

In Their Own Words: U.S. Think Tank “Experts” and the Framing of Education Policy Debates

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Abstract

This study draws on forty-six interviews conducted with staff from think tanks, education advocacy organizations, and university based education policy centers to discuss five prominent frames – the Public Education in Crisis frame, the Human Capital frame, the Unions are the Problem frame, the Advocates not Researchers frame, and the Irrelevant Academics frame. These frames are analyzed within context of the historical rise of conservative think tanks, the influence of neoliberal and neoconservative discourse in the policy arena, and the homogeneity of policy positions across ideologically different think tanks and advocacy organizations.

Key Words: Think Tanks, Framing, Education Policy, Conservative Movement, Neoliberal, Neoconservative

Introduction

In 1986 in a *National Review Magazine* article, Chester Finn, President of the conservative Fordham Institute said the following:

For conservatives to abandon the effort of systematic inquiry into education or the dissemination of sound educational ideas is to leave the field firmly in the possession of the colleges of education, the NEA, the American Association of School Administrators, and other bastions of liberal establishmentarianism. Whatever our differences about how to repair the education system, the most shortsighted strategy imaginable would be to withdraw all our explorers from this alien territory and turn it back over to the indigenous population (McGuinn, 2006, p. 54).

This quote illustrates a larger sentiment in the conservative movement at the time which called upon conservatives to enter the policy world of education otherwise it would be left to liberals and the education establishment. At the same time, the Heritage Foundation, along

with other conservative think tanks and policy organizations heeded Finn's call and helped fuel a movement that sought to insert neoliberal and neoconservative discourse into education policy debates.

While many actors in the education policy field seek to frame debates, including advocacy organizations, unions, business coalitions, school boards, and parent-teacher groups (Cross, 2004; Debray 2006; McGuinn 2006), what differentiates think tanks is that historically they have been locations from where research is conducted. This gives them a presumed legitimacy and credibility with the media, policy makers, and public. In theory, the policy recommendations at such research institutes are based on knowledge and expertise that sets them apart from many other organizations (Guttman & Willner, 1976; O'Connor, 2007; Ricci, 1993), however many scholars point to the fact that today's think tank "experts" wield disproportionate power in the media and education policy arena despite the fact that they do not produce research (Haas, 2004, 2007; Haas, Molnar & Serrano, 2002; Kovacs, 2008; McDonald, 2008; Welner, Hinchey, Molnar & Weitzman, 2010; Yettick, 2009).

This study seeks to examine the role of think tanks and their staff in framing education policy debates by drawing on interviews conducted with staff from think tanks, education advocacy organizations, and university based education policy centers. This research employs Snow & Benford's (1988) approach to framing which focuses on diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing processes that are used by social movement organizations (SMOs) to gain recognition and salience in the policy world. The interview data is analyzed within the context of the historical rise of conservative think tanks, the influence of neoliberal and neoconservative discourse in the policy arena, and the homogeneity of policy positions across ideologically different think tanks and advocacy organizations.

Historical Background

Dominating the policy world of the early 20th century were think tanks such as the Russell Sage Foundation (1907), Brookings Institute (1916), and the RAND Corporation (1946). The idea that academics could study society and make policy recommendations as "neutral" experts grew out of the 19th century belief in the objectivity and political neutrality of social science. Improving society through social scientific inquiry was also backed by Progressive Era reformers of the early 20th century, who established philanthropic endowments for such

institutes and pushed for government to address existing social problems (Critchlow, 1985; O'Connor, 2007; Orlans, 1972; Ricci, 1993).

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, several high profile conservatives saw the need for an institutionalized platform from which conservative ideas could make their way into policy discourse. In the famous 1971 "Powell Memorandum," Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. outlined what he saw as an attack on the American free enterprise system, suggesting that the Chamber of Commerce establish a staff of highly qualified free market scholars in the social sciences (Powell, 1971). The efforts of Powell and other high profile conservatives set the groundwork for the establishment of conservative think tanks as institutions to counter liberal/progressive ideas (Easterbrook, 1986; Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007; Nash, 1998; Ricci, 1993; Simon, 1978; Smith, 1991; Steinfels, 1979).

The post 1970 growth in conservative think tanks has been attributed to the expansion of business in politics, the rise of neoconservatism, a new paradigm of neoliberal economics, and the political mobilization of fundamentalist Christians (Apple, 2006; Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007; Lugg, 2000; Spring, 2005; Rich, 2004). The growth in think tanks was accompanied by a shift towards what Stone (1996) refers to as the "new guard" of think tanks that are more focused on affecting policy in a more partisan nature. While traditional academic think tanks have often employed academics to engage in social scientific research, advocacy think tanks produce easily digestible policy briefs and focus on getting their ideas into the media (McGann & Weaver, 2002; Ricci, 1993; Rich, 2004; Smith, 1991). Think tank growth in the United States has also been aided by the strong tradition of philanthropic support for social, economic, and political policy research (Weiss, 1991). At the very time that liberal and progressive non-profits, including think tanks, advocacy, and grassroots organizations, muted their politics to receive foundation funding, conservative think tanks were rewarded by conservative foundations for providing both neoconservative and neoliberal views (Callahan, 1999; Covington, 1997; Krehely, House & Kernan, 2004; Rich, 2005).

