Teacher Education, Pro-Market Policy and Advocacy Research

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ABSTRACT Across a wide variety of fields, research has long been promoted as a useful tool in helping policy-makers devise and enact policy. In the United States, the recently enacted federal No Child Left Behind Act specifically requires the use of high-quality research in education policy-making. In this rush to emphasize research, policy-makers have overlooked a number of important considerations, including issues related to research methodologies and structures (qualitative versus quantitative, descriptive versus analytic, etc.), and ethical issues around the use, design, and funding of research studies. Policies justified by research funded, conducted and published by pro-market advocates who bypass traditionally accepted norms for completing and applying research is of particular concern. The present paper examines these three critical issues, as well as their impact on teacher education and teacher educators. Additionally, the larger role of pro-market advocacy organizations is examined, as well as the response, or lack thereof, by the education establishment. Teacher educators must actively and effectively engage in this debate if they wish to retain control of their profession and continue to promote policy based on ethically sound and methodologically appropriate research conducted in the public interest.

Teacher educators across the United States are faced with a baffling array of new K-12 and teacher education policies, which often contradict decades of research and practice. Many states have required Schools of Education to create fast-track certification programs with a minimum number of credit hours. There is also new federal support for national fast-track alternative certification programs such as Teach for America. In most states, certification is not required at all for at least some of the teachers in charter schools, which can be run as non-profit or for-profit entities using public funds. Universities are also increasingly bypassed in the world
of inservice education as state departments of education give salary raises once connected to higher education coursework to teachers who participate in enrichment programs run by for-profit companies. Teacher educators are being asked to create courses and programs, and prove outcomes for standards their faculty may not support. They are asked to teach to K-12 standards and support standardized testing programs that are deeply problematic and have been extensively critiqued by a wide range of professional organizations including the American Educational Research Association. These policies are baffling because they contradict the wisdom and recommendation of peer-reviewed research and the authority of experienced teachers and the education professoriate. Yet, standardization, privatization, and deregulation of teacher education are increasingly common and are the result of the successful efforts of pro-market education advocates (Apple, 2001a; Cochran-Smith, 2001a, 2001b; McNeil, 2000). The present article explains who these advocates are, describes their ideology, and reviews their tactics. Concluding suggestions for how teacher educators can respond are offered.

Education remains a championed virtue but educators everywhere are under fire. We seldom allow it to rise into consciousness—but unconsciously we are aware that advertising is a far more persuasive medium than teaching or research. Salesmanship sells better than teaching teaches. Politics broaches, often with deceit. Campaigns and legislation push the boundaries of disregard for the facts. Advocacy has overcome Authority. (Stake, 1995, p. 1)

For nearly 20 years, the public schools have been at the center of the national political stage and, from the outset—with A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983)—the claims of advocates and the methods of the debate have been outside the processes of accountability and verification common to academicians. A new brand of rhetoric and research has been introduced into popular media without academic controls on method or context. Advocacy academicians who make these claims are typically individuals operating outside their area of expertise while wearing the garb of objective, expert scholarship. They have ceased to function as public intellectuals, choosing instead to promote and advocate rather than to research and analyze. Peer review, corroboration and the imprimatur of universities and philanthropic foundations that are the longstanding institutional forms of fostering and evaluating research, are being replicated by interest groups who present ideology in the form of inquiry. Universities and their processes of peer review and verification are bypassed. The message is frequently conservative, free market, and illiberal—and often interlocked with the positions of religious, political, and corporate entities. The motives are less about reforming public schools than about discrediting public institutions, gaining party advantage, and opening new markets for profit. The central obstacle to the aims of the advocates is the academic establishment in professional education—disparagingly labeled “the blob”—whose scholarship is frequently at odds with these emergent forces and cautions a gradualist, studied approach to education reform and policy. The strategy of the heirs to A Nation at Risk is to bypass the traditional professoriate, to co-opt the scientific forms of the academy in its own new alternative institutions, and to focus instead on direct
communication with media and politicians about educational issues. The process is well underway and could render colleges and professors of education obsolete.

The message of the advocates is formatted to appeal to interested non-experts who control education as policy-makers, legislators, and media leaders. This message is packaged to be sympathetic to the value of tradition and past lessons while acknowledging the needs of the future; it wears the garb of science and scholarship; it appeals to common sense; it claims democratic intent and a true concern for the underprivileged (unlike the “soft bigotry of low expectations”); and many well-known authorities sign on with the advocates. Upon closer examination, however, we find evidence of manipulation, bias, and fallacious argument.

In recent history, this tradition of manipulation began with the use of theatrical language to inspire fear. *A Nation at Risk* was authored by scientists and non-educators and was presented, at first, by the authority of the Secretary of Education, but soon thereafter under the auspices of the President of the United States (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report asserted that the poor performance of our public schools, particularly in mathematics and science, was more of a security threat than that of Soviet Communism, and was damaging the capacity of the United States to compete economically. The report’s prose was intemperate, its conclusions dubious, and its methods unscientific. While *A Nation at Risk* may have originally been a manifesto primarily aimed at preserving the Department of Education from closure, it became a defining document of our time. Its bombastic language proved mediagenic and it has set the tone for the debate on our public schools that followed. That tone has been careless, politicized, and ahistorical, like the report itself. It has put educators on the defensive and threatened the longstanding faith Americans have had in their public schools. *A Nation at Risk* convinced many, particularly in the media, that the need for fundamental education reform was pressing.

