civil society in all its chaotic and uncontrollable variety ... is by no means entirely positive and indeed, is accompanied by the open expression of social tensions that remained latent under communist rule ... Freedom won, must always be sustained by virtue, or it ceases to be freedom and falls away into some new tyranny (p. 326).

On the other hand, what is commonly held about the school system in North America is probably true. Administration is stultifying, classroom climate is disruptive, teachers are not rewarded for performance, expectations of curriculum content have been thinned to accommodate rival interest groups and consumer/user preference is only modestly felt. Additionally, in the opinion of many educators, it is altogether reasonable that a religious obligation be treated as a normal motivation for religious students who attend public schools.

It is a mistake, however, in the US or elsewhere, to assume that school choice implies that a family should have sole authority over educational decisions. It has long been recognized in democracies that whether public or private schooling is a balance of equally legitimate interests. Gutman describes them as three communities: the state community, the professional community and the family community (Gutman, 1987). If the state community were to have hegemony over the others, it may lead to ideological oppression and a deflation of professional integrity. It is widely agreed that this is what pertained in education under communism. If the professional community were to acquire hegemony it could lead to an absence of civic duty and would abrogate the right of parents to choose moral principles for their children. Some would argue that this problem characterizes education in the US. But if the family community were to acquire hegemony, it could lead to an equally problematic conclusion. It could lead to the teaching of ethnocentric interests and would create multiple professional standards without the necessary minimum required by the society and the economy. If the assumption behind extremist views of school choice, that families should have sole right to determine the education of their children, were applied, it might exacerbate the educational problem it purports to fix.

However cumbersome, inefficient and unresponsive to consumer interests the public-school system in North America has become, it is wise to remember that at least it does not teach sedition against the constitution; it does not teach disrespect toward specific ethnic or religious groups, it does not include in the curriculum materials which would increase political tensions with countries to the south or to the north. None of these problems are a part of the educational dilemmas in the US, but they are very much a part of the dilemmas for the new school systems in the post-communist world.

Using economic criteria to drive public policy has a limit. There are more expensive problems than an inefficient and cumbersome public education system. In the absence of institutional restraint, considered normal elsewhere, it is possible for ethnic, religious and racial groups to teach disrespect for the rights of their neighbors. In so doing, it is possible that schools may make a contribution exactly the opposite from their public purpose: instead of contributing to a civil society, they may be used to exacerbate social tensions. Instead of helping to create a consensus on public welfare and the public good, they may contribute to civil unrest and social instability. In these circumstances, schools can lay an intellectual foundation which leads to social breakdown and, in extreme instances, to civil war. It is certainly true, as Boaz mentions, that parents in Russia have 'more choice' than do parents in America, but that is not necessarily a virtue.

Notes

(n1.) Glenn, C. L. (1995) Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe (Washington DC, The Cato Institute).

(n2.) See Eklof, B. & Dneprov, E. (1993) Democracy in the Russian School: The Reform Movement Since 1984 (Boulder, CO, Westview Press).

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