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“The Voice of Choice”: Transpacific Educational Exchanges in the Neoliberal Era

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Abstract

This essay queries how ideas about school choice traversed the Pacific in the late twentieth century. Specifically, it reconstructs and deconstructs the visits of two African American proponents of parental school choice, Annette “Polly” Williams and Howard Fuller, from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1990s. Drawing from oral histories, newspapers, and archives in the United States and Aotearoa New Zealand, this essay explores Fuller’s and Williams’s travels and the responses they generated to better understand how and why choice-based educational policies, including school vouchers, gained traction, or failed to do so, at the close of the twentieth century. A close-up analysis of one small strand of the transnational voucher movement reveals that educational ideas and policies did not drift naturally from one place to another. To the contrary, they were cultivated; and that cultivation, particularly when done across vastly different contexts, represented both a political act and an expression of power. This essay also prompts historians to understand the global ascendancy of school choice at the end of the twentieth century by looking to other transnational frameworks and ideologies in addition to neoliberalism: decolonization, Indigenous activism, Pan-Africanism, and the “Black Pacific,” among others. Finally, this essay hopes to encourage more historians of education, including Americanists, to peer beyond national boundaries when investigating the cultivation, development, and dissemination of educational ideas and practices. A close analysis of the transpacific travels of Fuller and Williams can serve as a tangible model for how historians might utilize microhistory to reap the benefits of transnational inquiry while avoiding its analytical hazards: broad generalizations, oversimplifications, and cultural misinterpretations.

Keywords: African American activism and education; education vouchers; Indigenous activism and education in New Zealand; school choice; transnational activism and school choice

In March 1993, fifty-six-year-old Annette “Polly” Williams, Democratic state representative for Wisconsin’s Seventeenth Senate District, traveled from Milwaukee to Aotearoa New Zealand to begin a stint as a visiting fellow at the Auckland Institute of Technology. Williams’s leading role in Milwaukee’s parental school choice movement had caught the attention of businessman Roger Kerr, the executive director of

the New Zealand Business Roundtable, a private organization dedicated to promoting market-based reforms, including universal school vouchers.¹ Newspaper accounts credited the African American legislator “with promoting America’s first law that allowed parents to use state money to send their children to private schools.”² By “spread[ing] the good news about parental choice,” Williams could reinvigorate a faltering effort to create a universal school voucher program in Aotearoa New Zealand, Kerr hoped.³

Six years later, in October 1999, Williams’s longtime friend and political ally from Milwaukee’s parental school choice movement, fifty-eight-year-old Howard Fuller, made the same journey from Milwaukee to Auckland. The distinguished professor of education from Marquette University had traveled extensively throughout his life. In the early 1970s, inspired by Pan-Africanism, he visited Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique as part of an effort to launch Malcolm X Liberation University in Greensboro, North Carolina.⁴ Two decades later, he toured England, Germany, and Sweden as an impassioned advocate of parental school choice. Fuller recalled receiving a call from someone who he thought had sponsored Williams, asking if he would consider making a similar trip. Knowing nothing about the Pacific nation, he said yes.⁵

In point of fact, Fuller’s invitation came from a different set of actors than those who had invited Williams six years before: the Māori Education Commission, the Independent Schools Council, and the Ministry of Education.⁶ Created in 1997 and composed of Māori educational leaders from secondary and higher education, the Māori Education Commission focused on understanding the issues relevant to Māori teachers and students and advising the Minister of Māori Affairs.⁷ The Independent Schools Council, by contrast, represented a private organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of private (“independent”) schools.

Like Williams, Fuller spoke about the history and evolution of Milwaukee’s parental choice program. He also participated in small group meetings with public sector officials in the capital city of Wellington.⁸ His itinerary carried him beyond Auckland and Wellington into suburban and rural communities. There, he visited marae, traditional Māori meeting grounds, and *kura Kaupapa Māori*: state-funded, Indigenous-designed and -operated primary schools.⁹ This portion of his trip sparked many

¹Bronwen Lichtenstein, “Roger Kerr: The Man, the Message, the Strategy: What Impact on Teachers and Education in New Zealand?,” *Access: Contemporary Themes in Education* 12, nos. 1 & 2 (1993), 85; Roger Kerr, “Transforming Education: The Case for Vouchers” (speech, Epsom Business Breakfast Forum, Auckland, New Zealand, March 4, 1996), 1–15, located at Victoria University of Wellington / Te Herenga Waka Library, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand.

²“Top Speed Start for ‘Voice of Choice,’” *New Zealand Herald*, March 17, 1993, 9.

³“Top Speed Start for ‘Voice of Choice.’”

⁴Howard Fuller with Lisa Frazier Page, *No Struggle, No Progress: A Warrior’s Life from Black Power to Education Reform* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2014), 121–46.

⁵Howard Fuller, interview by the author, Nov. 29, 2022.

⁶“Voucher Education Supported,” *Waikato Times*, Oct. 26, 1999, 2.

⁷“Comment from the Chair,” *Māori Education Commission Newsletter* 1 (Nov. 1998), 1, University of Otago / Ōtākou Whakaihū Waka, Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁸Fuller, interview; Rebecca Rowe, “Straight Out of Milwaukee,” *New Zealand Education Review*, Oct. 29, 1999, 5.

⁹Fuller, interview.

questions, Fuller recalled. How did Māori sustain their language and culture in the face of colonizing efforts to use education to promote assimilation? What role did self-determination play in Māori educational philosophies, activism, and school building? Answers to these questions informed what Fuller took back from his visit, and shaped his understanding of the relationship between education, self-determination, and liberation.¹⁰

Drawing from oral histories, newspaper coverage, and archives in the United States and Aotearoa New Zealand, this essay explores two transpacific educational exchanges, Williams's and Fuller's visits from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1990s, by contextualizing them among broader conversations about school choice crisscrossing the Pacific in the late twentieth century. In so doing, I hope to make two contributions, the first geared toward understanding how ideas about school choice circulated in the late twentieth century, and the second aimed toward historians of American education, including myself, who typically consider the history of educational policies, politics, and practices within the confines of the nation-state.

As to the first aspiration: by examining the conversations, contributions, and critiques of parental school choice prompted by Fuller's and Williams's visits, I hope to offer a more nuanced account of how ideas about school choice crisscrossed the Pacific in the late twentieth century. Although modest in time and scope, when considered carefully, these exchanges can expand our thinking about how and why choice-based educational policies, including school vouchers, gained traction or failed to do so. The transnational voucher movement reveals that educational ideas and policies did not drift naturally from one place to another. To the contrary, they were cultivated. And that cultivation, particularly when done across vastly different contexts, represented both a political act and an expression of power.¹¹

In this way, I hope to expand the narrative about the global ascendancy of school choice beyond a strict focus on neoliberalism.¹² Lily Geismer defines "neoliberalism" as "the theory of political economy that free markets and government austerity are the best way to create individual freedom and choice," and notes that "since the 1970s," the "ideas of market fundamentalism, disseminated by Milton Friedman and the Chicago school of economics, came to structure seemingly all aspects of governance and spheres of human activity in the United States and much of the world."¹³ While Geismer focuses on the United States, she also acknowledges neoliberalism's global ascension.

I argue that the global history of school choice, which elevates neoliberalism, would do well to consider how other global political and economic movements contributed

¹⁰ Fuller, interview.

¹¹ Special thanks to Jack Schneider for this insight.

¹² For global and international assessments of school choice that center neoliberalism, see, for example, Martin Forsey, Scott Davies, and Geoffrey Walford, eds., *The Globalisation of School Choice?* (Oxford: Symposium Books, 2008); David Gabbard, ed., *Knowledge & Power in the Global Economy: The Effects of School Reform in a Neoliberal/Neoconservative Age* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2008); and David Salisbury and James Tooley, eds., *What America Can Learn from School Choice in Other Countries* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2005).

¹³ Lily Geismer, *Left Behind: The Democrats' Failed Attempt to Solve Inequality* (New York: Public Affairs, 2022), 7.

to and resisted the expansion of choice-based educational policies—in this case, school vouchers. How did decolonization, defined as the ongoing postcolonial project to dismantle modern colonial structures, fuel or oppose state efforts to promote school choice? How did Indigenous communities contest and coopt state efforts to promote school choice in an effort to decolonize education?¹⁴ What other transnational ideologies or frameworks, including Pan-Africanism and the “Black Pacific,” guided or impeded choice-based education policies? My essay makes gestures in these directions. In doing so, I hope to encourage other historians of education, including Americanists, to peer beyond national boundaries when investigating the cultivation, development, and dissemination of educational ideas and practices.