The individuals who work at think tanks are often referred to as experts, scholars, fellows, or policy analysts. The qualifications and backgrounds of these individuals vary widely, from people with no experience in education, primarily focused on being quoted in the media, to individuals with Ph.D.'s who conduct academic-style research. In the policy field, the role of

think tank experts is not clearly defined. Medvetz (2010) notes that think tank experts often balance multiple roles, including that of policy aide, academic scholar, business entrepreneur, and media specialist. The blurring role for think tank experts reflects the changing definitions for what it means for an organization to identify as a "think tank." As Stone (2007) notes, think tanks "construct narratives, routines and standards concerning their own roles between science and the state of society" (p. 276). Since the term "think tank" imparts organizational legitimacy, many institutes and centers globally have adopted the label, yet few operate like their historical predecessors (Stone, 2007). Kovacs (2008) refers to the individuals who work at many of these think tanks as "neointellectuals" who promote neoliberal and neoconservative policies and have "become the willing tools of big economic interests" (p. 1).

Several studies have brought attention to the neoliberal and neoconservative turn in education policy in the U.S. (Apple, 2004; 2011; Boyd, 2007; DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007; Kovacs & Boyles, 2005; Leyva, 2009). The conservative movement has found think tanks to be ideal organizations for entry into education policy debates, which they had largely stood outside of for decades (Apple, 2004; Debray, 2006; Jennings, 1998; McGuinn, 2006) and has applied both neoliberal ideas in the form of school choice and market-based education (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman & Friedman, 1980), as well as neoconservative ideas focused on managerialism, assessment, and standards (Apple, 2004; Hirsch, 1988; Jennings, 1998; Kovacs & Boyles, 2005; Pescheck, 1987) to education.

Prior to 1970, only four conservative think tanks focused on education issues: The Hoover Institution, the American Enterprise Institute, the Hudson Institution, and the Reason Foundation. Between 1970 and 1980 this number grew by five, with the addition of the Heritage Foundation, Rockford Institute, Cato Institute, Manhattan Institute, and Pacific Research Institute. The 1980's and 1990's brought an explosion of conservative think tanks with a focus on education policy. By 2006, there were fifty-six conservative think tanks in the United States with education policy divisions (McDonald, 2008).

The Heritage Foundation was one of the earliest conservative think tanks to get involved in education policy. When Heritage was founded in 1973, it was created to serve as "a talent bank for Republicans in office, a tax-exempt refuge for them when out of office, and a communications center for Republican thinkers across the nation" (Edwards, 1997, p. 5).

Their education ideas were articulated in *Mandate for Leadership* published in 1981. This text, which is sometimes referred to as the “blueprint of the Reagan administration,” argued to eliminate the Department of Education and cut various federal education programs (Docksai, 1981).

However, to the dismay of conservatives, the federal role in education grew following the 1983 release of the *Nation At Risk Report* (Cross 2004; Lugg, 2000). This report defined education as a national crisis and shifted the federal government’s focus from the old educational paradigm – one providing equal access to schools and greater funding for disadvantaged students – to a new one focused on oversight and accountability (Cross, 2004; Jennings, 1998; McGuinn, 2006). The focus on educational standards and testing carried into the Clinton presidency, with groups like the Business Roundtable, National Alliance of Business, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce joining forces with the National Governors Association and others to shift emphasis to educational “outputs” and “results” (DeBray, 2006; Jennings, 1998; McGuinn, 2006). Andrew Rotherham, a research fellow of the DLC’s think tank, the Progressive Policy Institute, would also become an education advisor to Clinton. Often referred to as the “third way,” this group drew distinctions between Clinton’s “centrist” agenda and the more “liberal” wing of the Democratic Party (Cross, 2004; DeBray, 2006; McGuinn, 2006). This move symbolized the neoconservative and neoliberal turn that occurred among many Democrats on education.

Simultaneously, several conservative think tank alliances emerged and places like the Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, and Empower America mobilized around a conservative policy agenda (DeBray, 2006). Another important conservative effort was the Koret Task Force based at the Hoover Institution and funded by a \$1.5 million dollar grant from the Koret Foundation. Several conservative think tanks, including the Heritage Foundation, Education Policy Institute, and Lexington Institute also began funding education-focused organizations such as Concerned Women for America, the Traditional Values Coalition, and EXPECT (Excellence for Parents, Children, and Teachers) (DeBray, 2006; McGuinn, 2006).

