

The pressure for performance generated by the accountability logic (Hallett 2010; Mehta 2013) demands disciplined focus on essential, testable knowledge in core subjects like math and language arts. In this study, I distinguish between two foundational “philosophical regimes” that apply to charter schools: essentialism versus progressivism. In broad outline (see Oakes et al. 2013; Watanabe 2007), *essentialism* calls for disciplined, scientifically organized, and often rote development of the knowledge and skills needed for student success in college & careers, with primacy given to “core subjects” in the Western tradition (or “common cultural canon”) including mathematics, literature, and grammar (e.g., Harris 1906; Hirsch 1996). In contrast, *progressivism* advocates a more rounded “child-centered” approach meant to instill social and emotional competence, independent thinking, and civic participation through active and self-directed learning (e.g., Dewey 1897).

Favored by its congruence with the logic of accountability, essentialism has become an exceedingly common basis for education. For instance, the dictates of essentialism are clearly reflected in “No Excuses” schools, exemplified by the KIPP group of charter schools (see Angrist, Pathak, and Walters 2013; Meier 2013). No Excuses schools are the most popular specialist model in the U.S. (in both school and student counts; see McShane and Hatfield 2015), but essentialism also reaches into many other schools that take up this philosophy for the rewards of broader appeal and district support. Thus, I generally predict that:

Hypothesis 1: Essentialism is more common in charter school missions than is progressivism.

However, the politicized struggle over curricula and their underlying philosophy (e.g., “Do we teach a common culture or diverse traditions? For content mastery or critical awareness?”; Asante and Ravitch 1991) means that neither philosophical regime holds fast

universally; essentialist ascendancy will hold stronger in some political contexts than others. Moreover, schools will receive more support and resources in (and gravitate toward) communities politically aligned with the schools' philosophical foundations. Specifically, the alignment between the conservative moral foundations of respect for authority and loyalty to the ingroup (Haidt and Graham 2007), on one hand, and the essentialist emphasis on teacher-led, standards- and drill-based teaching and the patriotically hued "common culture", on the other, means that essentialist schools in conservative communities will enjoy stronger parental involvement, budgetary priority, political leverage, etc. Additionally, because essentialism is taken for granted and therefore viewed as a safe choice in risky contexts, the political will to support essentialism will be stronger in communities where public school "failure" (and its consequences) is a recurrent theme, as well as in areas of concentrated social disadvantage (e.g., No Excuses and STEM schools are more likely to appear in predominantly black, low-income urban areas; McShane and Hatfield 2015). Based on this reasoning, I predict that:

Hypothesis 2: Essentialism is stronger in charter schools that (a) are in more politically conservative areas, (b) have higher rates of public school "failure" in their communities, and (c) have larger enrollments of low-income and (d) ethnic minority students.

A similar situation holds for progressive schools (which advocate civic participation as well as social competence and respect for diversity) in liberal communities (which correspondingly value fairness and equality as well as compassion and open-mindedness; Haidt and Graham 2007) with less urgent need for results (e.g., foreign language schools appear more in affluent areas; McShane and Hatfield 2015). Thus:

Hypothesis 3: Progressivism is stronger in charter schools that (a) are in more politically liberal areas, (b) have lower rates of public school "failure" in their communities, and (c) have smaller enrollments of low-income and (d) ethnic minority students.