Of the two visits, Williams’s probably generated more controversy, not because of her message, but because of the politics of her hosts, including Roger Kerr and his associates at the New Zealand Business Roundtable (NZBR), a conservative, free-market group composed of the chief executives of New Zealand’s largest companies. The NZBR embodied private and corporate efforts to insert free-market thinking into daily life.¹⁵ In March 1992, a year before Williams’s visit, the NZBR had created the “Education Forum” to promote neoliberalism and to support state efforts to introduce market-based policies into Aotearoa New Zealand’s education system.¹⁶

The sudden and dramatic rise of neoliberalism, and the conflicts surrounding it, shaped the dialogue in response to Williams’s visit. The missives she delivered about parental choice stressed its universalism. While she spoke primarily about the voucher movement in Milwaukee, she also affirmed that the education policy could “happen anywhere on the face of this earth.”¹⁷ Consequently, her message appealed to free-marketeers in Aotearoa New Zealand who persisted in promoting a largely unpopular universal school voucher policy. By extension, responses to her visit rejected efforts to conflate America and Aotearoa New Zealand and spoke to the deep-seated disillusionment with neoliberalism that had enveloped opponents of Aotearoa New Zealand’s market-based educational reforms. For those who supported reducing educational expenditures and devolving authority for educational decision-making, Williams represented “the heroine of the parental choice movement across America and in other parts of the world.”¹⁸ But for those who were uneasy with shifting responsibility for social welfare away from the state and onto the private sector, she represented “the perfect token for those pushing the voucher system” because of her race, gender, and socioeconomic status, and the seductive nature of her message.¹⁹

¹⁴On decolonization and Indigenous education in Aotearoa New Zealand, see, for example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 1999); and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang, eds., *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁵Dolores Janiewski and Paul Morris, *New Rights New Zealand: Myths, Moralities, and Markets* (Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 2005), 6–7; Lichtenstein, “Roger Kerr,” 86–87.

¹⁶Lichtenstein, “Roger Kerr,” 87.

¹⁷Polly Williams, “School Choice: A Vehicle for Achieving Excellence in the African-American Community” (speech, Heritage Foundation, Febr. 5, 1992), 1; Polly Williams, “School Choice Promotes Educational Excellence in the African American Community,” in *Voices on Choice: The Education Reform Debate*, ed. K. L. Billingsley (San Francisco: Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy, 1994), 1–10. 1.

¹⁸“Top Speed Start for ‘Voice of Choice,’” 9.

¹⁹Liz Gordon, “Voucher ‘Messenger’ Challenged,” *Press*, April 2, 1993, 10.

Fuller's visit offers a useful corrective to those who interpret Aotearoa New Zealand's school choice movement primarily as a byproduct of American political and economic thinking. By 1999, through the creation and development of Kaupapa Māori theory and institution-building, Indigenous scholars and educators had created pathways to capitalize on support for school choice to promote educational self-determination.²⁰ Fuller's reflections spotlight Indigenous education and provide a window into his understanding of Māori engagement with and resistance to school choice. In addition, his visit provokes questions about the promise and perils of analogizing the United States to Aotearoa New Zealand and vice versa, and the ties that connected Black and Indigenous educational activism.

As to my second aspiration, I also hope to use Fuller's and Williams's visits to make a case for how and why historians of American education might consider utilizing transnational history to peer beyond the nation-state. Here, I suggest that a close analysis of these exchanges speaks to larger questions about the utility of transnational approaches to the history of education. Specifically, I maintain, by carefully utilizing close readings of discrete moments, in the spirit of "microhistory," historians of education, including those accustomed to considering the United States in isolation, can reap some of the benefits of transnational history while sidestepping some of its inherent trappings: broad generalizations, false equivalencies, and culturally inaccurate interpretations. Finally, I suggest that transnational history, when combined with microhistory, can also help historians of education better understand the processes through which ideas and educational activism emerged from transnational communities.

Transnationalism and Microhistory

Most simply, transnational history can be defined as "following topics beyond national boundaries."²¹ Trained as an Americanist, I have little experience writing educational histories that transcend the nation-state. Despite teaching in a diasporic Black Studies department for nearly two decades, my scholarship has rarely peered beyond national boundaries. But living in Aotearoa New Zealand for three years offered an invaluable opportunity to expand my scholarly focus beyond the United States. In saying this, I should acknowledge that historians of education have been writing transnational histories for a while.²² I may be new to the party, but it is a party that has been going on for some time. Recent volumes of *History of Education Quarterly* have featured special issues on "Education in the Asia-Pacific Region" and "International and Comparative

²⁰Ngawaiatetui, "Kaupapa Māori Theory & Methodology Series Online Kōrero Session 1."

²¹Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor, "Introduction: Comparative History, Cross-National History, Transnational History—Definitions," in *Comparison and History*, ed. Cohen and O'Connor (London: Routledge, 2004), ix–xxiv.

²²For examples of transnational educational histories, see, for instance, Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Keita Takayama, "A Nation at Risk Crosses the Pacific: Transnational Borrowing of the U.S. Crisis Discourse in the Debate on Education Reform in Japan," *Comparative Education Review* 51, no. 4 (Nov. 2007), 423–46; and Rebecca Rogers, *A Frenchwoman's Imperial Story: Madame Luce in Nineteenth-Century Algeria* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

Education.”²³ Similarly, in 2019, the International Standing Conference for the History of Education launched a “Global Histories of Education” book series “to advance innovative historical scholarship that analyses education within a global, world, or transnational perspective.”²⁴ Its inaugural volume provides readers with an easy and expansive introduction to transnational methodologies. It also showcases essays that trace the history and development of transnationalism in the historiography of education and that offer guidance for those, like me, who wish to extend their research beyond national boundaries.²⁵

While I have little background in transnational history, microhistory has been a common feature of my scholarship and teaching. I often advise my students, when they propose writing about a sprawling topic like the transatlantic slave trade in a five-to-seven-page essay, to identify a small way in. Whatever the pathway, be it a vessel, an autobiography, or a shipping manifest, the focus of their inquiry need not be representative of the transatlantic slave trade in its entirety. Even the smallest bits of evidence can have significance, especially when the historical record might make it difficult to identify voices buried beneath archival silences. Rather than being representative of something larger, small subjects, if read closely, can be illustrative—that is to say, they can help to provide insights that may be revelatory.

For those unfamiliar with the term *microhistory*, Jill Lepore offers the clearest explication.²⁶ First, she distinguishes *microhistory* from *biography*. Along these lines, she suggests that the value of exploring a single individual’s life “lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual’s life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole.”²⁷ In other words, a close analysis of a small subject—in this case, the brief travels of two proponents of parental school choice—need not, and in fact do not, represent educational exchanges between all school choice proponents, or even any other Americans or New Zealanders. Instead, one can argue that a close analysis of these exchanges can illuminate how ideas about school choice traversed the Pacific.

Second, Lepore notes that while biography aims to “profile and recapitulate a life story,” microhistory aims to solve “small mysteries about a person’s life as a means to exploring the culture.”²⁸ Certainly, the same can be said of my engagement with Fuller and Williams. Both lived lives of significance that warrant biographies. Fuller, in fact, has already published his autobiography. And yet, his visit to Aotearoa New Zealand does not appear in this account. And when I first contacted him about this visit, he said he rarely thought about it.

²³For “Education in the Asia-Pacific Region,” see *History of Education Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (Nov. 2022), 369–510. For “International and Comparative Education,” see *History of Education Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (Feb. 2022), 369–510.

²⁴Eckhardt Fuches and Eugenia Roldán Vera, eds., *The Transnational in the History of Education: Concepts and Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan / Springer Nature, 2019), v.

²⁵Eckhardt Fuches and Eugenia Roldán Vera, “Introduction: The Transnational in the History of Education,” in Fuches and Roldán Vera, *The Transnational in the History of Education*, 1.

²⁶Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections of Microhistory and Biography,” *Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (June 2001), 129–44.

²⁷Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much,” 133.

²⁸Lepore, “Historians Who Love Too Much,” 141.

Microhistory encourages serious investigation of minor moments. In this case, I suggest that a close reading of slim archival records, newspaper accounts, and oral histories allows me to argue not that Fuller's or Williams's time in Aotearoa New Zealand represented a turning point in the history of school choice or in their own lives, but rather, that such visits are useful for their potential to better understand larger cultural questions—in this case, how ideas about school choice traversed the Pacific, and how and to what extent Black Americans and Māori saw common ground in their efforts for educational self-determination. In this way, it also empowers me to tackle a subject that appears large—in this case, a transnational history of school choice—in a way that suits my historical sensibilities. I have always been comfortable with close analyses of small events or local interventions. By combining microhistory with transnational history, I can expand my scholarly horizons beyond the nation-state and beyond the United States, without veering off a cliff of overgeneralizations, ill-conceived comparisons, and cultural misinterpretations.

“Neoliberalism” and the Ascendancy of School Choice in the Late Twentieth Century

According to most nation-based and international accounts of school choice, these policies gained traction as an outgrowth of the global ascendancy of neoliberalism. One example to illustrate this point: in *The Globalisation of School Choice?* editors Martin Forsey, Scott Davies, and Geoffrey Walford assemble a fine collection of essays from scholars researching school choice policies in Canada, Australia, England, Israel, and India, among many other countries. To stitch together these nation-based studies, the editors situate them against the backdrop of “neoliberalism.” This umbrella term can be a useful mechanism through which to understand this international set of choice-based reforms, they maintain.²⁹ I have no reason to doubt them. Yet I wonder if other transnational ideas helped to drive the expansion of school choice, particularly in places with active Indigenous educational movements geared toward self-determination, such as Aotearoa New Zealand.

The history of school choice in Aotearoa New Zealand follows a similar explanatory framework. Most accounts of its dramatic embrace of school choice policies in the late twentieth century point to neoliberalism.³⁰ These narratives call particular attention to the influence of American economic and political thought, especially the Virginia and Chicago schools of economics. As the story goes, neoliberal disciples of American free-market economists, particularly Milton Friedman and James Buchanan, housed in the Department of Treasury, designed, promoted, and implemented “Tomorrow's Schools,” the 1989 school reform that devolved authority from state-run education

²⁹Forsey, Davies, and Walford, *The Globalisation of School Choice?*, 12–14.