One important, recent manifestation following in the tradition of *A Nation at Risk* is the National Reading Panel’s (N.R.P.) Report “Teaching Children to Read” (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999a). This report, emanating from the medically oriented National Institutes of Health, claimed authority through association with science; more specifically, “hard science”. Like *A Nation at Risk*, the N.R.P. Report—whose authors largely represent a specific and narrow segment of reading scholars (Garan, 2002, p. 3)—conducted a highly selective review of the literature under its own unique set of rules, which eliminated qualitative, specifically ethnographic and correlational studies (Yatvin, 2000), and “predetermined the course of the analysis as well as the outcome” (Garan, 2001d, p. 63). Similarly, Reading Recovery® has recently been attacked by the US Department of Education and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development for being on the wrong side of the reading wars (i.e., in the whole language camp), although a more accurate view is that Reading Recovery® transcends categories and is a vital early reading intervention employing a wide range of instructional methods. Draft guidance by the US Department of Education threatens to subvert the clear intent of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act by directing funds away from pull-out programs such as this. The N.R.P.
report and recent National Institute of Child Health and Human Development are supported by “authoritative” signatures, yet these signers do not accurately represent the spectrum of professional thought in reading, and except for two individuals, they lack a background in the actual teaching of reading to children.

Through the use of executive summaries and methodological manipulation, the scholarship used by the advocates has evolved to the detriment of fair inquiry. The N.R.P. Report, over 600 pages with a “Minority View”, is little seen compared with the 32-page summary that is in wide circulation and excludes any official dissent (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1999b). This summary interprets the findings of the Panel in ways that are arguably unjustified, even in the eyes of panel members (Yatvin, 2001, 2002), and, it seems, loses all semblance of academic balance and controls (Cunningham, 2001; Garan, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Krashen, 2001). This honing of propagandist technique is emblematic of the erosion of the popular debate on public education. During these 20 years since *A Nation at Risk*, pro-market advocates who began as arrogant “experts” speaking in an impassioned though ill-informed manner outside their field of expertise have moved to a more studied approach of disinformation. The new approach features co-opted forms of inquiry, the bypassing of the peer-review process and other checks and balances, second-generation “summaries” that betray the original works, increasingly interconnected networks of media, corporations, pro-market policy and advocacy research, and federal sponsorship of questionable scholarship. This evolution in the strategy continues, and some worry that mechanisms to solidly institutionalize these corrupted forms of research are currently being put in place in government, business, and higher education.

**Of Research and Politics**

[E]ducation research by its very nature is imbued with politics, for both education and research are political endeavors … Both have labored under the myth of neutrality and objectivity, but both have significant subjective components because facts do not speak for themselves nor do they have any inherent meaning. All significance and relevance are functions of context and intentionality, and are thus bestowed by human beings with their own value and belief systems. (Randall, Cooper & Hite, 1999)

The recently enacted No Child Left Behind Act, which re-authorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (the Federal government’s principle legislative authority for involvement in K-12 public education), places new emphasis on research, requiring the use of “scientifically based research” in education and education policy-making. While this new emphasis has been generally praised, concerns have arisen regarding the definition of “scientifically based research” (Cochran-Smith, 2002; Olson & Viadero, 2002). Under the evolving definition, much valid research may be lost if the term is defined too narrowly (e.g., if experimental research is emphasized to the exclusion of descriptive research). Additionally, funding mechanisms currently used to support research could cause a
narrowing of the field if specific methodologies are viewed as unscientific. The definition reads:

The term ‘scientifically based research’
(A) means research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs; and
(B) includes research that:
—employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment;
—involves rigorous data analysis that are adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn;
—relies on measurements or observational methods that provide reliable and valid data across evaluators and observers, across multiple measurements and observations, and across studies by the same or different investigators;
—is evaluated using experimental or quasi-experimental designs in which individuals, entities, programs, or activities are assigned to different conditions and with appropriate controls to evaluate the effects of the condition of interest, with a preference for random-assignment experiments, or other designs to the extent that those designs contain within-condition or across-condition controls;
—ensures that experimental studies are presented in sufficient detail and clarity to allow for replication or, at a minimum, offer the opportunity to build systematically on their findings; and
—has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review. (US Department of Education, 2002a)

Of primary concern to researchers is the requirement for experimental or quasi-experimental designs and the preference for random-assignment experiments. As Deputy Valerie Reyna of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) explained:

The bottom line here is these same rules about what works and how to make inferences about what works, they are exactly the same for educational practice as they would be for medical practice. Same rules, exactly the same logic, whether you are talking about a treatment for cancer or whether you’re talking about an intervention to help children learn … When we teach students we really are engaging in a kind of brain surgery. (US Department of Education, 2002b)

While such designs may be desirable in some situations, they are expensive and bring to the fore a variety of ethical issues that can be resolved using other methodologies. Additionally, such requirements would eliminate much of the qualitative research base and possibly result in improperly narrow findings like those recently released by the National Reading Panel (Garan, 2001a; Krashen, 2001;
Yatvin, 2000, 2002). A similar artificial narrowing of the literature (Darling-Hammond, 2001) has been used in other recent literature reviews, including the Abell Foundation report, *Teacher Certification Reconsidered: stumbling for quality* (Walsh, 2001).

