

How A Decentralized Education System Keeps Hubris In Check

While the past two years have been characterized in many ways by top-down policy approaches and greater centralization of power, there have also been positive signs of decentralization and bottom-up solutions. This has been particularly true in education, as parents seek new learning options for their kids and entrepreneurial educators create a variety of new models.

A decentralized education ecosystem is characterized by diversity of options. Rather than parents being forced to send their child to an assigned district school with a standardized curriculum, they now have increasingly greater opportunities to access a charter school, low-cost private school or microschool, learning pod, homeschooling center or co-op, or virtual learning platform.

The more robust the education marketplace, the more choices there will be for parents. The more choices that are available, the more likely it will be that parents will find a learning environment for their children that reflects their preferences and needs.

I have attended several conferences recently in which I highlighted the benefits of vast education decentralization and the innovation and diversity it produces.

Some conference participants pushed back, concerned that such a “wild west” of education choices would lead to overall chaos, including low-quality learning options and a lack of good pedagogy.

My obvious follow-up question was: Who decides? Who decides what is a “quality” learning option or what is “good pedagogy”?

The critics would respond that they, or others they trust, have the answer of what is “quality” and “good” in terms of educational options.

They may believe that they are right, just as other critics who have a different perspective on education may believe that they are right. For example, I may believe that self-directed education, or unschooling, is the best educational option and try to persuade you of its quality and goodness, while advocates of Waldorf education, or Montessori, or Classical, or faith-based education, or college prep will just as strenuously try to persuade you that their preferred educational approach is the best.

There is no “best” educational choice, just as there is no “best” food choice. Some of us think Mexican food is best, while others think it’s Italian. You might say Starbucks coffee is the best, while I know it’s Dunkin’ Donuts. In a dynamic marketplace of choices, there is no

“best” choice—only what we decide is best for us, based on our individual preferences.

We can try to persuade others, through reason and argument, to our way of thinking. We could explain why we think kale is good, or why we think project-based learning is good. But the choice must always lie with the individual.

It is up to the consumer, which in education is the parent, to decide what is best for her child, aligned with her preferences. It is the parent who ultimately decides what is “quality” and what is “good.”

This is why decentralization is so important in education, especially. It eliminates educational hubris. No longer can central planners or education “experts” define what is good and right for other people’s children. Parents decide what is good and right for their children, by selecting from a diverse marketplace of education options.

The Nobel Prize-winning economist, Friedrich Hayek, referred to the hubris of central planners, or the idea that “man is able to shape the world around him according to his wishes,” as the “fatal conceit.” He argued instead for decentralization. He claimed that rather than creating chaos, decentralization will actually increase order. In his book, *The Fatal Conceit*, Hayek writes:

“To the naïve mind that can conceive of order only as the product of deliberate arrangement, it may seem absurd that in complex conditions order, and adaptation to the unknown, can be achieved more effectively by decentralizing decisions and that a division of authority will actually extend the possibility of overall order. Yet that decentralization actually leads to more information being taken into account.”

Putting it more succinctly, Hayek says: “The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design.”

We all demonstrate hubris. We all think that our preferred educational approach is the best one, that our definitions of “quality” learning options and “good pedagogy” are the right ones, the true ones.

A decentralized, market-based system keeps our hubris in check. It challenges us to try to sway our potential customers to our way of thinking, while avoiding the imposition of our will upon others. It is based on voluntary exchange, not coercion.

In a fully decentralized education marketplace there are guaranteed to be education options that you or I deem to be “low quality” and infused with “poor pedagogy.” If enough parents agree that a particular education option is subpar, then that organization will go out of business. Consumer preferences, not central planners or “experts,” will decide which education organizations succeed and which ones fail, which ones are good and which ones are poor.