With the passage of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) during the early days of the George W. Bush presidency, the standards and assessment movement reached its peak and has since carried over into the policies of the Obama administration (Ramirez & Clark, 2009; Wilson,

2009). President Obama has received praise from both Jack Jennings of the Center on Education Policy (a Democratic Party education policy organization) and from Chester Finn of the Fordham Institute (a conservative think tank) for setting uniform academic standards. Kovacs (2008) argues that this neointellectual class has shaped a longstanding political project to generate support for pro-business educational initiatives. Other scholars have similarly noted that the standards and assessment paradigm has united ideologically different think tanks (DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski & Scott, 2007; Debray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009).

Framing

Several social science fields have used framing for analytical purposes. In sociology, Goffman (1974) used the idea of frames to understand how individuals label events and actions, noting that how individuals and groups frame social phenomena structures their societal perceptions. In the field of linguistics, Lakoff (2002; 2006) argues that political pundits use language and metaphors to frame issues in a way that taps into people's moral system and worldview. He argues that conservatives have been more successful than progressives in framing issues, and as such liberals are left to debate conservatives on their terms. Entman (1993) suggests that "framing is often defined casually, with much left to an assumed tacit understanding of reader and researcher" (p. 52). He notes that frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies.

Social movement theorists (Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Snow & Benford, 1988; Zald, 1996) have focused on collective action frames and framing processes to understand the dynamics of social movements. For instance, drawing on social movement frame alignment, Sivek (2008) analyzes how *National Review* magazine created deliberate frames to advance the goals of the conservative movement and construct a liberal enemy. In education, Davies (1999) used frame analysis to examine how a Canadian religious reform movement used frames of multiculturalism and school choice to advance their agenda. Kumashiro (2010) also examined how neoconservative, neoliberal, and Christian fundamentalist movements frame teacher education as irrelevant. Varghese & Park (2010) similarly discuss how the neoliberal agenda frames bilingual education in terms of future workers in the deregulated, highly competitive, post-industrial "global work order." Spreen and Salim (2006) analyzed the resurgence of social education movements in South Africa and how they used a rights-based policy frame. In Australia, Jones (2009) studied the international values education movement, finding that conservative frames of citizenship and character education dominated

the discourse. In Grossman's (2010) research, he examined how educators in New York framed their arguments for test exemptions to resonate with policymakers, while Lessor's (2008) study analyzed organizational change within the university as a process of frame alignment.

In the social sciences, social movements and formal organizations and institutions (such as think tanks) have often been studied separate from one another (Davis, McAdam, Scott, & Zald, 2005). This study conceptualizes think tanks as social movement organizations (SMO) that have been used broadly by the conservative movement to infiltrate the education policy arena with neoconservative and neoliberal ideas. This study draws on forty-six interviews conducted with staff from think tanks, education advocacy organizations, and university based education policy centers to discuss five prominent frames in the world of think tanks and the larger education policy community – the Public Education in Crisis frame, the Human Capital frame, the Unions are the Problem frame, the Advocates not Researchers frame, and the Irrelevant Academics frame.

Methods

The data for this research is based on forty-six interviews that I conducted with staff from think tanks, education advocacy organizations, and university based education policy centers. An initial set of interviews was conducted in 2005-2006, while a second set were conducted in 2008-2009. The majority (31) interviews were conducted in person in Washington, D.C. in the offices of the think tanks, an additional (2) interviews were conducted in Boston and San Francisco at universities, while (13) interviews were conducted via telephone (these included interviews with both think tank staff and university faculty). Interviews ranged from thirty-five minutes to two and a half hours in length. A latent coding system was developed to identify themes and frames within the data. A secondary data source for this research included an analysis of bios, reports, web memos, policy papers, and research found on think tank and education organization websites.

During the first part of the data collection process I was a graduate student enrolled in a Ph.D. program in New York, during the second part of the data collection process I was an Assistant Professor at the university where I am currently employed. Prior to the start of the research I had never met any of the people that I interviewed and had no relationship to anyone in the Washington DC education policy community. I gathered the names and

contact information of potential participants through think tank and university websites. I first sent e-mails asking people if they would be interested in being interviewed for my research project. After very few responses I began calling people personally and talking to them on the telephone. This allowed me to explain my research and yielded the greatest number of interviews. All participants had to sign a consent form indicating whether or not I could identify them by name and affiliation in my research.

For the purposes of this study, I define think tanks as 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan independent (i.e. non-university based) organizations that either self-define as a “think tank” or explicitly self-define as an organization that engages in policy “research.” Education policy organizations included in this study are non-profit, grassroots 501(c)(3) organizations. Although they do not self-define as “think tanks,” their work is often indistinguishable from the work done at think tanks. University based education policy centers included in this study are not funded by corporations, but by non-profit 501(c)(3) foundations. These university-based policy centers vary drastically in size, scope, and funding. At some colleges and universities their education centers exist more in name only, are not funded, and staffed part-time by just one faculty member. At the other end of the spectrum there are several prominent university based education policy research centers that are funded by millions of dollars in grants and have a full-time research staff.