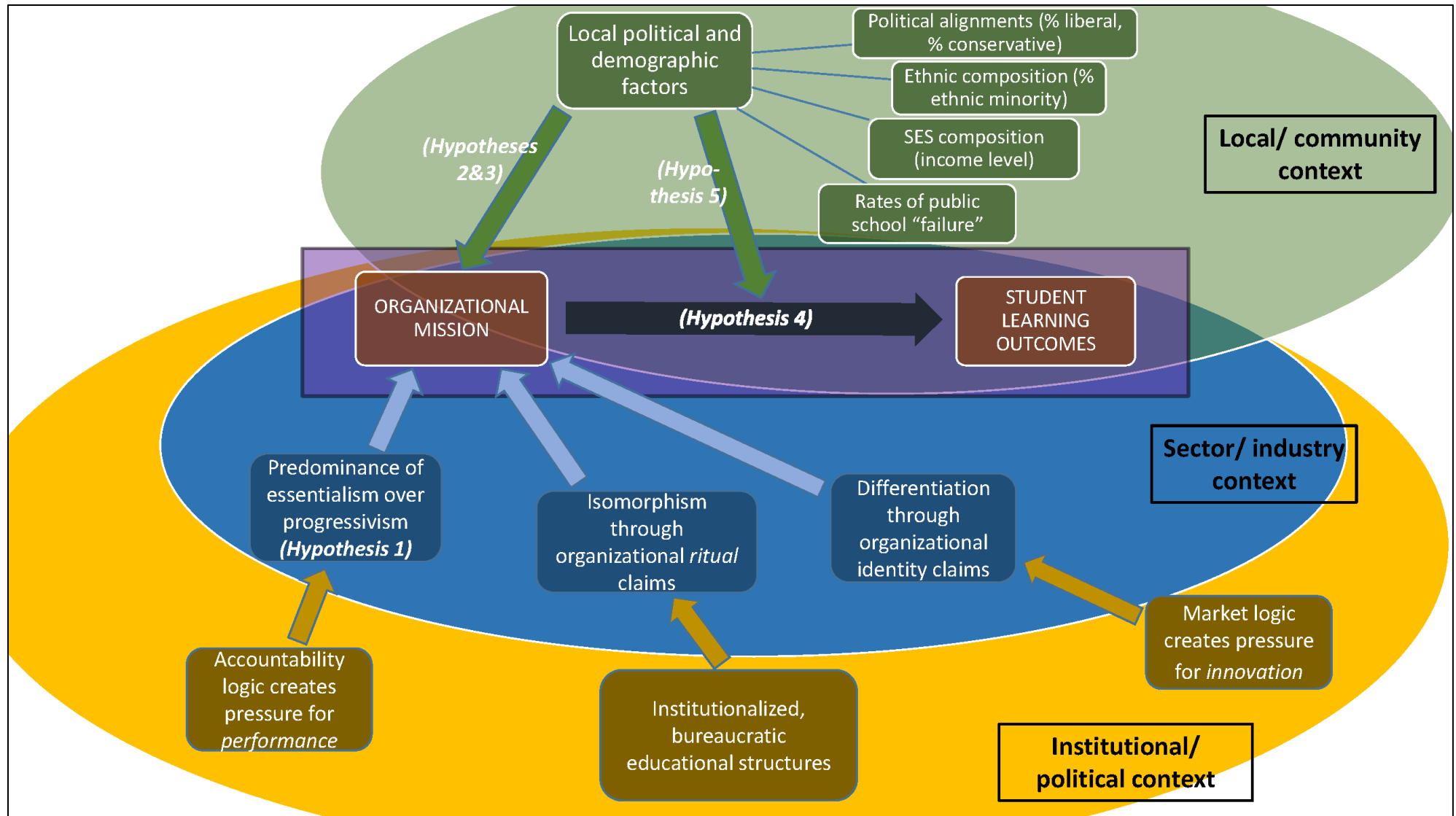
As a consequence of this uneven availability of essential resources (parents, funding, etc.), political context modulates the effectiveness of each philosophical regime at delivering academic results. And this builds on differential impacts of philosophical regimes on student achievement, for essentialism aims squarely for higher test performance (via standards-based curricula, discipline, and drill) while progressivism takes broader goals of social skills, independent thinking, etc. Therefore:

Hypothesis 4: Academic performance is higher in essentialist schools than in progressivist schools.

Hypothesis 5: (a) Essentialists perform better in conservative than in liberal areas. (b) Progressivists perform better in liberal than in conservative areas.

See conceptual model below for a visual representation of all five hypotheses.

Conceptual model of contextual layers shaping hypotheses



List of References

- Angrist, Joshua D., Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters. 2013. "Explaining Charter School Effectiveness." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 5(4):1–27.
- Asante, Molefi Kete and Diane Ravitch. 1991. "Multiculturalism: An Exchange." *The American Scholar* 60(2):267–76.
- Dewey, John. 1897. *My Pedagogic Creed*. New York & Chicago: E.L. Kellogg & Company.
- Haidt, Jonathan and Jesse Graham. 2007. "When Morality Opposes Justice: Conservatives Have Moral Intuitions That Liberals May Not Recognize." *Social Justice Research* 20(1):98–116.
- Hallett, Tim. 2010. "The Myth Incarnate: Recoupling Processes, Turmoil, and Inhabited Institutions in an Urban Elementary School." *American Sociological Review* 75(1):52–74.
- Harris, William Torrey. 1906. *The School City*. Syracuse: C.W. Bardeen.
- Hirsch, Eric Donald. 1996. *The Schools We Need, and Why We Don't Have Them*. New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell.
- McShane, Michael Q. and Jenn Hatfield. 2015. *Measuring Diversity in Charter School Offerings*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute (AEI).
- Mehta, Jal. 2013. *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Meier, Deborah. 2013. "Explaining KIPP's 'SLANT.'" *Education Week - Bridging Differences*. Retrieved November 2, 2015 (http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/2013/04/slant_and_the_golden_rule.html?cmp=SOC-SHR-FB).
- Oakes, Jeannie, Martin Lipton, Lauren Anderson, and Jamy Stillman. 2013. *Teaching to Change the World*. 4th ed. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Watanabe, Maika. 2007. "Displaced Teacher and State Priorities in a High-Stakes Accountability Context." *Educational Policy* 21(2):311–68.