**What is Research?**

Central to this emerging debate is the question, what is scientifically based research? This question is not new, and touches on the long-running debate between quantitative and qualitative research, as well as experimental and quasi-experimental versus non-experimental methodologies. While many in the research community seem comfortable with the scientific basis of these methodologies, concern about the political support for non-experimental and qualitative research remains.

A number of influential researchers and research organizations have weighed in on the debate. Late last year, the National Research Council issued a paper on education research, *Scientific Research in Education*. The paper determined that what made education research “scientific” was not solely linked to study design or methodology, but rather that research “… must allow direct, empirical investigation of an important question, account for the context in which the study is carried out, align with a conceptual framework, reflect careful and thorough reasoning, and disclose results to encourage debate in the scientific community” (Shavelson & Towne, 2002, p. 6). In using these principles for identifying scientifically based research, the National Research Council was setting the stage for re-authorization of the OERI within the Department of Education.

Separate from the specific issue of OERI re-authorization, however, is the role of the Department of Education, which is a political office under the executive branch. The Department’s purpose is to promote the President’s education agenda, and it is this mixing of political agenda with education, as supported by research that may be “imbued with politics,” that is of concern. To help formulate and clarify their position, the Department of Education held a conference in February 2002 (“The Use of Scientifically Based Research in Education”). The conference included presentations that were very much in line with mainstream education researchers, supporting both quantitative and qualitative research, as well as experimental and non-experimental research designs (US Department of Education, 2002c). While the presenters held up experimental design as “the gold standard” for causal research, each presenter also recognized instances where such designs would be difficult to achieve or inappropriate (such as with descriptive research). As Yin (1984) asserts, when research questions seek to uncover “how” and “why” answers, it is best to use non-experimental methods such as the case study. Empirical quantitative research merely confirms or disconfirms a measurable supposition. When the large participant numbers and measurement requirements for quantitative research are applied, complexity and the nature of specific educational contexts, which are so important in education, are lost.

Despite the generally broad view of research offered by the panelists, it will be important to see how the Department actually funds and uses research. Recently,
some state policy-makers and researchers have expressed concerns about the Department of Education’s view toward scientifically based reading research; for example, questioning whether specifying commercially available reading products might expedite approval of Reading First grant applications because they are phonics based (Manzo & Robelen, 2002). Also, many wonder whether Reading Recovery® has been unfairly targeted for exclusion by these interpretations. While the Department rigorously denies any bias, the way in which review panels are selected, and what perspectives individual members bring to the table, could indicate how the Department plans to interpret “scientifically based research”.

Research Funding, Sponsorship and Misconduct

As identified by Randall, Cooper and Hite (1999), regardless of the definition and methodological rigor of research, the ethical quality of research ultimately remains rooted in the value and belief systems of the researchers and individuals who sponsor that research. If individuals wish to manipulate their research, either through overt data falsification or, more subtly, through methodological design, there is little that can be done, other than to rely on peer reviewers to expose the misconduct (Howe, 2002; Reeves, 2002; Viadero, 2002). While the general quality of education research has come under fire recently, it is also important to note that research into scientific misconduct in the “hard” sciences has generated similar problems. For example, Mildred Cho, a senior research scholar at Stanford’s Center for Biomedical Ethics, found that corporate-sponsored drug research produced results that corroborated what the sponsor hoped to find 98% of the time. By contrast, independent drug research supported researchers’ hypothesis only 79% of the time (Press & Wubburn, 2000). Clearly there is something to worry about in this brand of funded “science”.

In a review of research on scientific integrity, Nicholas Steneck (2000) found that serious ethical lapses may be present in as many as one in 100 cases, although the actual reporting rate is only one in 100,000. While one percent may seem low, these figures only include the most serious offenses (defined as fabrication, falsification, and plagiarism). Misrepresentation of findings, authorship irregularities, duplicate publication, bias and conflict of interest, or misconduct in private research efforts are not included. Additionally, Steneck highlights the importance of peer review, self-correction, and formal instruction in the responsible conduct of research—some or all of which are often missing in the research produced by advocacy institutions (Cookson, Molnar & Embree, 2001; Howe, 2002).

In recent articles in Education Week, former Assistant Secretary for Research and Improvement at the US Department of Education, Chester Finn (who now heads up the market-oriented Fordham Foundation), has attacked the “tattered raiments” that the peer-review emperor wears, noting that “by selecting the peers, you’re preordaining the outcome of the review” (Finn, 2002, p. 34), and, when questioned, justifying that at Fordham, “We’re engaged in an argument ... not refereeing an argument” (Viadero, 2002). Kenneth Howe, director of the Education and the
Public Interest Center, later defended the concept of peer review and criticized Finn and “those who market their partisan preferences under the guise of informing public deliberation” through research (2002, p. 35).