³⁰For histories of late twentieth-century school reform in Aotearoa New Zealand that stress the importance of American economic thought, especially with regard to public choice and neoliberalism, see, for example, Nesta Devine, *Education and Public Choice: A Critical Account of the Invisible Hand in Education* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); Edward B. Fiske and Helen F. Ladd, *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000); and John A. Codd, “Managerialism, Market Liberalism and the Move to Self-Managing Schools in New Zealand,” in *A Socially Critical View of the Self-Managing School*, ed. John Smyth (New York: Routledge, 1993), 153–70.

boards by empowering schools to elect parental “Boards of Trustees.” This interpretation is accurate but incomplete. It elevates one ideology, neoliberalism, and highlights one set of political and economic actors, those influenced by neoliberalism. At the same time, these interpretations spill little ink on the influence of other ideologies, including decolonization and self-determination. How should one account for the simultaneous development of kura Kaupapa Māori or, decades later, the decision of some Māori educators to support charter schools (*kura hourua*)?³¹ Apart from neoliberalism, what other ideologies drive support for these choice-oriented educational initiatives?

For those familiar with the history of school choice in the US, the idea that the interests of free-market economists and Indigenous scholars, educators, and activists could coalesce around school choice may seem unsurprising. The history of school choice in the US readily advances the idea of “strange bedfellows,” a term used to describe the multiplicity of stakeholders with divergent values and priorities who form uneasy coalitions to promote school choice.³² Here, the parental school choice movement in Milwaukee might serve as one example. Choice-based coalitions could include everyone from “white supremacists, black nationalists, Catholic and other religious leaders, free-market economists, free-schoolers, private school advocates, linguistic minorities, and left-leaning social scientists,” among others.³³ By contrast, most historical accounts detailing the ascendancy of school choice in Aotearoa New Zealand still stress the singular importance of neoliberalism.

Indigenous scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith have made it clear that neoliberal education reforms failed to engage Māori as stakeholders. She describes the 1990s as a time when Māori struggled “to come to terms with neoliberal reforms in education, which have painted a discourse of parental choice and competition between schools, and overall, the impact of these reforms on Māori has been quite devastating.”³⁴ Likewise, Graham Hingangaroa Smith details how Aotearoa New Zealand’s most significant neoliberal education reform, “Tomorrow’s Schools,” similarly failed to engage with Māori educational needs or imaginations.³⁵

Like Tuhiwai Smith, Hingangaroa Smith argues that neoliberalism has worked against Māori efforts for educational self-determination. To support this claim, he

³¹On recent Māori engagement with charter schools, see, for example, Daniel Kiwa McKinnon, “Charter Schools and Treaty Partnerships: Māori Perceptions of Schooling, Public Systems, and Privatization in Aotearoa New Zealand (Graduate Diploma of Education, University of Queensland, Australia, 2023); and Willie Jackson, “What Charter Schools Mean to Māori and Why New Zealand Needs to Listen,” *Daily Blog*, Oct. 12, 2018, <https://thedailyblog.co.nz/2018/10/12/guest-blog-willie-jackson-what-charter-schools-mean-to-maori-and-why-nz-needs-to-listen/>.

³²On the varied constituencies supportive of school choice in the United States, see, for example, David R. Garcia, *School Choice* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2018); Sigal R. Ben-Porath and Michael C. Johaneck, *Making Up Our Mind: What School Choice Is Really About* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); and Jon Hale, *The Choice We Face: How Segregation, Race, and Power Have Shaped America’s Most Controversial Education Reform Movement* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2021). Special thanks to Jon Hale for connecting me with Howard Fuller.

³³Jim Carl, *Freedom of Choice: Vouchers in American Education* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), xx.

³⁴Marie Battiste, Lynne Bell, and L. M. Findlay, “An Interview with Linda Tuhiwai Te Rina Smith,” *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 26, no. 2 (March 2002), 171.

³⁵Graham Hingangaroa Smith, *Tomorrow’s Schools and the Development of Māori Education*, Research Unit for Māori Education / *Te Tari Rangahau o Te Matauranga Māori* Monograph No. 5 (University of Auckland, Dec. 1991).

points to the creation of kura Kaupapa Māori in the late 1980s, which “was initially begun as a resistance to existing state school options” and became “a manifest critique of the Tomorrow’s School reforms.”³⁶ Historians examining Indigenous critiques of neoliberalism in education might reach two possible conclusions: Indigenous efforts to design new forms of schooling were concurrent with but distinct from the choice-based reforms of the late 1980s and 1990s, because they critiqued rather than promoted neoliberalism. Or, alternatively, one can conclude that school choice in Aotearoa New Zealand probably drew upon multiple ideologies, including self-determination and decolonization.

Education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Relative to the US, Aotearoa New Zealand offers more educational options within its state system (see Figure 1). This expansiveness helps to explain why a universal school voucher movement struggled to gain traction. First, the commitment to separate church from state is less rigid in Aotearoa New Zealand than in the US.³⁷ For example, in 1975, Parliament passed the Private Schools Conditional Integration Act, which allowed cash-strapped Catholic schools to “integrate” into the state system. (They are now referred to as “integrated” schools for that reason.) As religious education is accessible within the state system, it does not drive debates over school vouchers as it does in the US.³⁸

Likewise, Aotearoa New Zealand’s state schools include a category called “Designated Character Schools.” While integration brought Catholic schools into the state system in the 1970s, other schools, including those tailored to Māori educational needs and informed by Māori educational philosophies, did not enter the state system until 1989, despite decades of activism to revive *te reo Māori*, Aotearoa New Zealand’s first language, and to remediate the disastrous educational legacies of settler colonialism.

As Leonie Pihama argues, under settler colonialism, state schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand promoted colonization, assimilation, and Christianity.³⁹ By the early 1980s, Indigenous educators had developed strategies and philosophies to create schools to advance educational opportunities for Māori. These schools aspired to recover and preserve Māori language and culture and to tailor education to the needs of Māori children. *Kohanga reo* (language nests), preschools that immerse young children in Māori language and culture, represented an early innovation. Soon after,

³⁶Smith, *Tomorrow’s Schools and the Development of Māori Education*, 2.

³⁷On the evolution of religious instruction in Aotearoa New Zealand, see, for example, Stephen Jackson, *Religious Education and the Anglo-World: The Impact of Empire, Britishness, and Decolonisation in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand* (Leiden, The Netherlands, Brill: 2020); Helen Bradstock, “Religion in New Zealand’s State Primary Schools,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36, no. 3 (May 2015), 338–61; and Helen Bradstock, “Let’s Talk about Something Else’: Religion and Governmentality in New Zealand’s State Primary Schools” (PhD dissertation, University of Otago, 2016).

³⁸On “Integration,” see Rory Sweetman, *A Fair and Just Solution? A History of the Integration of Private Schools in New Zealand* (Palmerston North, New Zealand: Dunmore Press, 2002).

³⁹Leonie Pihama, “Colonisation, Neoliberalism, and Māori Education: Herbison Invited Lecture, NZARE Annual Conference 2017,” *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 54, no. 1 (2019), 7.



Figure 1. Map of Aotearoa New Zealand in 1985.

Composed of several smaller and two large islands—the North Island and the South Island—Aotearoa New Zealand covers an area roughly the size of Colorado.⁴⁰ In 1986, its population topped 3.26 million, comparable to Iowa’s population in 2023.⁴¹ Auckland is located at the top end of the North Island. Wellington, the capital city, is also located on the North Island, but on its southern tip.⁴² “New Zealand” (Wellington: Department of Lands & Survey, 1985). Photo sourced from LINZ. Crown Copyright reserved. http://ndhadeliver.natlib.govt.nz/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE28733275.

⁴⁰“Background Notes, New Zealand,” US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Public Communication, Editorial Division, 1989, p. 1, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951002970826e>.

⁴¹Stats America, https://www.statsamerica.org/sip/rank_list.aspx?rank_label=pop1; Bob White, ed., *New Zealand Official 1990 Year Book* (Wellington: New Zealand Department of Statistics, 1990), https://www3.stats.govt.nz/new_zealand_official_yearbooks/1990/nzoyb_1990.html#idchapter_1_21201.

⁴²White, *New Zealand Official 1990 Year Book*. https://www3.stats.govt.nz/new_zealand_official_yearbooks/1990/nzoyb_1990.html#idsect2_1_22741.



Figure 2. Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Nga Mokopuna.

An image of Te Kura Kaupapa Māori o Nga Mokopuna, located just down the hill from my house in Seatoun, a seaside community in Wellington's eastern suburbs. The school had previously been located in the neighboring suburb of Newton. In 2002, it was relocated to its current location on Falkirk Avenue, across the street from Seatoun Beach, and on a site that had been previously occupied by Seatoun's public primary school. When the move was announced, some residents expressed concern, fearing the new school might "change the character of the neighbourhood" and cause property values to fall. "Who Will Welcome This Child in Seatoun?," *Evening Post*, April 12, 2002, 3. (Photo courtesy of Hilary Moss.)