The ideology of each think tank was determined by using Rich’s (2004) classification system to identify key words and phrases in their mission statements and/or annual reports to classify think tanks as either conservative, centrist (no identifiable ideology), or liberal/progressive. This classification is a reflection of how think tanks “self-define” but is not necessarily reflective of what scholars would analytically consider liberal, centrist, or conservative positions on education policy issues.

Public Education in Crisis frame

One of the frames that emerged while interviewing think tank staff is the idea that public education is in a state of crisis. This frame is not new and has been critiqued by scholars as a “manufactured crisis” largely serving the interests of neoliberals and neoconservatives (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Bracey, 2001; 2009; Picciano & Spring, 2005). In interviews, people most often cited the 1983 *A Nation At Risk Report*, and its foreboding language as the wake-up call to this crisis – “the educational foundations of our society are presently being

eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people” (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1984, p. 5). People also cited the report as the primary reason for the growth in the number of think tanks focused on education policy:

I’m fairly new to this, but some of this at least you can attribute to the publication of *A Nation At Risk*. For a lot of the nation that was a wake-up call, it was sort of a Sputnik moment (Former Democratic Governor Bob Wise, President of the Alliance for Excellent Education – Washington, DC based advocacy organization).

Bruce Fuller a researcher from a university based education policy center identified the organizational infrastructure of think tanks that emerged as tied to a centralized (federal) discussion of education:

A Nation At Risk legitimated the idea that we could debate education issues at the federal level, it wasn’t only a state issue. Then you had Heritage, AEI [American Enterprise Institute], EPI [Economic Policy Institute], you had these national think tanks that could suddenly attract foundation support to talk about national education issues (Bruce Fuller, PACE: Policy Analysis for California Education).

Similarly, Kati Haycock, the Director of the Education Trust, an influential advocacy organization that played a large role in writing the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) legislation, noted the significance of the report:

The 1980’s was the first time we started having a national consciousness about education in the U.S. compared to education elsewhere. We started having national goals, so it would make sense that you would have more think tanks (Kati Haycock, Director, The Education Trust).

While many people in the education policy field framed the rise in the number of education policy organizations (including think tanks) as a response to an educational crisis, several conservative Washington DC based think tanks framed it as a response to a broader crisis in American politics brought to light by the Powell Memorandum and the call for pro-business ideas to counter the policy recommendation of progressives. During one of my two visits to the Heritage Foundation I was given a tour of the facilities and told about the paid internship program where future conservative leaders are trained. I spoke to two of their education

policy staff about the impetus for the dramatic growth in the number of conservative think tanks in the U.S.:

They had this meeting in Switzerland, and they decided that we needed to create institutes to carry the torches of these ideas through what had been a long winter where classical liberal ideas [neoliberal ideas] had not been heard. Out of that we got the Institute for Economic Affairs in London, which ended up becoming Margaret Thatcher's Idea Factory, the American Enterprise Institute here, and the Chicago School where Milton Friedman was. I definitely think that the Mont Pèlerin Society achieved their goal (Dan Lips, Heritage Foundation).

If I could go back and talk a little bit more about the history of think tanks more generally. Sir Anthony Fisher, a British Industrialist, wanted to do something for King and Country, or I guess Queen and country, and he said to Friedrich Hayek, "I'm thinking about running for the House of Commons and doing it that way." Hayek said, "don't do it, fund an independent research organization." That is how the Institute for Economic Affairs was started. That got a lot of people thinking about the role of the independent research and policy making organization. Brookings has been around forever, we've been around for 32 years. That is how we got the ball rolling. Our star really rose quite a bit during the Reagan years (Kirk Johnson, Heritage Foundation).

Human Capital frame

Related to the "Crisis in Education" frame the "Human Capital" frame has its roots in the neoclassical ideas of economists Milton Friedman and Gary Becker. Human capital economic theory views investment in human capital (in the form of education) purely in terms of the benefit it renders to the marketplace and the investment's economic return to the capitalist economy (Becker, 1962). Increasingly applied to the field of education, human capital theory has resulted in neoliberal education reforms that treat schools as businesses. Various international studies have drawn attention to how neoliberalism is educating children to meet the needs of capital (Bunnell, 2011) and shifting education away from ideas of universal citizenship and towards individual consumer rights (Beckmann, Cooper, & Hill, 2009). In higher education scholars have called attention to how human capital theory dictates a reductionist view of education that justifies a shift from public to private corporate funding and management of colleges and universities (Holborow, 2012; Saunders, 2010) which aids an already multi-billion dollar educational assessment, publishing, and instructional technology industry (Lakes, 2011).

One of the driving forces behind the human capital frame in the U.S. came from two centrist think tanks, the Center on Education and the Economy and the Progressive Policy Institute. These two think tanks made several recommendations to the Clinton administration based on a study funded by the Carnegie Corporation. They focused on an international comparison between the United States and other countries, as the President of the Center on Education and the Economy, Marc Tucker, told me in an interview:

All of the countries we studied were different, countries as different as Japan and Sweden, Singapore and Germany¹ but the basic structures of their educational systems were all similar, each to the other, but all very unlike the United States. They all had systems that were based on explicit standards of achievement at the national level. They all had national systems of tests and examinations. They all had curriculum frameworks that specified topics to be studied in each grade level in each of the required subjects in the curriculum (Marc Tucker, President of the National Center for Education and the Economy).