Adding to concerns about bias in education research are issues related to the market nature of research funding and grant competition. Because the education research funding system is essentially a market system—that is, there are a limited number of resources available to support research, creating a competition among researchers to design projects that have the “best” chance of being funded—the demand for specific types of research could indirectly skew the body of scientific knowledge, creating a bias toward questions important to funders, irrespective of the actual value of those questions (Gowri, 2000; Spring, 1998). For example, if teacher quality is defined by funders as the impact of teachers on student achievement from year to year, the body of research on teacher quality may begin to skew away from other equally important indicators (such as graduation rates, additional educational attainment, economic participation, self-actualization, success, etc.). Additionally, over time, the question might become the answer, resulting in the definition of teacher quality becoming student achievement on standardized tests. Achievement itself is now often narrowly prefigured, since student achievement is typically defined as only what achievement tests measure.

Even more insidious is the impact that funding might have on research design. If researchers feel funders are seeking specific results, they may structure their research in the way to most likely uncover the hypothesized results. While this is not always actual misconduct, such manipulation of research design is certainly unethical and should be a concern to research consumers. Funded research is “interested” research. Ideally, the university should represent independent, unbiased, scholarly views. As the Multinational Monitor (1997) asserts:

Universities are unique repositories of information and expertise, and society looks to academia to provide disinterested recommendations for, and critique of, policies, technologies and products. When the autonomy of huge swaths of the university is compromised, and when open debate is displaced by corporate norms of proprietary secrecy, then society loses an important pool of potentially independent, trustworthy experts.

Academia should not become another arm of corporate America nor serve as the legitimator of any single partisan ideology, yet this is a real danger for research in a wide range of disciplines, including education. As Virginia Ashby Sharpe (Integrity in Science project director for the Washington, DC-based Center for Science in the Public Interest) explains, “There are conflicts of interest when an academic researcher’s primary commitment to the use of sound procedures in the unbiased search for truth is placed in competition with other [financial or personal] interests that might eclipse the primary commitment” (Paone, 2002, p. 48).

Education research may be especially vulnerable to these types of research bias (i.e., the market skewing and the demand of corrupt research), since it has been historically under-funded when compared with the “hard” sciences. While education research expenditures in the US are difficult to estimate, they seem to
Pro-market policy and advocacy research generally account for from 0.03 percent (National Education Knowledge Industry Association, 2002) to 0.001 percent (Shavelson & Towne, 2002) of all education expenditures (or approximately $564 million). Contrast that with the National Science Foundation (2002) estimates of Federal research expenditures for Defense ($34.5 billion), Health and Human Services ($16.4 billion), NASA ($9.7 billion), Department of Energy ($7.5 billion), and the National Science Foundation ($2.9 billion).

**Advocacy Institutions**

The role of think tanks, especially market-oriented think tanks like Fordham, has expanded greatly in the past 20 years (Callahan, 1999; Heineman, Bluhm, Peterson & Kearny, 1997; Spring, 1998). As identified by both Spring and Heineman et al., a network of market-oriented think tanks now spans the entire country, with a presence in every state, as well as nationally. The State Policy Network, founded in 1992, is “dedicated solely to improving the practical effectiveness of independent, non-profit, market-oriented, state-based think tanks” (State Policy Network, 2002), and boasts 40 member groups in 37 states. The “Conservative News and Information” site sponsored by the Heritage Foundation (www.Townhall.com), lists almost 90 member groups. These groups produce research and help organize members at the grassroots level, and were credited with the almost overnight success of the Newt Gingrich Republicans and Contract with America (Heineman et al., 1997). The groups continue to act forcefully around a variety of issues, including education, and because of the research they produce have a significant impact on policy discussions generally, as well as the use of research in policy-making specifically.

This counter-establishment of “academic” educational institutions—journals, centers, think tanks, organizations, foundations—is coming together for the specific purpose of legitimizing their message. This parallel world serves to authenticate information with the aim of discrediting public institutions, opening education as a new market for profit, and consolidating a “conservative” world view (Heineman et al., 1997; Spring, 1998). Their standards display a form of objectivity different from that which we have come to take for granted. Peer review is limited; conflicts of interest ignored or concealed; open debate over ideas short-circuited. Outwardly and to the non-specialist, however, their information is indistinguishable from our traditional scholarly forms. Rather than engage the community of educational researchers with their arguments, advocates are creating a parallel system for communication that is fully integrated in its structure. That is to say, there are funding sources, scholars in residence, institutions, and liaisons to policy-makers and media. There are corroboration of results and analysis among this new network of “research” providers.