Māori parents and educators collaborated to create a new type of primary school, kura Kaupapa Māori.⁴³ The state system incorporated kura Kaupapa Māori in 1989 (see [Figure 2](#)).⁴⁴

⁴³Graham Hingangaroa Smith, "Indigenous Struggle for the Transformation of Education and Schooling," keynote address delivered to the Alaskan Federation of Natives (AFN) Convention (Anchorage, AK, Oct. 2003), <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/curriculum/Articles/GrahamSmith/>; and Kimai Tocker, "The Origins of Kura Kaupapa Māori," *New Zealand Journal of Education Studies* 50, no. 1 (April 2015) 23–28.

⁴⁴Ngawaiatetui, "Kaupapa Māori Theory & Methodology Series Online Kōrero Session 1," YouTube video, April 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hk6jzNRXg1I>; Tocker, "The Origins of Kura Kaupapa Māori," 35.

Also in 1989, as part of a series of public sector reforms to shrink the state, combat bureaucracy, and reduce spending, the Tomorrow's Schools reforms radically restructured Aotearoa New Zealand's state school system. Led by businessman Brian Picot (who would later host Williams), the Picot Taskforce proposed to eliminate Regional Boards of Education and replace them with parental Boards of Trustees.⁴⁵ This transformation also dramatically altered who made enrollment decisions. Previously, children had a right to attend a "reasonably convenient" school, with zones determined by the secretary of education.⁴⁶ The 1989 Education Act, which codified Tomorrow's Schools, required schools facing enrollment pressures to draw "home zones."⁴⁷ In 1991, an even more conservative National government empowered all schools to draw their enrollment zones and to design their enrollment policies.⁴⁸ Thereafter, few constituencies remained to demand more choice. Independent schools (or private schools) represented the largest among them.

The School Voucher Movement in Aotearoa New Zealand

Because of devolution and the abundance of choice, by the time Williams visited in 1993, calls for universal school vouchers had largely, although not entirely, disappeared.⁴⁹ The peak of the universal voucher movement had come and gone in 1987, before Tomorrow's Schools and the elimination of school zoning. Echoing the Reagan administration's infamous 1983 report of the same name, Aotearoa New Zealand's National Party, at that time the Opposition, ran with an educational platform entitled *A Nation at Risk*. "Consumer Choice" represented a centerpiece of its campaign.⁵⁰ As part its efforts to empower parents ("consumers"), National called for a universal voucher plan, substituting the term *entitlement* for voucher. Its proposal linked funding to students rather than schools, and would allow all students, regardless of race, income, or socioeconomic status, to use state funds to attend private schools.⁵¹ Beyond National and its sympathetic base of free-marketeers, a universal school voucher idea failed to gain much support.

⁴⁵ On "Tomorrow's Schools," see Fiske and Ladd, *When Schools Compete*.

⁴⁶ Diane Pearce and Liz Gordon, "In the Zone: New Zealand Legislation for a System of School Choice and Its Effects," *London Review of Education* 3, no. 2 (July 2005), 145–57; Susan and Graham Butterworth, *Reforming Education: The New Zealand Experience, 1984–1996* (Palmerston North, New Zealand: Dunmore Press, 1998), 275.

⁴⁷ Pearce and Gordon, "In the Zone," 145–57.

⁴⁸ Pearce and Gordon, "In the Zone," 152–53.

⁴⁹ On the voucher movement in Aotearoa New Zealand, see, for example, Jonathan Boston, "Some Reflections on the Merits of Education Vouchers," *Working Papers of the State* (Department of Sociology, Massey University, 1998); 4, 61–78, Alexander Turnbull National Library of New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand (hereafter Alexander Turnbull National Library); and Cathy Wylie, "Is the Land of the Flightless Bird the Home of the Voucherless Voucher?," *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 34, no. 1 (1998), 99–109.

⁵⁰ Ruth Richardson, *A Nation at Risk* (Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand National Party, 1987), Victoria University of Wellington / Te Herenga Waka Library, Wellington, New Zealand; Georgina Stewart et al., "School Zoning: Spatial Justice and Education Policy in Aotearoa New Zealand," *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 56, Suppl 1 (May 2021), 1–4.

⁵¹ Ruth Nichol, "Education the National Way," *Dominion*, July 2, 1987, 10; Alistair Morrison, "Education Vouchers Advocated by National," *Dominion*, June 23, 1987, 3.

Moreover, compared with the US, fewer children in Aotearoa New Zealand utilized private schools.⁵² Although these institutions retain prestige and power, the housing market serves as the primary mechanism for accessing the most elite educational institutions, which remain in the state system. Ultimately, school vouchers, at least as they were utilized in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, had little utility in Aotearoa New Zealand. When National failed to oust Labour from power in 1987, enthusiasm for universal school vouchers waned—with some exceptions, chief among them Independent schools and free-marketeers, including Kerr and his colleagues at the NZBR, who brought Williams to speak about Milwaukee's parental choice program.

The Educational Biographies of Williams and Fuller

To understand how Fuller and Williams came to promote parental choice, it may be helpful to know something about their educational biographies, as children and as parents. Both invoked their educational histories when speaking about how and why they decided to support parental choice. Williams, who came to be known in Milwaukee as “the mother of school choice,” traced her decision to oppose “forced desegregation” and to support choice back to the struggles she faced as a mother trying to secure educational opportunity for her children in a district that burdened Black children and failed to educate them.⁵³ Fuller, in turn, invoked his experience as a student at the majority-Black North Division High in the 1950s, before court-ordered desegregation. It was his desire to preserve his former high school as a “neighborhood school” as opposed to a “magnet school” that introduced him to educational activism in Milwaukee, and informed his views that “children should get an education for the world they're going to face. Integration is a secondary part of the whole discussion.”⁵⁴

Williams's childhood stretched back to Mississippi, where her parents worked as sharecroppers. In the aftermath of World War II and agricultural mechanization, Williams's father and uncle left Mississippi for Milwaukee.⁵⁵ After her father secured work and housing, Williams joined him at the age of ten.⁵⁶ She completed her education in the Milwaukee Public Schools, also attending North Division High, graduating a few years before Fuller.⁵⁷ She had hoped to attend college after graduation, but lacked

⁵²As of 2020, while about eight percent of American children attended private schools, less than four percent of their Kiwi counterparts did. National Center for Education Statistics, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=55>; Joel Hernandez, “Research Note: The State of Schooling: State, State-Integrated, and Private School Performance in New Zealand,” The New Zealand Initiative, Aug. 10, 2020, 1–2, <https://www.nzinitiative.org.nz/reports-and-media/reports/research-notethe-state-of-schooling/>.

⁵³Eugene Kane, “Program Expansion, Adjustment Worry ‘Mother of School Choice,’” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 18, 2011, <http://archive.jsonline.com/news/milwaukee/124142334.html>; A. Polly Williams, “Inner City Kids: Why Choice is Their Only Hope,” *Imprimis* 21, no. 3 (March 1992), 3.

⁵⁴Joanna Richardson, “The Unexpected Superintendent,” *Education Week*, May 25, 1994, 20–24.

⁵⁵Ron Grossman, “Polly's Political Paradox,” *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 20, 1993, 1. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/1993/08/20/pollys-political-paradox/>.

⁵⁶Tamara Henry, “‘Rosa Parks’ of Choice Sits Out Voucher Fight,” *USA Today*, Jan. 5, 1999, 6D; John H. Fund, “Champion of Choice: An Interview with Polly,” *Reason*, Oct. 1, 1990, 1.

⁵⁷Fuller, interview.

support. “I never saw a high-school counsellor until my senior year, when it was too late,” she recalled.⁵⁸

Williams married early and had four children. Divorcing thirteen years later, she found herself temporarily out of work while recovering from surgery and briefly received state support. In 1969, Williams accepted a federally funded position helping to provide social services to other low-income Milwaukeeans. She also enrolled at the University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin, earning her bachelor’s degree in 1975.⁵⁹

Although Williams herself had attended public school as a child, she sent her own children to a local private school, Urban Day Academy.⁶⁰ She described the school as “nonreligious,” despite being founded by Catholic educators.⁶¹ Urban Day would become one of the primary participants in Milwaukee’s parental choice program. Unfortunately, the school only ran through eighth grade. When attempting to enroll her daughter in the public high school of her choice, Williams learned she had not been given her selections because the school district did not take into account the disparate burdens that desegregation imposed upon Black children when making assignment decisions. Soon after, she joined Blacks for Two-Way Integration, a political organization that opposed Milwaukee’s busing program, which demanded that Black children alone make the sacrifice for integration.⁶² In 1980, Williams was elected to the state assembly; her district included one of the state’s largest Black populations.⁶³

Fuller’s primary education took place at a local Catholic school. He would often return to that experience when questioned about whether religious schools should be included in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. After attending North Division, Fuller attended Carroll College, in Waukesha, Wisconsin. He recalled his experience as the only Black student on campus as challenging, though he enjoyed his friendships and valued his education.⁶⁴

After graduating from Carroll in 1962, Fuller moved to Cleveland, Ohio, to pursue a master’s degree at Western Reserve with help from a Whitney Young scholarship.⁶⁵ For a time, he believed that “integration would make things better,” because it would allow equal access to schools and, by extension, political and economic opportunity.⁶⁶ As his scholarship required him to work with the Urban League for a year, Fuller accepted a position in Chicago, where he supported workplaces in their efforts to advance integration.⁶⁷

⁵⁸Grossman, “Polly’s Political Paradox.”

⁵⁹Grossman, “Polly’s Political Paradox.”

⁶⁰Carl, *Freedom of Choice*, 116.