While the report received negative feedback from some anti-government places like the conservative Capital Research Center² the basic tenets of the report were not challenged by the mainline Washington DC policy community. In an interview I conducted with a researcher from a university based education policy institute, I asked about why there is so little diversity of opinion across think tanks and policy centers in Washington DC who claim to come from opposite sides of the political spectrum. His answer is illustrative of the almost taken for granted notion of human capital theory in federal education discourse in the U.S.:

The Democratic liberal tradition has been spouting human capital rhetoric for the last forty odd years. It was Linden Johnson who said in signing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the Higher Education Act, and the Economic Opportunity Act, which was the War on Poverty.... that education is going to solve poverty. George Miller³ and Ted Kennedy⁴ spout human capital rhetoric, they have for years. Some of the stuff in terms of public-private relationships is odd right now, changing, and in flux. But in terms of the basic approach and if you look at what the purpose of education is, they are not going to be that dramatically different. Even hard felt liberals in Congress, they are not academics. They are going to repeat what they've heard that sounds nice, and providing opportunity, and that is basically human capital rhetoric (Researcher, University Based Education Policy Institute).

Unions are the Problem frame

Like the “Public Education in Crisis” frame, the “Unions are the Problem” frame is nothing new and has been a long standing mantra of Republicans and Right wing politicians. More recently however it has been articulated on the big screen in the 2010 documentary *Waiting for Superman* and 2012 dramatic film *Won't Back Down* both produced by Walden Media and financed by Right wing billionaire Phil Anschutz (Sperling, 2012). At the center of both films teachers unions are cited as the problem and school choice as the solution. Not surprisingly in my interviews when I asked school choice advocates who they would identify as their opponents in educational policy debates, teachers unions were always first on the list followed by “liberal academics.” The response of both Max Pappas of Freedom Works⁵ and Charlene Harr of the Education Policy Institute, a conservative think tank, are illustrative of what I repeatedly heard during the course of my interviews:

The teacher's unions tend to be the biggest opponent as far as school choice goes, it doesn't tend to be parents, they tend to be on our side, especially poor parents, who actually live in the places that their kids have to go to, really bad schools, because of the part of the city they live in. There is really no bigger opponent than the NEA [National Education Association] and local school unions (Max Pappas, Freedom Works).

That's part of the reason that I helped start the Education Policy Institute. We were looking at policy issues from the standpoint of union obstruction and union reaction. . . We started out doing a book almost immediately, which is now out of print probably, called *The NEA and AFT, Teacher Unions in Power and Politics*. (Charlene Harr, Education Policy Institute).

While I was not surprised at the answers given to me by conservative think tank staff when I asked about “opponents in education debates,” I was surprised by the answers given to me by staff at the Center for American Progress, a well-funded liberal/progressive think tank, touted as the “Heritage Foundation of the Left” when it was founded in 2003. In an initial interview conducted in 2005 with Cynthia Brown, Director of Education Policy, she emphasized the bi-partisan nature of education, and noted “I agree with Checker Finn⁶ [President of the conservative Fordham Institute] on a lot of things.” She then added the following:

When you look at the standards based framework for education, some of the initial conceptualization of that did come out of some universities, Stanford and Harvard. Then some of these ideas were adopted by the governors and by the first Bush administration. That is a very big change in how we frame education that happened relatively quickly, but I wouldn't credit think tanks with that. I do think that think tanks are going to become more powerful in education as education groups become less powerful. By that I mean the unions, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of School Boards, the American Association of School Administrators. Basically education is pretty high on the public's agenda, and it is because they are uneasy about whether their children are being prepared for the economy of the future, which they see as a global economy. I don't think that they feel that the education establishment is up to the job (Cynthia Brown, Center for American Progress).

Brown's expectation that think tanks will become more powerful in the future while other educational organizations (including unions) become less powerful is also indicative of a shift in education policy discourse in Washington DC where educational insiders are being supplanted by outside policy "experts" who largely support corporate managerialism of schools. Additionally her comments regarding the global economy and criticism of the "education establishment" are both indicative of the "crisis in education frame" as well as the "human capital frame" discussed earlier. In a follow-up interview with Cynthia Brown's colleague Robin Chait in 2008, I was surprised when she began talking about various anti-union initiatives such as merit based pay which she referred to as "teacher compensation" that the Center for American Progress was working on:

Overall the goal has always been ways to get effective teachers, particularly into high poverty schools, and so we began by exploring teacher compensation as a tool for doing that, and we got a public grant to work on that. We've expanded to other areas including teacher evaluation systems, tenure processes, alternative certification, and we're going to be working on pensions (Robin Chait, Center for American Progress).