**The Impact on Teacher Education**

The advocates are co-opting the forms of scholars in order to assume this mantle for their ideas as well as to displace the traditional sources of educational scholarship.
and opinion. In this way, policy-makers and informed citizens who wish to obtain scholarly information rather than polemics will have a difficult time sorting through the messages available to them. Examples of these efforts are readily available, as evidenced by the work of, among others, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), the Education Leaders Council, the Fordham Foundation, the Hoover Institute’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), the Center for Education Reform, Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG), and the journal *Education Next*. While listed here separately, these organizations are intricately intertwined in both the market-oriented agenda they espouse, and the individuals responsible for directing their efforts.

While the agendas of these groups may be summed up as pro-market, further definition is in order. Pro-market theorists generally assume that a system based on competition and minimal regulation will result in better quality education at a lower cost. They claim that parents will choose the “best” education for their children (the implicit definition of “best” meaning academically best), forcing schools to improve programs in an effort to compete for students. Given de-regulation reforms, schools will be able to educate more efficiently, which will bring down the cost of education. Finally, when schools do not succeed, they will close; thereby ensuring a high degree of quality. The concept of marketplace competition provides the basis for the choice movement, which includes voucher programs, charter schools, open enrollment, home schooling, and tuition tax credits. The deregulatory concept results in efforts to remove certification and accreditation requirements, and collective bargaining agreements, as well as efforts to promote site-based management and private contracting for school services. While the general market orientation serves as a fundamental underpinning for market groups, it is the deregulatory angle that primarily affects teacher education, as efforts are made to ease or eliminate certification requirements (Cochran-Smith, 2001a, 2001b). As Finn (2000) asserts, “The regulatory strategy is bankrupt. Teacher certification is no guarantee of good teaching, and its greatest effect has been to keep many fine prospective teachers from ever entering America’s classrooms”. This two-pronged approach allows a diversity of groups with different agendas to collaborate around the larger concepts of school choice and deregulation. Table 1 presents an outline of these groups and their self-identified agendas. In each case, the organization expresses a focus on choice, deregulation, or both prongs of the market approach.

Recommendations for the de-regulation of teacher preparation are supported by pro-market advocates, and they actively influence federal and state teacher education policy despite a body of peer-reviewed research suggesting that de-regulatory policies do not necessarily contribute greater numbers of good teachers and that they can contribute to unsuccessful teaching. Although the quality and nature of alternative certifications programs vary considerably (Zumwalt, 1996), research suggests that unless great care is taken in program design and classroom support, eliminating or greatly reducing preservice preparation is a mistake. Teachers without adequate preparation may have difficulty in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1990; Shulman, 1992; Stoddart & Floden, 1995), may receive lower performance evaluations (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1990; Jelmberg,
TABLE 1. Market-oriented organizations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Market angle</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fordham Foundation</td>
<td>“The Foundation’s work … incorporate(s) these principles …. diversity, competition, and choice” (Fordham Foundation, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoover Institution (CREDO)</td>
<td>Hoover supports the “… principles of individual, economic, and political freedom; [and] private enterprise …” (Hoover Institution, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Leaders Council</td>
<td>Education reform must “center on the needs and choices of families … [and] will not be achieved through a continued fixation on increasing budgets and promulgating regulations …” (Education Leaders Council, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Council on Teacher Quality</td>
<td>NCTQ will … advocate reform strategies whose touchstone is documentable student achievement rather than regulation (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Education Reform</td>
<td>From Charter Schools to School Choice … CER is at the forefront of education reform in our country (Center for Education Reform, 2002)</td>
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1996), and tend to leave the profession more quickly (Shen, 1997). Yet, the pro-market advocates’ perspective on teacher preparation (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Finn, Manno & Ravitch, 2000; Kanstroom & Finn, 1999; MacDonald’ 1998; Stone, 2000) is driving federal policy. The new No Child Left Behind Act provides support for a number of alternative certification programs including an expansion of “Teach for America and Troops to Teachers”. Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, reported “There is little evidence that education school course work leads to improved student achievement” as he released the first yearly report to Congress on teacher quality required under the Higher Education Act of 1998 (The Fresno Bee, 2002). As detailed earlier, his assertion has little support in the literature of the field and, indeed, resulted in calls for an independent analysis of the data, as well as concerns about the quality of research used in the report (Paige to States, 2002).

The Interconnected Networks of Pro-Market Policy and Advocacy Research

The policy success of pro-market education advocates is significantly enhanced by the interconnectedness of their efforts with the efforts of like-minded groups and individuals. Chester Finn and the Fordham Foundation serve as a useful place to start examining the interconnectedness of individuals in pro-market organizations, as well as their involvement in other ostensibly agenda-free organizations. Finn not only heads up the Fordham Foundation, but is also a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at Stanford’s Hoover Institution (as is Fordham’s Diane Ravitch). Fordham, in conjunction with the Education Leaders Council, established the National Council on Teacher Quality. Eric Hanushek, who heads up CREDO (at the Hoover
Institution) sits on the NCTQ Board, as does Fordham’s Finn and Ravitch, and the Education Leaders Council’s Frank Brogan, Lisa Graham Keegan, and William Maloney. While Finn and Hanushek are associated with Hoover, so too are Paul Peterson and Caroline Hoxby, who are also associated with the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance. PEPG also lists Frederick Hess, who recently proposed elimination of teacher certification in a study carried out for the New Democrats, as a Faculty Associate. Also involved with these groups and individuals is the Washington, DC-based Brookings Institute, which lists as scholars Diane Ravitch and John Chubb, who are Distinguished Visiting Fellows at Hoover. Tom Loveless, who is the director of Brookings’ Brown Center on Education Policy, was formerly at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, where the PEPG is housed and, in fact, is still listed as a faculty associate at PEPG.