⁶¹Fund, “Champion of Choice.”

⁶²Jack Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 161–63.

⁶³Meg Jones, “Annette Polly Williams, Longest-Serving Woman in Legislature, Dies,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Nov. 11, 2014, <https://aarchive.jsonline.com/news/reports-say-annette-polly-williams-longest-serving-woman-in-legislature-has-died-b993875446z1-282088211.html/>.

⁶⁴Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 37–43.

⁶⁵Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 43–44.

⁶⁶Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 53.

⁶⁷Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 57–58.

In 1965, Fuller moved to Durham, North Carolina, to work with “Operation Breakthrough,” an anti-poverty program, where he gained experience with community organizing. In Durham, he abandoned integration and embraced Pan-Africanism. Fuller helped to launch Malcolm X Liberation University (MXLU), whose mission was “to produce scholars and workers totally committed to the liberation of all African people throughout the Diaspora.”⁶⁸

As part of his work for MXLU, which opened in 1970, Fuller traveled to Tanzania and Mozambique, where he learned how education could advance liberation and decolonization. From Mozambique, Fuller returned to Durham. After the sudden closure of MXLU, he went back to Milwaukee, where he completed his doctorate in education with a dissertation that evaluated educational activism and the effects of school desegregation in Milwaukee’s Black community.⁶⁹ His research led him to the same general conclusions as Williams. Desegregation, at least as it had operated in Milwaukee, overburdened Black children. Like Williams, he believed in strengthening Black schools and empowering Black parents to make educational decisions.

Parental School Choice in Milwaukee

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), launched in 1990, represented the first voucher program for low-income children in the US. Several historians and education policy analysts, including Fuller, Jim Carl, Thomas C. Pedroni, and Jack Dougherty, among others, have written excellent accounts of Black educational activism in Milwaukee. Because there is an abundance of great scholarship, I’ll provide just a brief synopsis.⁷⁰

As early as the late 1960s, a coalition of Black parents, educators, students, and activists in Milwaukee, including Williams, organized in response to the disproportionate burden desegregation imposed upon Black children. Fuller and Williams both opposed busing, which, in their view, represented an ineffectual, onerous policy that burdened only Black children and threatened Black-run community schools.⁷¹ Williams and Fuller also rejected other integration mechanisms, including magnet schools, which encouraged White children to attend schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Williams considered magnet schools to be “private education at public expense” and inaccessible for most Black children.⁷²

Instead of providing White parents with more options, Williams argued, education policymakers should begin with the premise that “black parents want the same choice” as their White counterparts.⁷³ Both Fuller and Williams argued that self-determination, and not integration, should be the primary objective when crafting educational policies. Fuller defined “self-determination” as a fundamental component of Black people’s enduring struggle “for the realization of freedom.” Educational

⁶⁸ Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 99.

⁶⁹ Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 165–71, 192–93.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*; Carl, *Freedom of Choice*; and Thomas C. Pedroni, *Market Movements: African American Involvement in School Voucher Reform* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁷¹ Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 201–2; Williams, “Inner City Kids,” 1–2.

⁷² Fund, “Champion of Choice.”

⁷³ Fund, “Champion of Choice.”

self-determination, he explained, also depended upon the development of Black institutions.⁷⁴

Williams concurred. Her support for the MPCP emerged from Milwaukee Public Schools' (MPS's) stubborn attachment to integration. She took particular aim at White liberals, whom she believed prioritized their own need to feel good about themselves over doing what was best for Black children.⁷⁵ In response to MPS's continual promotion of integration and sustained failure to educate Black children, Fuller and his friend Michael Smith "drafted a manifesto" to create a pilot program for a new majority-Black school district in the North Division neighborhood, located within MPS.⁷⁶ This new entity, in line with educational self-determination, would empower the Black community to control majority-Black schools. Williams, now a state representative, drafted a bill for the proposal and introduced it to the state assembly.⁷⁷

Although it generated attention, Fuller's proposal failed to pass for fear that some would confuse it with support for segregation. Fuller recalled being labeled a "separatist" who undermined *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the landmark decision outlawing de jure school segregation. He denied such accusations. He did, however, believe that *Brown* contained an "essential flaw" by assuming that "an all-Black school equated to an automatically bad one."⁷⁸ Opponents of the plan to create a predominantly Black school district included the Milwaukee NAACP branch, MPS, and some Black residents, parents, and lawmakers who did not share Fuller's view. Wisconsin's Republican governor Tommy Thompson also declined to support the proposal, believing that it could be misconstrued as an attempt to uphold segregation.⁷⁹

After the North Division initiative failed, Black community leaders tried a different approach. They proposed a modest voucher scheme that would later become the MPCP. Under the plan, a small number of low-income students could use state subsidies to enroll in any Milwaukee County school: "private, parochial, or public."⁸⁰ Unsurprisingly, the option to choose a parochial school drew immediate opposition and was dropped. In October 1989, Williams introduced the Parental Choice Options Bill to the Wisconsin legislature, along with "46 Democratic and Republican co-sponsors."⁸¹ Thompson signed the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program into law in April 1990.⁸² Under the MPCP, initially approved as a five-year pilot program, "about 1,000 low-income children received vouchers of up to \$2,500" to be used at non-sectarian private schools.⁸³

Williams and Fuller endured searing criticism for their willingness to work with polarizing political figures when advocating for parental choice. The MPCP also inspired conservatives to imagine and promote more ambitious voucher programs,

⁷⁴ Fuller, interview.

⁷⁵ Fund, "Champion of Choice."

⁷⁶ Carl, *Freedom of Choice*, 105–6; Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle*, 170–85; Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 202–3.

⁷⁷ Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 202–3.

⁷⁸ Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 203.

⁷⁹ Carl, *Freedom of Choice*, 106.

⁸⁰ Carl, *Freedom of Choice*, 124.

⁸¹ Carl, *Freedom of Choice*, 129.

⁸² Carl, *Freedom of Choice*, 129.

⁸³ Fund, "Champion of Choice."

akin to what Milton Friedman had first envisioned in 1955.⁸⁴ Attacks against Fuller and Williams often found them guilty by association, calling attention to those who garnished praise on the policy: conservative icons including Newt Gingrich and George H. W. Bush, and conservative think tanks including The Heritage Foundation, the Bradley Foundation, and the American Enterprise Institute, among others.⁸⁵

Fuller and Williams rejected efforts to label them “neoliberal reformers,” even though they did collaborate with individuals and institutions who supported neoliberal reforms.⁸⁶ As Williams made clear in 1990, “Labels do not tell you much about me. I’m not a liberal. I believe in what works.”⁸⁷ Neither Fuller nor Williams believed in abandoning public schools either.⁸⁸ As Williams explained in a 1998 interview, “I represent poor people. And I felt that choice was a valuable tool of empowerment for poor people. It was that simple.”⁸⁹

In my conversation with him, Fuller took pains to clarify that he did not “support school choice.” He supported “parent choice.” To Fuller, this distinction was important because he sought to empower Black parents to decide what education was best for their children. He had no desire to empower schools to select students, as was called for in Aotearoa New Zealand’s failed voucher proposals.

Williams Visits Aotearoa New Zealand

By the time Williams arrived to Auckland in 1993, little enthusiasm for school vouchers in Aotearoa New Zealand remained (see [Figure 3](#)). Unfortunately, because of her passing in 2014, I did not have the opportunity to speak with her, as I did with Fuller. My reconstruction of her time comes from interviews with those who remembered her visit, and the popular and scholarly responses to it. Because she wrote and spoke frequently about parental school choice, one can get a sense of the message she articulated in Aotearoa New Zealand. In contrast to Fuller, however, it is challenging to identify what she took away from her visit.

In the early 1990s, Williams accepted numerous invitations to talk about the MPCP. In May 1994, a reporter from the *Capital Times* (published out of Madison, Wisconsin) relayed that Williams had earned \$59,000 in speaking fees in 1993 alone, which included “five trips to California, travel to nine other states, Washington, D.C. and New Zealand.”⁹⁰ Likewise, in August 1993, Ron Grossman at the *Chicago Tribune* took

⁸⁴Milton Friedman, “The Role of Government in Education,” in *Economics and the Public Interest* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 123–44.

⁸⁵Dolores Janiewski, “Wisconsin School Trip,” *New Zealand Education Review* 4, no. 30 (Dec. 3, 1999), 8; author interview with Dolores Janiewski, Dec. 1, 2023.

⁸⁶Jim Carl, Thomas C. Pedroni, and Kelly Jensen explore the politics behind these coalitions. See Carl, “Unusual Allies: Elite and Grass-roots Origins of Parental Choice in Milwaukee,” *Teachers College Record* 98, no. 2 (Winter 1996), 266–85; Pedroni, *Market Movements*; and Jensen, “Localized Ideographs in Education Rhetoric: Polly Williams and a Justice-Driven Ideology of Choice,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 107, no. 3 (July 2021), 305–27.

⁸⁷Fund, “Champion of Choice.”

⁸⁸Jensen, “Localized Ideographs,” 305.

⁸⁹John F. Guess Jr. “Polly Williams,” *Headway* 10, no. 8 (Sept./Oct. 1998), 18; Fund, “Champion of Choice,” 1.

⁹⁰“Rep. Williams Got \$59,000 in Speaking Fees,” *Capital Times*, May 6, 1994, 3A.



Figure 3. Polly Williams in Wellington, 1993.

