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Welner, Kevin G.; Hinchey, Patricia H.; Molnar, Alex; & Weitzman, Don (Eds). (2010). *Think Tank Research Quality: Lesson for Policymakers, the Media, and the Public*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.

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Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein
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One of the features of the landscape of education policy over the past few decades has been the explosion of studies and policy briefs on various aspects of education, often designed to influence policy makers such as elected legislators at state and federal levels, schools boards at the state and local level, and various people with executive authority over education ranging from the President of the United States to local superintendents of schools. Many of these have been produced by policy think tanks rather than university researchers. Unfortunately, many of those published have not been subjected to vigorous peer review, yet despite this have had a disproportionate impact on media coverage of the discussions of education policy,

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In 1998, Alex Molnar founded The Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. In 2006, this became the Think Tank Review Project at Arizona State University, at that time a partnership among ASU and its Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU), the University of Colorado at Boulder and its Education and the Public Interest Center (EPIC), along with the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice (GLC).

Since the Think Tank Review Project was established, it has become an invaluable source for those who want dispassionate and professional evaluations of much of the material floating about the discussions on educational policy.

By providing independent, expert, third-party evaluations of think tank research publications, the TTRP helps policymakers and members of the public draw their own conclusions about the value of a given think tank publication. Since reviews are designed to highlight issues of reliability, accuracy and usefulness, a policymaker or reporter who has read both the think tank report and the Project's review of it is in a much better position to assess the value of the report's findings and make sound use of them. TTRP thereby promotes high-quality research, informed public debate, and research-driven policymaking. (p. xiv)

One key issue in the publication of education studies has been the ability of politically conservative organizations to get media coverage of their efforts. This has been part of a larger strategy about which the authors write in the introduction:

Conservative donors have demonstrated a greater willingness to spend their money on developing institutions and supporting those who adhere to their ideological premises—and to fund activities that directly engage the political process. (p. xviii)

This should actually not surprise those who pay attention, since what has happened in education is no different from what has played out on the broader political stage, dating back to 1971, when Lewis Powell, later a Supreme Court Justice, wrote a memorandum to the Chairman of the Education Committee of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Eugene Sydnor, which outlined a strategy that has been followed by the political right and corporate interests ever since (google Powell Memorandum to find multiple sites from across the political spectrum that examine the Memorandum and its influence). What is relevant to this review is the exploration done by the predecessor organization to TTRP in 2001, in which the three conservative think tanks—Heritage, Hoover, and Fordham, the first two founded as a direct result of the Powell Memorandum—acknowledged they did not have a peer review process for what they put out while those either centrist or to the left had a different response.

In contrast, the Economic Policy Institute and the three more centrist organizations (the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, RAND and Brookings) described peer review processes but tended to have much less well-developed media strategies for bringing their publications to the attention of policymakers and the public. A rough indicator of the priorities of the Heritage Foundation is that about 35% of its annual budget at the time was devoted to advertising. (p. xix)

The book is divided into ten parts, each focusing on a particular topic of interest in education policy debates, with a total of 21 reviews, at least two on each topic. The topics are as follows (with the number reviews being two except as noted in parentheses):

- Part 1: School Choice and the Benefits of Competition
- Part 2: Private School Supremacy and Voucher Achievement Gains
- Part 3: Contracting Out and Private Management
- Part 4: Vouchers Save Money (3 reviews)
- Part 5: Charter Schools
- Part 6: School Funding

- Part 7: No Child Left Behind and Standards-Based Accountability
- Part 8: Report Cards: Bad Grades make Headlines
- Part 9: Preschool
- Part 10: Teacher Quality

Some of the reviews are the work of one person, several more than one, with a total of 18 different reviewers some participating in multiple reviews. Each section begins with a brief introduction by the editors of the volume.

Some of the reviews appear as they were originally offered by the Think Tank Review Project. A few have been somewhat edited, that fact being noted. The 21 reviews represent a substantial minority of the 59 reviews done by TTRP at the time the book went to press.

The best use of this book is in conjunction with the original reports and studies it examines. Still, sometimes even without the particular report in hand, the reviews readily make clear the deficiencies of the original report. Thus Christopher Lubienski examines a report on the fiscal impact of the DC Voucher program—now terminated by the Obama administration—that was published by the Cato Institute. The original report asserted four key findings, including that the program saved the District of Columbia public schools, which would increase up to a total of \$3 million were the program ever fully funded. Lubienski puts it thus before embarking on his detailed analysis:

The subsequent sections of this review will show how these findings are premised on questionable analyses and grounded in ideological assumptions about schools and markets. (p. 99)

He backs up these assertions by taking apart the methods in the study, identifying serious flaws, such as the fact that students leaving the DC Public Schools by utilizing vouchers are not a random sample, and that costs for the students remaining behind tend to be higher on a per pupil basis because students who are harder to educate, such as those classified as special education, do not normally depart by means of a voucher.