Further relationships become apparent when looking at funding exchanges among these organizations. To do this, a limited analysis of financial data was conducted using as source material information obtained from year 2000 tax returns (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2002), a search of Cursor’s Media Transparency (2002) database, and a review of the Smith Richardson Foundation (2000) Annual Report and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (2001) Five-Year Report. The analysis identified a number of generally pro-market and limited-government focused foundations (the Bradley Foundation, the Fordham Foundation, the Olin Foundation, the Scaife Foundations and the Smith-Richardson Foundation) that, over the past decade, have contributed millions of dollars to the market-oriented organizations and individuals previously identified. Among the relationships, the Center for Education Reform (which received more than $700,000 from the Scaife, Olin, and Bradley Foundations from 1994 to 2000) had business dealings, in the year 2000 alone, of more than $55,000 with the Education Leaders Council, and the Fordham Foundation and Chester Finn (who received almost $1 million from the Olin Foundation between 1988 and 1999) gave $320,000 to the journal Education Next (housed at the Hoover Institute) and $180,000 in start-up grants to the National Council on Teacher Quality. The Olin Foundation added another $100,000 to Education Next while Smith Richardson added $50,000. In 2000, Erik Hanushek received $199,613 from the Smith Richardson Foundation to start up and run the CREDO at the Hoover Institution (according to Cursor’s Media Transparency database, Hanushek also received another $300,387 for creation of an education policy evaluation and research center while at the University of Rochester).

A good example of the concerns that arise from the use of agenda-based money, as well as sponsorship by advocacy organizations, can be found in the CREDO. In its most publicized effort, Teach for America: an evaluation of teacher differences and student outcomes in Houston, Texas (Raymond, Fletcher & Luque, 2001), the Center identifies the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (a strong supporter of Teach for America (TFA)-type programs) as one of the project’s primary sponsors (the Smith Richardson Foundation and Packard Humanities Institute also lent support). It is not surprising, then, that TFA fared quite well in CREDO’s evaluation, which stimulated a debate with the National Commission on Teaching and America’s
Future (2001) about the study’s methodology. American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)’s Education Policy Clearinghouse also weighed in with the publication of a detailed critique of the design and objectivity of the CREDO study (Earley, 2001). This is a concern CREDO takes seriously, highlighting the blurring line between research funding and advocacy, when they note in response to the critique:

While it is the case that representatives of our project sponsor, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, make an argument in the Foreword to the volume comparing ed schools with programs like TFA, this dichotomy did not enter into our analysis. It would have been perhaps more constructive if AACTE had quoted CREDO and not the Foreword prepared by our project sponsor. While we agree with the Foundation on many things and are grateful to them for supporting the evaluation financially, we are an independent group and think about this issue and others on our own. (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2001)

What remains to be seen is whether CREDO simply pursues the appearance of balance and attempts to give the impression that it is an honest broker of information, or if it can truly act independently despite agreeing with its funders philosophically on many issues.

While agenda-based organizations have previously eschewed peer review, a coalition of these groups recently established a new journal of “opinion and research”. Like CREDO, the new journal, Education Next (formerly Education Matters), also garners its support from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Hoover Institute. Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance, and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, as well as the Olin Foundation, also lend considerable support. With editors and an editorial board that includes Chester Finn, Jay Greene, John Chubb, Eric Hanushek, E.D. Hirsch, Terry Moe, Diane Ravitch, and Herbert Walberg, Education Next would appear to have a built-in point of view. The initial issues of the journal do appear, however, to be striving for balance and, therefore, an unexpected scholarly respectability. A closer reading, however, raises questions. While there are a range of opinions presented on issues such as school choice, teachers’ unions, and teacher preparation, it is a range around carefully tailored ideological themes. Open inquiry is constrained, but not in a crass or overt manner. Instead, the journal performs its advocacy through control of context and by limiting the scope of options considered. For example, the issue on unionism (Peterson, 2001) asks “Is it possible for unions to shed their adversarial, industrial-era approach in favor of collaboration and professionalism?” While this is clearly a loaded question, the articles that follow seem to offer varying perspectives. However, none assumes that unions, in their current form, will become partners in reform. While Terry Moe (“A Union by Any Other Name”) concludes that “teacher unions have emerged as the fiercest, most powerful defenders of the status quo, and the single greatest obstacle to the reform of American education,” Charles Kerchner (“Deindustrialization”) presents a more hopeful view of the union role in reform, but one that relies on unions changing from an industrialized to a professionalized model. Finally, Adam Urbanski offers an initial defense of union involvement in
improving schools, but later notes that “The industrial-union model that emerged from years of struggling for parity with management was a good match for the industrial-style schools of yesteryear … However, as the industrial model of schooling begins to crumble, so too must industrial-style unionizing”. In each article, the underlying message is that unions as they now stand must be reformed if schools are to improve.