Taken by Michael Smith, this image captures Polly Williams as she appeared in a March 30, 1993, article by Cathie Bell in the *Dominion*. During her interview with Bell, Williams stressed that “the schools in [in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program] are not your exclusive private schools. The minute they opened their doors, they were for low-income students, and they are schools right in our neighborhood.”⁹¹ (Photo reproduced with permission from *Stuff Limited*.)

note of the fact that in 1993 alone, Williams had also lectured “at Harvard, Yale and Stanford Universities.” In addition, he reported, “she also took her political roadshow to New Zealand early this year, where she served as a visiting fellow at the Auckland Institute of Technology.”⁹²

⁹¹Cathie Bell, “Voucher Schools Succeed,” *Dominion*, March 30, 1993; the photo is found on page 6.

⁹²Grossman, “Polly’s Political Paradox.”

In point of fact, Williams received no money for her time in Aotearoa New Zealand, although she did have her expenses covered. And, as noted earlier, the MPCP had little in common with the universal voucher plan promoted by her sponsors. Williams always maintained that she supported parental school choice to empower Black and low-income parents to make educational decisions for their children. She never supported “allow[ing] all students, regardless of family income, to receive vouchers.”⁹³ To be clear: Williams’s sponsors, and not Williams, hoped her visit would foster support for a *universal* voucher program that would allow all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income, to transfer state funds from public schools into private schools. For that reason, those who responded negatively to Williams’s visit in Aotearoa New Zealand did so because they believed her message could be misunderstood as evidence for undermining public education.

During her eleven days in Aotearoa New Zealand, Williams delivered several public speeches, including one to the Auckland Rotary Club, an association of small business owners. At the Auckland Institute of Technology, she was hosted by Brian Picot, chair of chaired the Picot Taskforce, which wrote the blueprint for Tomorrow’s Schools. In addition to Kerr and the NZBR, Williams’s visit was also supported by Christine Fernyhough, the spouse of the chair of Electricorp, an entity created in 1987 to assist with the deregulation of Aotearoa New Zealand’s electricity market.⁹⁴ Williams also met with representatives from Education Forum, a lobbying group that promoted the use of universal vouchers for all children to attend private schools; the School Trustees Association; Lockwood Smith, who spearheaded efforts to eliminate school zoning in 1991; and the education spokeswoman for Labour (the Opposition party), Margaret Austin, who would launch a failed effort in 1995 to reclaim for Aotearoa New Zealand’s children the right to attend neighborhood schools. Finally, Williams also spoke with representatives from the New Zealand Treasury, the State Services Commission, and the Ministries of Māori Development and Māori Affairs.⁹⁵

During some talks, she began with a history of American inequality, explaining how segregated housing produced segregated schools. At the Auckland Rotary Club, Williams talked about how and why “poor, mainly black people in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, were being failed by a public school system in which they were forced to take part.”⁹⁶ Here, Williams implicated “integration,” and specifically, the tools that MPS employed to promote integration: busing and magnet schools. She also drew attention to what separated her from her sponsors. As she told her audience, “Perhaps we don’t sing from the same hymnbook all the time;” the *New Zealand Herald* quoted her as saying, but it was clear from her talk that “concern for the children was the common link.”⁹⁷ Such comments suggest that Williams took pains to delineate sharp

⁹³Henry, “‘Rosa Parks’ of Choice Sits Out Voucher Fight.”

⁹⁴Colin John Fernyhough, “Speech to Electricity Supply Association of N.Z. Annual Conference,” Sept. 13, 1989, Victoria University of Wellington / Te Herenga Waka Library, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand; Janiewski and Morris, *New Rights New Zealand*, 47 and 52.

⁹⁵Michael Rentoul, “Visiting Politician All for Education-Voucher System,” *Press*, March 30, 1993, 1; Gordon, “Voucher ‘Messenger’ Challenged,” 10.

⁹⁶“Top Speed Start for ‘Voice of Choice,’” 9.

⁹⁷“Top Speed Start for ‘Voice of Choice,’” 9.

boundaries between her voucher program, targeted at low-income Black families, and the universal ambitions of her hosts.

Williams's visit and the disjuncture between her and her sponsors reveal that ideas about school vouchers, or neoliberal policies more broadly, did not migrate independently. To the contrary, the transnational voucher movement lays bare the processes and networks through which ideas about free-market educational policies were purposefully curated and disseminated. These ideas did not drift from place to place by happenstance; and the networks engaged in promoting them were, at their base, both ideological and political. While Williams supported parental choice to improve educational opportunities for low-income children, her sponsors supported private enterprise and deregulation, cornerstones of Aotearoa New Zealand's neoliberal revolution.⁹⁸

To illustrate this point, consider that Williams was neither the first nor the last American to visit Aotearoa New Zealand to talk about free-market social programs. As Dolores Janiewski and Paul Morris detail in *New Rights New Zealand: Myths, Moralities, and Markets*, "Travelling evangelists moved between the different centres of New Right Activism" in the late 1980s and 1990s.⁹⁹ The global spread of free-market ideas depended upon international travel. In 1984, newly elected Labour leader David Lange addressed the United Nations in New York to champion Aotearoa New Zealand's commitment to capitalism and neoliberalism.¹⁰⁰ Two years later, Finance Minister Roger Douglas toured the US, stopping in New York, Boston, Hartford, and San Francisco to meet with "members of the banking community" and to appraise them "of the economic policy developments" his "government had initiated."¹⁰¹

In the other direction, in April 1981, Milton Friedman himself accepted an invitation, from Donald Brash, the general manager of the Broadbank Corporation, to share his ideas about the free market in Aotearoa New Zealand. Friedman delivered two lectures on free choice: one in Auckland and one in Wellington.¹⁰² Along with his wife Rose, he found the trip, which combined "sight-seeing with economic inquiry," to be "especially pleasurable."¹⁰³

Recall that Williams's invitation came from Roger Kerr, who had been speaking about her work in Milwaukee long before her visit. Influenced by *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*, authored by the American political scientists John Chubb and Terry Moe, Kerr believed that state schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, like American schools, "face[d] outside pressures from two main sources: the education bureaucracy and the teachers unions."¹⁰⁴ Referring to parents as "consumers" and describing the

⁹⁸Rentoul, "Visiting Politician All for Education-Voucher System."

⁹⁹Janiewski and Morris, *New Rights New Zealand*, 53.

¹⁰⁰"Prime Minister's Debut at the United Nations," *New Zealand Update* 6, no. 9 (Oct. 1984), 2.

¹⁰¹"Finance Minister Visits the United States," *New Zealand Update* 8, no. 9 (Oct. 1986), 2.

¹⁰²Milton Friedman, "The Invisible Hand in Economics and Politics" (speech, Wellington, New Zealand, April 22, 1981), Alexander Turnbull National Library; Milton Friedman, "Inflation and Unemployment: An Address by Professor Milton Friedman" (speech, Auckland, New Zealand, April 23, 1981), Alexander Turnbull National Library.

¹⁰³Milton and Rose Friedman, *Two Lucky People: Milton and Rose Friedman's Memoirs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 433–35.

¹⁰⁴Kerr, "Transforming Education," 4–5.

state as a “monopoly,” Kerr lobbied for a “voucher system” where “parents would make their choice of school, and funding would follow the child.”¹⁰⁵ In contrast to the MPCP, which limited funding to low-income parents, Kerr envisioned a universal voucher system. When pitching such a system to the Epsom Business Breakfast Forum in Auckland in 1996, Kerr again invoked Williams, reading a paragraph of her own words to counter claims that low-income parents lacked the capacity to make good choices for their children. He also referenced Williams’s visit in 1993, recalling that she escaped attacks from voucher opponents because she “did not fit their ideological stereotypes.”¹⁰⁶

While the distinction between Kerr’s and Williams’s programs may appear obvious, in his promotion of Williams, Kerr nonetheless sidestepped questions of context and collapsed the meaning of school vouchers by separating the policy from the educational problem it sought to ameliorate. In this way, Kerr elided the vast ideological chasm separating the universal school voucher movement in Aotearoa New Zealand from the parental choice movement in Milwaukee, which also relied upon school vouchers but prioritized the educational needs of low-income children. He made such a move, in part, because he hoped Williams’s equity-based arguments for vouchers might help assuage concerns from those on the left, who saw vouchers as a tool supported by free-marketeers, unconcerned with inequality, who wished to transfer responsibility for schooling from the state to the marketplace.¹⁰⁷

Kerr’s representation of Williams’s visit was also inaccurate. Williams’s visit did, in fact, provoke opponents of neoliberal educational reforms to critique her message. The bifurcated reactions to Williams in Aotearoa New Zealand probably had less to do with her race and gender, as Kerr surmised, and more to do with deep-seated frustrations within Aotearoa New Zealand in response to a decade of neoliberal reforms, including Tomorrow’s Schools and de-zoning.

For those on the left, Williams’s message was inevitably tied to the free marketers who hosted her. Liz Gordon, a lecturer in sociology at Canterbury University, penned a strident rebuke of Williams and school vouchers.¹⁰⁸ At the time, Gordon was an active education researcher who specialized in querying and documenting the catastrophic effects of neoliberalism, particularly on educational inequality.¹⁰⁹ In April 1993, she published a short but pointed response to Williams’s visit and the generally positive press coverage it had received.¹¹⁰

Gordon questioned the motivations behind the decision to bring Williams, and the potential implications of her message for school reform in Aotearoa New Zealand. First, she called attention to the fact that Kerr had been referencing Williams to advance his own neoliberal agenda since 1991. Second, she suggested that he selected Williams because of her gender, race, and low-income background. Not wishing to “attack the messenger,” Gordon then focused on her message. She argued that differences between

¹⁰⁵ Kerr, “Transforming Education,” 6.