I asked if the characterization of the Center for American Progress as the "Heritage Foundation of the Left" was no longer applicable and also how the think tank differentiated itself from other think tanks. She responded by explaining that education policy is different from other issues:

It [the label] is not actually [outdated] but education is a different issue, it is not partisan in the same way, there's disagreement on the Left and the Right, and there's

really a center coalition in favor of education reforms, in favor of differential pay, and charter schools, and national standards and assessments, and so we work with Rick Hess [of the conservative American Enterprise Institute] a lot, we agree with Fordham [conservative think tank] on a number of things. How are we [Center for American Progress] different? You would have to go issue by issue (Robin Chait, Center for American Progress).

The absence of any recognizable liberal or progressive discourse in the comments made by Center for American Progress staff during my interviews in 2005 and 2008 is indicative of a trend I found not only across my interview data, but across think tank and education advocacy organization publications. Several scholars have directly contested the way in which think tanks self-classify, noting that places like the Center for American Progress support neoliberal and neoconservative education policy positions despite identifying as “progressive” (Bracey, 2007; Gabbard, 2007; Welner, 2011). This phenomenon is what Kovacs & Christie (2009) refer to as “spontaneous consent” among various conservative and non-partisan think tanks and advocacy organizations in the U.S. education policy arena. In their analysis of policymaking coalitions DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski & Scott (2007) state that “advocacy coalitions in support of school choice now encompass left and centrist groups as well as those from the New Right” (p. 216). DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn (2009) similarly note that “support for standards, both state-level efforts and national standards, was a big idea that began to unite otherwise rather ideologically different think tanks” (p. 34).

Advocates not Researchers frame

Both academics at university based education policy centers and staff from liberal think tanks have attempted to frame conservative think tank staff as “Advocates not Researchers.” Despite the evidence supporting this claim (Welner, Hinchey, Molnar, & Weitzman, 2010) studies have found that the news media often does not address the credibility of think tank reports, but instead presents think tanks as credible sources on education policy issues regardless of whether they are advocacy oriented or not (Haas, 2004; 2007). In my interviews the issue of whether think tanks produce “research” or simply advocate for a particular ideological policy perspective was widely discussed. As illustrated in an interview that I did with Richard Kahlenberg from the centrist think tank, the Century Foundation, the location of a think tank is thought to be symbolic of whether or not its focus is to exert influence through research or advocacy:

There is a certain symbolism to where the think tank decides to locate. If you are in DuPont Circle, that is Brookings and AEI [American Enterprise Institute], it is considered a little more intellectual. Then if you are on the Hill, which is where Heritage and the Progressive Policy Institute are located, and the Center for National Policy, that is symbolic of trying to be part of the day to day goings on the Hill. Whereas other groups are trying to look a little further down the road and exert their influence by creating big, new ideas that may take 20-30 years to catch on (Richard Kahlenberg, The Century Foundation).

Many think tank staff who I interviewed described what they do as a mix of research and advocacy, and differentiated themselves from purely academic institutions. Many explained that they did more secondary data analysis, or used data and reports produced by other think tanks or education advocacy organizations, and synthesized them into shorter reports that are more accessible to the public and policy makers. Below are statements from members of the libertarian Cato Institute, liberal/progressive Political Research Associates, and centrist Education Sector, which all reflect that advocacy is a component of the “new” type of think tank:

I think we do a mix of research and advocacy. We haven't done as much of what you might consider purely academic research. We aren't doing a lot of econometric analyses and things like that. I think we do something that is a little more accessible, for lack of a better term, to regular folks. Some of our research will use NCES data and other such data. We do research that has immediate policy consequences (Neal McCluskey, Education Policy Analyst, Cato Institute).

We've debated this long and hard, what is our role? We've come up with a way of thinking of ourselves as a useful contributor to the progressive movement in that we can design what is called “action research.” What we mean by that is that it is some interactive result of researchers communicating with the leaders of progressive movements to discover what kind of research those movements need (Pam Chamberline, Political Research Associates).

I guess what we really want to be is neither advocates nor researchers, but the people, if you are a journalist, if you are a policy maker, a parent, and you just want accessible, trustworthy information about education policy, we want to be the people that you come to. Yes we have some views on some things, but we want to put across what is honest in an unbiased fashion (Sara Mead, Senior Research Fellow at the New America Foundation, formerly Policy Analyst at Education Sector).

Criticism of conservative think tanks as pure advocacy machines primarily came from academics who noted that what many think tanks do can simply not be termed research and that representing it in such a way is simply inaccurate. For example, a professor from a university based education policy center described what he sees as the difference between conservative think tank research and academic research:

They are never ever going to say anything that doesn't support their advocacy for charter schools. That's just the way it is. The Heritage Foundation is never ever, ever going to say anything that contradicts a market based solution to anything. That is just not going to happen. (Researcher, university based policy center).

Carol Weiss, who has studied think tanks and is a professor in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, also discussed with me the distinction she sees between conservative think tank research and academic research:

It is certainly true that university based policy centers do different kinds of research. They do research when they don't know the answer. The conservative think tanks know the answer before they start the research. In the universities, the aim is to discover stuff, and to write about it in respected academic journals (Carol Weiss, Harvard Graduate School of Education).