The issue on teacher preparation (Peterson, 2002) is similarly organized, with each article approaching teacher education and state licensure as a poor system in need of reform. While Mary Diez (“The Certification Connection”) offers a defense of licensing and professional teacher preparation, she highlights the need for standards-based and performance-based reform of the current system. James Fraser (“A tenuous hold”), takes the position that the state should stop licensing teachers and regulating ed schools, allowing districts and schools to certify and hire teachers. Finally, Frederick Hess (“Break the Link”) calls for the complete elimination of certification (other than through a background check, passage of a test of “essential knowledge”, and possession of a college degree), with hiring decisions left at the local school level. These articles are then supported by an article praising alternative routes to teaching (“Teach for America”), and another highlighting a study that claims there is no reliable body of research supporting professional teacher certification and preparation (“Positive Spin”). Again there is no article supporting the current system. Each issue begins with the assumption that the current system is in need of reform, and the proposed reforms frequently emphasize competition and deregulation. This technique of manipulating the debate is reminiscent of how empirical studies can be controlled—not by doctoring statistics, since this is easily revealed, but by “using inappropriate statistical methods, not accounting for important variables or influences …, or making unfounded generalizations that lead to wrong-headed conclusions” (Earley, 2001, p. 1).

The work of the Harvard PEPG has also come under fire from a variety of researchers. The re-evaluation of the Cleveland voucher program by PEPG researchers provides a vivid example, stimulating this response from the official program evaluator, Kim Metcalf:

… The members of the team of advocates, though some of them represent prominent institutions, are strong supporters of vouchers and have done much to promote the implementation of voucher programs throughout the country. So it is possible that they are engaged in a deliberate effort to misrepresent the Cleveland data in order to influence educational policy. We would prefer to believe that scholars would not do such a thing, no matter how strongly they believed in their cause … Only the advocates and those who fund them can know with certainty why they are acting as they are. Much of their earlier work on the voucher issue has been debunked by the research community, and their current work may be as well. But regardless of their intentions, their actions cloud rather than clarify the issues and serve to reduce the already limited public belief in research and researchers. (Metcalf, 2001, p. 39)
John Witte, the official program evaluator of the Wisconsin voucher program, had similar critiques of work done at PEPG, noting that PEPG’s re-evaluation of the data from Wisconsin’s program was, “a confusing, tortured effort to try to find any evidence that students enrolled in private schools under the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) do better than any students in the Milwaukee Public Schools” (Witte, 1996). Another analysis by PEPG researchers, this time praising voucher programs in New York, Washington, DC, and Dayton, OH, caused their own co-authors to distance themselves from the report, noting “voucher claims of success are premature” (Walsh, 2000).

While the work of Fordham, PEPG, Education Next, and CREDO is highlighted here, there are two important caveats. First, the body of literature supporting market efforts at education reform is extensive and much broader than the works referenced in the present paper. Second, while much of this research is conducted by researchers committed to market reforms, and funded by market-oriented organizations and foundations, these facts in-and-of-themselves do not necessarily mean the work is either unscholarly or of poor quality. As Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) explain, labeling of a body of work as ideologically oriented is a strategy frequently used to discredit opposing agendas. This is not our purpose in the present article—rather, our goal in identifying these groups and individuals (and their “ideology”) is to ensure that the policy debates (and the research used in those debates) are conducted in an open and honest atmosphere, and that, as noted in the Guidelines for the Responsible Conduct of Researchers, potential conflicts of interest are identified and controlled for (Brock, Sutter & Selwitz, 2000).

Pro-Market Access to Media and Legitimization

Despite these concerns, it is the voice of the pro-market advocates that most often makes the news and enters the consciousness of the American public. An important related strategy of pro-market advocates is to symbiotically align with conservative corporate media. Citizens and policy-makers have easy access to partisan pro-market media information through popular media, and little access to the world of peer-reviewed research or the opinions of teacher organizations. During this same two-decade period discussed here—the post-Nation at Risk era—associated trends have emerged in popular media, which have shifted steadily to the right.

- The talk show world on radio and TV is dominated by the likes of Robert Novak (Crossfire), the McLaughlin Group, The O’Reilly Factor, Hardball, Rush Limbaugh and Limbaugh clones.
- An extensive right-wing Christian radio and TV system propagating the values of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, etc., has multiple stations available all over the country.
- Fox News, created by right wing advocates Rupert Murdoch and Roger Ailes, is now a major force in national television news casting. Murdoch owns a TV network, movie studio, 132 newspapers, book publishers (including Harper Collins), 25 magazines, and more.
• Rush Limbaugh admirer John Malone’s Tele-Communications Inc. is the largest cable system in the United States (14 million subscribers) and has interests in 91 U.S. cable content services. (Herman, 1997).

Major network stations also quote conservative think tanks and regularly report the pro-market party line that public schools are in crisis and drastic changes are needed. Through these media organizations, the educational “research” and policy perspectives of Diane Ravitch, Chester Finn, Lamar Alexander, William Bennett, and David Kearns are featured prominently, and their names, views and faces are made familiar to Americans.

