Charter schools as postmodern paradox: Rethinking social stratification in an age of deregulated school choice

For the last two-and-a-half years, authors Amy Stuart Wells, Alejandra Lopez, Janelle Scott, and Jennifer Jellison Holme have been engaged with a team of researchers in a comprehensive qualitative study of charter schools in ten California school districts. They have emerged from this study with a new understanding of how the implementation of a specific education policy can reflect much broader social changes, including the transformation from modernity to postmodernity. Given that much of the literature on postmodernity is theoretical in nature, this article invites readers to wrestle with the complexity that results when theory meets the day-to-day experiences of people trying to start schools. In their study, the authors examined how people in different social locations define the possibilities for localized social movements, and how they see the potential threat of greater inequality resulting from this reform within and among communities. They started with a framework that questioned how charter schools came into being at this particular time that is characterized by global economic developments and demands for a more deregulated state education system. This framework allowed the authors to examine the particularistic nature of a reform that defies universal definitions. Their purpose was not to definitively state whether or not charter school reform is "working," or whether or not it is leading to greater social stratification across broad categories of race, class, and gender. Rather, the authors focused on understanding how modern identities and postmodern ideologies converge and, thus, for whom charter school reform is "working," under what conditions, and on whose terms.
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