Similarly, Catherine Lugg, a professor at Rutgers Graduate School of Education noted the difference she sees between academics and think tanks in an interview:

Think tanks generate policy briefs that reflect the think tank's ideological lines. They are very consistent and you won't see any surprises. My favorite example is that it will probably be the first frosty Friday in July, before you see an Afro-centric critique of public education coming out of the Heritage Foundation. Think tanks are very narrow in theoretical approach and ideological assumptions (Catherine Lugg, Rutgers University).

In an interview I conducted with Joydeep Roy from the Economic Policy Institute, a progressive think tank in Washington DC with a group of Ph.Ds on staff differentiates what they do as academics from what is done at other think tanks, specifically conservative ones:

People here do research. We are a research think tank. We do have people in publications and communications who try their best to disseminate our research. Some of the think tanks which are very prominent in other respects, for example the Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute, they do not do original work on education.

Irrelevant Academics frame

While the “Advocates not Researchers” frame is primarily limited to the confines of academia, I found the “Irrelevant Academics” frame across conservative, centrist, and liberal think tanks in the Washington DC education policy world. The most vocal proponents of the frame were staff at conservative think tanks who often argued that universities are dominated by liberal ideas and are generally inhospitable places for conservatives. This point is illustrated in an interview I did with David Hogberg of “Education Watch” a division of the Capital Research Center, a conservative think tank:

I think that at least for someone on the conservative side, the nice thing about working at a think tank is that I don't have to worry about university politics, which tend to lean Left and sometimes can lean Left in ways that are authoritarian, and if you have conservative views, it may not be a very hospitable place..... A lot of the research they [academics] do go into obscure journals that get read by 30-40 people who work in the same discipline, or a specialized area in that discipline. It may or may not have any real bearing on the policy world. The primary purpose of it is not to affect the policy world, it is to get tenure. (David Hogberg, Capital Research Center)

Similarly Kirk Johnson of the conservative think tank, the Heritage Foundation, noted to me why he thinks that think tank, rather than academia, is a good fit for someone with conservative views:

I didn't want to get into a tenure rat race where I must publish things in obscure journals about even more obscure topics, just so I can get tenure and some sort of job security. That wasn't the life for me. So therefore think tanks are very appealing in that way. I don't have to worry so much about the bureaucracy that goes along with university life. I don't have to worry, as is the case with many conservatives, about political correctness. Here's where I see the problem with university based research, and where think tanks have a distinct advantage. It is very difficult for the standard university peer review journals to have timeliness and relevance. If you submit something in one year, maybe it will be published in the next year, if not two years. (Kirk Johnson, Heritage Foundation).

There were more general critiques of the university as well. For example, Rick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, discussed with me how academia as a bureaucratic institution is not necessarily open to critical ideas whether they are coming from a politically Right or Left perspective:

Right now the university is caught by a variety of institutional anachronisms. If you want to engage as a public intellectual, the university is an uncomfortable place. Whether you are Right or Left doesn't make a difference. You have to put it through a form, through tendentious jargon. The kinds of Leftists that come to a university are the kinds of Leftists who have no impact on the discourse because they are tendentious and hard to follow. Serious public intellectuals, Right or Left, don't score points within the disciplines. There is an underlying presumption in the universities that sensible people are going to be generally uncomfortable with market mechanisms and sensible people understand the desirability of technocratic regulation. Folks like me, who for whatever reason, our priors kind of line up differently. I think the larger problem is that universities are not hospitable to either entrepreneurial discourse or public discourse (Rick Hess, American Enterprise Institute).

In my interview with Chester Finn, President of the Fordham Institute, a conservative think tank, he was specifically critical of schools of education housed at universities:

In the field of education I have found that schools of education are profoundly limited in their world view and very conventional in their thinking. If you want to get outside of the box, which I do, in a college of education faculty is about the worst place in the world to be. What E.D. Hirsh refers to as the "thought world" is paralyzing. I am one of the lucky people who sort of happily fit into the think tank world to get away from the paralysis of the education school part of the universities (Chester Finn, Fordham Institute)

It wasn't only conservatives who critiqued the relevance of academic research. In discussions I had with several Democratic Party aligned think tank staff, critiques of academic research focused on its lack of timeliness and use of jargon. They emphasized the need for research to be translated into understandable, short documents that can easily be explained to policy makers. As one think tank staff member, "academics and people who are at the university level, frequently their research is full of jargon, statistics and formula that the average person would have some difficulty comprehending." While another noted, "we

are not going to use jargon when we write about an issue. We are going to write about it in plain English that is accessible to people.”