There are many deeply disturbing agendas motivating the rhetorical messages of right-wing pundits. For example, discrediting public education serves to draw attention away from real social and economic problems. Despite the drumbeat of mainstream media, public education is not failing. Berliner and Biddle (1995) have carefully documented the alleged failure beginning with the publication of The Manufactured Crisis: myths, fraud, and the attack on America’s public schools. Richard Rothstein, weekly in “Lessons”, his column in The New York Times, and Gerald Bracey, in his monthly department “Research” in Phi Delta Kappan, both regularly submit hard evidence to support an objective appraisal of our schools. Yet, blaming economic troubles on failing schools and low Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) scores continues to be an extremely effective strategy by what Bracey calls the “Education Scare Industry” (2001, p. 157). “Trade deficits that ballooned 20 years ago”, Rothstein (2001, p. A14) writes, “were caused not by low test scores but by corporate bloat, markets that were more open here than elsewhere and a budget deficit that pushed up interest rates and the dollar’s value”.

These facts are rarely apparent to the average American who has been conditioned to view failing schools, immigrants, and welfare mothers as the source of their troubles. When progressive, critical, and multicultural education are discredited, it is more difficult for students and teachers to accurately understand their world. Displacing critical thinking and analysis in favor of rote skills and memorization helps to keep the public from developing a critical awareness that can challenge non-democratic forces. Steering the public to “soft” cultural debates instead of substantive economic ones also misdirects our dialogues on reform. Finally, discrediting public education has the added benefit of making the enormous education market of $732 billion vulnerable to for-profit interests through the creation of vouchers, charter and for-profit schools, supplementary commercial programs, expensive standardized tests, textbooks, and canned curriculums.

Conclusion: response of educators and the professoriate

Meanwhile, the professoriate are speaking primarily to one another, if at all, about such vital issues, and typically not to the public, organizations of teachers and administrators, policy-makers, or popular media. The conferences, associations, and
journals of the professoriate are dangerously removed from school practitioners, the legislature, and popular media. Organizations of teachers and administrators are also marginalized and spoken about without the opportunity to speak for themselves. While some education organizations, such as the teacher unions, administrator groups, and school boards (among others) do work to address policy-makers and the press, they typically end up speaking from the perspective of their constituents, and focusing on their overriding mission to best meet their members’ needs. They do not speak as loudly in defense of public schools generally. This narrow focus among both educators and the professoriate works to prevent the formation of broad coalitions like those found among the pro-market groups. As a result, research based, pro-public school advocacy efforts are fragmented and ultimately less effective than an ideologically unified and politically sophisticated effort might produce. Effective pro-public coalitions do not exist in spite of the fact that, judging from the policy statements of a wide range of professional education groups, the vast majority of educators and professors of education favor public schools and are leery of both the research and policy agenda of pro-market advocates. There is a compelling need for pro-public school coalitions to balance power and influence policy in this on-going debate.

Without political outreach and public appreciation of the work of educators and researchers, the underpinnings of the profession could well disappear. If there is no university-based teacher education, for example, how many professors of education will there be? If educators are not needed to prepare teachers, why should they be needed to prepare educational administrators, policy experts, or researchers? These and many other previously unasked questions are becoming commonplace and, typically, no educators are present when these questions are asked and answered. As Apple noted:

Conservative modernization has radically reshaped the commonsense of society. It has worked in every sphere—the economic, the political, and the cultural—to alter the basic categories we use to evaluate our institutions and our public and private lives. It has established new identities. It has recognized that to win in the state, you must win in civil society. The accomplishment of such a vast educational project has many implications. It shows how important cultural struggles are. And, oddly enough, it gives reason for hope. It forces us to ask a significant question. If the right can do this, why can’t we? (2001b, p. 194)

A revised consciousness and political savvy on the part of the professoriate and teacher education organizations could redirect the trends discussed in the present paper. An early priority is to assert a place at the table in the public and policy-maker dialogs that are occurring in popular and formal settings. A subsequent need is to communicate the messages of educators in words and images that are accessible to non-specialists since it is they, in our democratic society, who have authority over public education. If the public policy dialogue is broadened and educators participate, the outcome will no longer be foregone.
Notes

1. The opinions expressed in the article are those of the authors and not necessarily their affiliated institutions. Some elements of the present study also appear in SHAKER, P. & HEILMAN, E. (2002). Advocacy vs. authority: silencing the education professoriate. AACTE’s Policy Perspectives, 3(1).

2. While these organizations emphasize and fund projects related to a particular policy agenda, it should be noted that this does not mean that they do not undertake methodologically rigorous research. At the same time, it would be unwise to read these studies without some understanding of the orientation and background of the researchers and their funding organizations. Philosophically oriented organizations are not going to consistently sponsor research or researchers who produce studies that contradict their institutional mission statements.

3. For additional information on the effectiveness of Teach for America and the controversy surrounding the program, see Earley (2001), National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (2001), and Raymond, Fletcher and Luque (2001).

References


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