In criticizing studies, the reviewers are not always dismissing them. Sometimes they suggest they may be inconclusive, but still point to areas that should be examined more closely. The weakness thus may be in the original reports attempt to draw conclusions that are not fully supported by the results. In examining a study on Trends in Charter School Authorizing published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Ernest R. House concludes

The credibility of the findings is weakened by the poor and differential return rate on the survey. How representative was the sample? If one accepts this limitation, the following conclusions seem reasonable: agencies often do not renew charter schools because of poor academic performance; authorizers have grown more careful over time; most authorizers exercise only limited oversight; most authorizers are small-scale; and, most say they would use additional staff to monitor academics. However, the conclusions comparing authorizer types are deeply flawed. The conclusion that nonprofits and independent boards are better able to handle the authorizing process seems to be contradicted by the data.

Given its flaws, this study is not conclusive enough to guide policy, although it might point to future directions for consideration. (pp. 163-164)

The book concludes with an essay by Welner and Molnar titled “Junk Social Science: Its Patrons and its Audience.” Among the points of this essay is the deliberate funding of research intended to support a particular point of view, and the tendency of too many policy makers to defer to the supposed expertise of those writing reports for the think tanks. As they note,

One of the reasons research publications produced by think tanks have become so widely accepted by policymakers and the media in this “pay for play” policy environment is because there is no effective mechanism for subjecting those reports to outside quality controls. If every document labeled as “research” is received and reported without review or critique by independent experts, then its value is not derived

from its quality and rigor - these become relatively beside the point. Value is instead tightly linked to the ability of the research to gain attention and influence policy. Private think tanks accordingly become, from a business standpoint, sensible investments for corporate influence-seekers. It is thus hardly surprising that the most well-funded think tanks tend to be those perceived as having the greatest influence with the media and policymakers. In fact, these prominent think tanks are so proficient at marketing their publications that many of their reports have attained greater prominence than articles addressing the same issues that are published in the most rigorous and respected research journals. That is the context for the Think Tank Review Project (TTRRP). (p. 312)

I would add another factor that is critical to the context. Very few of those reporting on education for mainstream media organizations or offering commentary are competent to evaluate the material on which they base their stories and opinions. They lack background in research methods and design and are not educated in statistics at the level required. What may be equally shocking is how little they know of the basics of the history of education and how apparently unaware they are of the biases of many of the authors and the organizations that sponsor them.

The authors continue:

These reports are generally not aimed at experts in the field, who know the other research in the area or can easily recognize methodological flaws. Instead, they are aimed at policymakers, reporters, bloggers and others who are either predisposed towards their ideological conclusions and recommendations or are simply receptive to using “research” that is slickly produce and well-packaged. (p. 315)

To date, the efforts of the Think Tank Review Project have not gotten the same attention in the mass media that the reports examined receive. Yet scholars in the field are aware of the work of TTRP. Increasingly, its work is

appearing in new media outlets, as bloggers on education who are not necessarily in agreement with the agenda of some of the think tanks make the work of TTRP more widely known.

I suggest that this book is a useful addition to the library of anyone who is concerned about the making of policy in public education. It provides examples that even a non-professional can understand of the weakness of many of the reports produced by think tanks.

It also demonstrates clearly the reason why peer review is such an important process. One problem in the past has been the time to publish when peer review is involved: hard copy printing schedules have required a lead time that is frustrating to those who wish to get their results included in policy discussions. Thus some are tempted to forego peer review with some justification that it decreases timeliness.

The reviews included in this book were originally published electronically, as are now many professional publications in education, including those subject to rigorous peer review. Perhaps the process can be even more condensed if those undertaking the peer review process were compensated appropriately for the effort it takes. Full disclosure: the previous sentence is offered from the perspective of one who has served as a peer reviewer for three professional publications only one of which appears in hard copy, and who has never been compensated for his time or effort. Nor am I compensated for reviewing this book, except that I received a free copy, for which I am grateful.

Taking the time to read through this book should convince you of the value of the work of the Think Tank Review Project, whose work may be viewed more completely at their website <http://nepc.colorado.edu/think-tank-review-project>

Some of the think tanks whose work has been critiqued by TTRP have complained. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute's Education Gadfly (Chester Finn) began one piece by describing TTRP as "left-leaning" while complaining that it "reviews virtually every analytic report that Fordham publishes—and they have yet to find one

that they like.” Thus the reader of this review should be aware that those whom TTRP has criticized are perfectly willing to return fire. The reader will make an independent judgment which side has the better of that argument.

If nothing else, this volume will remind the reader of the value of peer review by someone knowledgeable about the subject matter. Perhaps that is one reason that publication in the more prestigious academic journals always requires a process of peer review.

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including *Current Issues in Education* and *Teachers College Record*. He is coauthor of Rotberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views About the Potential Impact of the Bush Administration's Education Proposals*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies. He was recently named 2010 Washington Post Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher.

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