¹⁰⁶ Kerr, “Transforming Education,” 14.

¹⁰⁷ Lichtenstein, “Roger Kerr,” 89–91; Kerr, “Transforming Education,” 14.

¹⁰⁸ Gordon, “Voucher ‘Messenger’ Challenged,” 10; author Interview with Liz Gordon, May 26, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, Gordon.

¹¹⁰ Gordon, “Voucher ‘Messenger’ Challenged,” 10; Rentoul, “Visiting Politician All for Education-Voucher System.”

the public education systems in America and Aotearoa New Zealand were so vast that Williams and the MPCP offered few, if any, relevant lessons. Next, she raised questions about whether the MPCP had, in fact, been as successful as Williams had claimed. Then, she cautioned her readers to not misconstrue promotion of the MPCP and efforts to promote universal vouchers in Aotearoa New Zealand. And finally, Gordon called attention to the fact that the universal voucher plan would do little to improve education for Māori compared with increasing support for kura Kaupapa Māori, which existed within the state system. “This kind of solution flies in the face of moves by the Māori to get equitable schooling opportunities for their young,” Gordon maintained. “Currently the emphasis is not being put on private schools, but on culturally appropriate schooling, and these are not at all the same things.”¹¹¹

Had they the opportunity to talk face to face, Gordon may have realized she and Williams were not as far apart as she claimed. Williams supported the MPCP as a means to improve educational opportunities for Black and low-income children. She also agreed with Gordon that parents, especially those neglected by the state system, needed the power to determine which education best served their children. In Milwaukee, this could mean small schools like Urban Day that prioritized the needs of Black and low-income children. In Aotearoa New Zealand, as Gordon herself suggested, educational self-determination could be found in the state-supported kura Kaupapa Māori.¹¹² Unfortunately, it is impossible to know what Williams thought about Gordon’s response. Nor is it possible to know if the visit altered her thinking on parental choice or the potential pitfalls of collaborating with individuals who had different motivations for supporting vouchers.

Howard Fuller’s Visit to Aotearoa New Zealand

By definition, educational exchanges operate in multiple directions. Fuller asserted that the most impactful part of his visit did not come from dialogues with those who sought to use the MPCP to cultivate support for school choice. Instead, he maintained that his visits to kura Kaupapa Māori and his conversations with Māori educators and activists provided him with the most important insights. “All of the trips to England, to Sweden, to Germany ... I learned a lot,” he recalled. “But the New Zealand one was really special because of the Māori,” he recalled.¹¹³

Fuller arrived in Auckland in October 1999 (see [Figure 4](#)). Deborah McGriff, his wife, accompanied him. A noted educator and school leader, McGriff had served as deputy superintendent of Cambridge (Massachusetts) Public Schools and superintendent of Detroit Public Schools; and would later accept a position as the executive vice president of Edison Schools, a controversial for-profit company that sold management services to public schools.¹¹⁴ His daughter, Miata Fuller, and Jeannie Fenceroy, a staff member from Marquette University, also came with him to New Zealand.¹¹⁵ After

¹¹¹Gordon, “Voucher ‘Messenger’ Challenged,” 10.

¹¹²Gordon, interview.

¹¹³Fuller, interview.

¹¹⁴Fuller, *No Struggle, No Progress*, 205–6, 209–16, 234, and 243.

¹¹⁵Fuller, interview.



Figure 4. Howard Fuller and Family in Aotearoa New Zealand, 1999. Howard Fuller is accompanied by his wife, Deborah McGriff (left) and his daughter, Miata Fuller (right). Also joining them but not pictured is Jeannie Fenceroy, a staff member from the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University (Photo courtesy of Howard Fuller.)

landing in Auckland, they traveled on to Wellington, although Fuller does not remember his itinerary. Many of his experiences resembled those of Williams. He met with representatives from the Ministry of Education and a lobbying group for independent schools. He also delivered a public address detailing the history of the parental choice movement in Milwaukee and the MPCP.¹¹⁶

In Wellington, Fuller advanced his key arguments. He stressed the importance of parental choice in improving educational opportunities for Black and low-income children. He encouraged those concerned about the education of low-income students to make private schools more accessible. “If a private school is educating,” Fuller advised, “it is in the public interest for poor kids to be able to access that education.”¹¹⁷ He also asserted that parental choice did not undermine public education. He flatly rejected claims that his decision to support parental choice implied a desire “to destroy public education.”¹¹⁸

At the time of Fuller’s visit, the libertarian ACT Party, which sat to the right of National, centered its education platform on school choice and promoted universal vouchers. Akin to Kerr’s endorsement of Williams, ACT sought to use Fuller and the MPCP to cultivate support for its educational proposals. And, as the NZBR

¹¹⁶“Vouchers Force Schools to Improve—Expert,” *Press*, Oct. 26, 1999, 5. Fuller, interview.

¹¹⁷Phil Hamilton, “Voucher System Benefits Poor, Says US Educationist,” *Evening Post*, 12.

¹¹⁸Hamilton, “Voucher System Benefits Poor,” 12.

did with Williams, ACT relished similar praise on Fuller and asserted that “school choice has been proven around the world.” It then boiled down Fuller’s message to its most simple point: “Nothing has helped the education standards more than school choice,” ACT maintained. Similar to Kerr’s promotion of Williams, ACT used the success of the MPCP to cultivate support for school choice, but in this case, ACT also argued that vouchers would benefit low-income, Indigenous communities like Otara, a predominately Māori and Pacifica suburb in South Auckland.¹¹⁹

As with Williams, Fuller’s visit attracted criticism, particularly from those who were leery of New Right efforts to privatize public services including education; to target teachers’ unions; and to eviscerate the welfare state. Probably the staunchest critique of Fuller came from Dolores Janiewski, a senior lecturer in American history at Te Herenga Waka/Victoria University of Wellington. Having been in residence at the university, I was already acquainted with Janiewski before finding her 1999 article about Fuller. Discovering her essay sparked many questions. Why did she choose to write about him? What about his visit motivated her to sound the alarm?

In the short essay she penned about Fuller and parental choice, Janiewski did not disclose that their paths had crossed briefly years before. She also thought she may have been “one of the only people in New Zealand” to know who he was. Janiewski had become acquainted with Fuller in Durham, North Carolina. At that time, she recalled that Fuller had immersed himself in Pan-Africanism and went by a different name. She thought he may have parted ways with some more strident proponents of Pan-Africanism at this time. Janiewski had also heard that Fuller served as superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools and, at some point, found himself on the opposite side of the teachers’ union. Fuller confirms all of this in his autobiography.¹²⁰

At the time of Fuller’s visit, Janiewski had been tracking the New Right’s international visitors, whom she characterized as “anti-welfare state, anti-state, and pro-private public partnerships.”¹²¹ That research resulted in *New Rights New Zealand*, co-written with Paul Morris, which documents and explores the emergence and expansion of Aotearoa New Zealand’s “New Right” in the 1980s and 1990s and situates it in a global context.¹²²

Janiewski contextualized Fuller’s visit as one more example of the New Right’s tactical efforts to utilize international ciphers to promote their agendas. She did not hear him speak personally, but she felt well versed in Milwaukee’s parental choice movement. She shared Gordon’s view that Fuller and the MPCP had no relevance in Aotearoa New Zealand. She also similarly interpreted Fuller’s visit as part of the neoliberal attack on public institutions, especially public schools.¹²³

¹¹⁹“New Zealand’s Children Deserve the Best,” ACT New Zealand, press release, Oct. 28, 1999, <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA9910/S00643/new-zealands-children-deserve-the-best.htm>.

¹²⁰*No Struggle, No Progress*, chaps. 9 and 14.

¹²¹Dolores Janiewski, interview by author, Dec. 1, 2023.

¹²²Janiewski and Morris, *New Rights New Zealand*.

¹²³Janiewski, interview; Janiewski, “Wisconsin School Trip,” *New Zealand Education Review* 4, no. 30 (Dec. 3, 1999), 8.

Accordingly, she cautioned readers to “*be aware that some crucial information about both Fuller and the reforms he advocates was not reported.*”¹²⁴ She wanted her audience to know that educational benefits of the MPCP had not been documented. Most importantly, Janiewski wanted her readers to be aware of Fuller’s involvement with the Bradley Foundation, which supported universal school vouchers and had, in her words, been waging a “concerted ‘war of ideas’ on behalf of free enterprise.”¹²⁵ She then called attention to Fuller’s fight with the teachers’ union while he served as superintendent of MPS. Because of Fuller’s ties with those who “promoted market solutions” and “attacked unions,” she hoped readers would receive Fuller’s message with caution.¹²⁶

Fuller, however, did not see himself as a free-marketeer. To support this claim, he pointed to an argument he had with Friedman about universal vouchers during a dinner held in the economist’s honor. He opposed universal choice policies that increased the power of wealthy parents and subsidized the private school tuition they could afford anyway.¹²⁷ Fuller maintains that he has “always seen the parent choice issue” through the lens of “social justice” and “self-determination.”¹²⁸

By his own account, he also supported parental choice because it promoted Black liberation. His involvement with MXLU and Pan-Africanism in the 1970s exposed him to global movements for liberation and decolonization. By extension, with certain audiences, he would invoke Pan-Africanists when he spoke about parental school choice. During a 2001 address at Howard University, he described Black people’s struggle to obtain education in the face of slavery and settler colonialism. He saw the MPCP as part of Black and Indigenous people’s struggles for freedom, liberation, and self-determination. In the same talk, he referenced Franz Fanon’s canonical anti-colonial treatise, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and also called upon his audience to “heed Malcolm X’s words and declare that our children must be educated ‘by any means necessary.’”¹²⁹

What Did Fuller Take Away from His Visit?

By Fuller’s account, he took more from his visit than he gave. He recalls spending the majority of his time “explaining how the program operated in Milwaukee” and the challenges that it faced.¹³⁰ But his most significant memories came from his interactions with Māori educators and his visits to Māori schools. This engagement led Fuller to reflect on at least four themes. First, the interactions prompted him to consider African Americans’ ongoing struggle for freedom and the continued necessity of educational self-determination. Second, they provoked him to wonder about the value and validity of comparing and connecting Indigenous and global Black struggles for education, self-determination, and liberation. Third, they reinforced his belief that care should

¹²⁴Janiewski, “Wisconsin School Trip,” 8.

¹²⁵Janiewski, interview; Janiewski and Morris, *New Rights New Zealand*, 69.

¹²⁶Janiewski, “Wisconsin School Trip,” 8.

¹²⁷Fuller, interview.

¹²⁸Fuller, interview.

¹²⁹Fuller’s lecture at Howard University was originally titled “The Continuing Struggle of African Americans for the Power to Make Real Educational Choices,” and was reprinted as “Educational Choice, a Core Freedom,” in *Journal of Negro Education* 71, no. 1/2 (Winter-Spring, 2002), 3.

¹³⁰Fuller, interview.

be taken when applying knowledge about the US to situations abroad. And fourth, they showed him in tangible ways how education could promote decolonization and advance liberation.

Fuller described being curious about the ties that connected Black and Pacific peoples. But he stopped short of drawing parallels between Black people in the US and Indigenous people in decolonizing societies. He found it more accurate to see commonalities between Native Americans and Māori than to envision a larger web of connections that might fall more squarely in the analytical framework that Robbie Shilliam refers to as the “Black Pacific,” a category of analysis that presumes Black and Indigenous people could unite under a banner of anti-racism and self-determination.¹³¹ Fuller’s reflections of his time in Aotearoa New Zealand speak to the complicated, if not fractious, nature of the Black Pacific.

In the *Black Pacific: Anti-colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections*, Shilliam defines the “Black Pacific” as a term referring to “the variable and shifting nature of African-American and North-Pacific Asian ties of kinship, politics and ideology against the backdrop of US imperial ambitions in the region.”¹³² The concept, along with its tensions and contradictions, especially reveals itself when Fuller talks about his desire to connect with Aotearoa New Zealand’s Indigenous community. And yet, Fuller does not go as far as Shilliam. While he observes commonalities between Black people in America and Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand, for him it was the differences that were more striking. He described feeling great respect “for an original people, and what happened to them, and the struggle to sustain their culture and identity.”¹³³ And he saw “unity” in Black and Indigenous people’s shared oppression.¹³⁴ But that “unity” did not presume a shared history, or even common experiences. Instead, he observed how Black and Indigenous people were united through their common belief that liberation and self-determination could be achieved through education.

Personally, Fuller considered himself a Pan-Africanist. He recognized that his historical experiences differed from those of other “people of African descent” who, for example, lived in Ghana, Tanzania, or Guyana. For Fuller, these experiential differences, while significant, did not discount his belief that he too “has an African history.” While in Aotearoa New Zealand, he recalled his efforts to be “as respectful as I could about [Indigenous] history, and really trying to understand it.” And at times, he made “comparisons to the situation of Black People in the United States.” But he took care not to “act like their experiences were the same, because they weren’t.” Although uncertain if what he learned was directly “applicable to America,” engaging with Māori educators helped him to understand “self-determination in different situations.”¹³⁵

¹³¹Special thanks to Robbie Shilliam, both for generously sharing his thoughts about the “Black Pacific” and for also sharing archival sources related to Black and Indigenous activism in Aotearoa New Zealand. See Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), 9–10. For additional explorations of the “Black Pacific,” see, for example, Quito Swan, *Pasifika Black, Oceania, Anti-colonialism, and the African World* (New York: NYU Press, 2022); and Etsuko Taketini, *Geographic Imaginings of Race and Empire between the World Wars* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2014).

¹³²Shilliam, *The Black Pacific*, 9–10.

¹³³Fuller, interview.

¹³⁴Fuller, interview.

¹³⁵Fuller, interview.

Epilogue

One might wonder why Fuller received an invitation to speak about parental choice in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1999, as opposed to the proponents of universal school vouchers inviting Williams a second time. When Williams visited in 1993, she and Fuller remained aligned in their goals and their message. As a politician, Williams understood the necessity of cooperating with individuals who subscribed to varied positions. By 1999, however, when Fuller visited Aotearoa New Zealand, Williams had stepped back from the parental choice movement in Milwaukee, concerned that the program's evolution had lost sight of its original purpose: to expand educational opportunities for Milwaukee's Black and low-income children.¹³⁶

Fuller's personal and professional journey had evolved as well. Over his long career, he promoted integration; engaged with community organizing; devoted himself to Pan-Africanism; served the school system as a superintendent; and launched an academic center to improve educational access for low-income children. An activist and academic, he capitalized on the opportunity to promote parental choice and to learn from Aotearoa New Zealand's Indigenous population.

But by the time Fuller arrived to Aotearoa New Zealand, Williams had distanced herself from those who wanted to expand the MPCP beyond Black and low-income children, a mission akin to that of the proposed universal voucher program in Aotearoa New Zealand. She also separated herself from those who had "used" her "to validate their agenda ... only as long as it suited their needs."¹³⁷ While it is unknowable if she would have included her hosts in Aotearoa New Zealand in that description, it does seem likely she would not have put herself in the same position again.

By 1999, Williams had gone on the record opposing efforts to expand the MPCP to include Catholic schools.¹³⁸ Now sixty-two, she was no longer willing to tolerate those who used her message to cultivate their own agenda for school choice. "The conservatives made me their poster girl as long as it appeared I was supporting their cause," she maintained. Now, she found herself "the odd person out." She rejected associating with those who "want religious schools to be tax-supported," arguing that "Blacks and poor are being used to help legitimize them as the power group." She wanted no part in that arrangement.¹³⁹

Fuller, however, did not agree with Williams and denied there was truth in her claims. He accepted that there would never be "unanimity within the broad choice coalition on every issue relative to choice."¹⁴⁰ But he disagreed with Williams on the question of adding religious schools to the MPCP. Such a position makes sense when one considers that Fuller attended Catholic school as a child and a Catholic university, Marquette, for graduate school. He also held a permanent position at Marquette, which describes itself as "Catholic" and "Jesuit."¹⁴¹

¹³⁶"Voucher Godmother Skeptical of Allies," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 26, 1999; "Rosa Parks' of Choice Sits Out Voucher Fight."

¹³⁷Derrick Z. Jackson, "The Corruption of School Choice," *Boston Globe*, Oct. 28, 1988, A23.

¹³⁸"Voucher Godmother Skeptical of Allies," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 26, 1999, 33.

¹³⁹Henry, "Rosa Parks' of Choice Sits Out Voucher Fight."

¹⁴⁰Henry, "Rosa Parks' of Choice Sits Out Voucher Fight."

¹⁴¹Per Marquette University's website: <http://www.marquette.edu>.



Figure 5. Howard Fuller and Polly Williams, 2018.

Howard Fuller speaks to the National Summit on Educational Reform in 2018. Behind him is an image of his longtime friend and colleague Annette “Polly” Williams, who passed away in 2014. (Photo courtesy of Howard Fuller.)

Fuller said that he never understood those who opposed incorporating religious schools into the MPCP. He also noted that other government programs created to expand access to higher education, including Pell Grants and the GI Bill, also did not exclude religious colleges or universities. “There were all these different ways that the government found to have policies that allowed people to choose, even though the choices were religious based,” he told me. He recalls having this argument with students at Marquette who had received government support for their education: “You’re here at Marquette University on a Pell Grant,” he would say. “Explain to me why you can’t support poor parents being able to access religious schools in elementary [and] secondary. I never understood their arguments,” he explained.¹⁴²

By 1999, six years after she traveled to Aotearoa New Zealand as the “voice of choice,” Williams had stepped back from the parental choice movement, a decision she found

¹⁴²Fuller, interview.

to be both painful and necessary. And yet, her decision to step back also reveals the multiplicity of positions that the school choice movement in the US encompassed. With respect to the question of whether religious institutions could or should be made available to those who could not afford tuition, Williams and Fuller did not agree.

Despite their differences, the friendship between Williams and Fuller endured (see [Figure 5](#)). When she passed away in 2014, Fuller honored her activism and the ties that bound them. “There would be no parent choice movement had it not been for the courage of Polly Williams,” Fuller affirmed. “I lost a friend and a warrior,” he shared.¹⁴³

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¹⁴³Jones, “Annette Polly Williams, Longest-Serving Woman in Legislature, Dies.”