In an interview I conducted with Diane Stark Rentner, from the Center on Education Policy, a centrist advocacy organization, headed by Jack Jennings, a Democrat and former general counsel for the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Education and Labor, she noted the following about academic research:

I sat at a meeting on a group of assessment, where I understood 50% of what they were saying most of the time. This guy got up and said “I can’t believe that they included this in NCLB, didn’t they read our research paper that we wrote one year before they were considering this saying, blah, blah, blah.” I was thinking, I’ve read your stuff and it is incomprehensible. You’ve got to take it to the next step. That is why I think that you see a lot of former Hill staff at the think tanks (Diane Stark Rentner, Center on Education Policy).

Similarly in my discussions with a legislative associate who works for the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce (on the Democratic side), she noted that members of Congress are open to academic research but it is very difficult for the committee to translate the material:

It is always one of our complaints. When researchers come in and want to share something with us, they say, “I don’t understand why you are not reading it.” We say over and over again, it is very hard to translate. I think that is very evident in education. There are a lot of good researchers out there who are doing stuff on teaching kids, how kids learn to read, etc. but it doesn’t get translated into practice (U.S. House of Representatives Legislative Associate).

The “Irrelevant Academics” frame is also largely based on the lack of academic research that appears in major media outlets. Yettick (2009) examined education-related stories in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Education Week* and found that think tanks were disproportionately cited in these newspapers despite the very small amount of research they produce when compared government and universities. In an interview I conducted with Larry Hayes, a retired education reporter who is affiliated with the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado Boulder, he noted the following about the disparity:

One of the things that the media do – in most news rooms, I worked in one, I would imagine that there is this ethos that you have to be objective, impartial, we don't take sides. What happens is that you get this counting of noses instead of weighing. Some idiot stands up, they know nothing but they spout off, and they get the same space and they get the quotes just as much as the sociologist that comes from New York University.

As “universities without students” think tank staff commonly told me about the importance of the media in being considered “relevant” in education policy debates as illustrated in an interview I did with Shaka Mitchell, Director of Policy at the conservative Center for Education Reform:

Today we were in the *Chicago Tribune*, which is sort of a top tier media outlet, so definitely newspapers, be it the *New York Times*, the *Toledo Blade*. We have folks that track all of that to see where we are having some impact. (Shaka Mitchell, Center for Education Reform)

Similarly getting an Op-Ed placed is of particular importance to think tanks as told to me by Neal McCluskey, Education Policy Analyst for the Cato Institute and Max Pappas, Policy Director of Freedom Works:

For Op-Eds, I'll see something in the news that I think is important, especially if it makes me angry, and I'll write an Op-Ed on it. The Op-Eds usually go to the Media Department who will shop them to who they think is best (Neal McCluskey, Cato Institute).

The press guys [at Freedom Works] get to know the contact person somewhat - the *Washington Post* or the *Washington Times*, it is the same Op-Ed page editor that you contact every time to try and get something placed (Max Pappas, Freedom Works).

The “Irrelevant Academics” frame that claims that the majority of academic research is inaccessible, not timely, and inconsequential is largely substantiated by the absence of such research in federal education policy discussions which are currently dominated by neoconservative and neoliberal discourse and framing of the debates. Kovacs (2008) argues that the lack of public intellectuals, inaccessibility to scholars' work, and the worship of pure science undermines the ability of the academy to counter the disinformation and fear mongering of neointellectuals. O'Connor (2007) similarly argues that the rise of

conservative philanthropy has challenged the very premise of applied social research. She notes the following warning given by sociologist Robert Lynd in the early 20th century:

He also issued a warning about the dangers of a social science trapped within the confines of narrow empiricism and overly abstracted theory, and sheltered behind the veil of neutral scholarly detachment. Such a science, he argued, was both all too willing to accept prevailing definitions of social problems and incapable of questioning prevailing social norms (O'Connor, 2007, p. 4)

The prevailing definitions and discourse of current education policy has been narrowly framed by a group of think tanks and advocacy organizations that in name only represent diversity across the political spectrum. In reality the groups that have coalesced around the current neoliberal and neoconservative framework that is guiding education policy have largely gone unchallenged, as dissenting voices have been confined to the academy. Weiss (1977; 1986; 1991) argues that social scientific research has rarely ever had the ability to immediately shift policy debates. In a process she calls “knowledge creep” research findings must be repeated often and represented through multiple channels before policymakers will take them into consideration. However the possibility of that process occurring has been curtailed by the historical retreat of academics engaged in applied research and the ascension of conservative voices.

Conclusion

When I embarked on this research project it came with two surprises: First, the sheer lack of diversity in education policy discourse across almost all think tanks and policy organizations in Washington DC.; second, the overwhelming willingness of conservative think tank staff to speak with me, spend an extensive amount of time with me, and be identified by name in my research. I contrast this with the relative reluctance and unwillingness of individuals at many non-conservative think tanks to be interviewed. I can only speculate at the reasons why this occurred, but it may speak to the greater willingness of conservative think tank staff to convey their message to any outlet, as messaging and framing are a prime focus. It may additionally have to do with the fact that academic-style think tanks are less concerned with the public accessibility and profile of individual staff.

The five frames used in the discussion of the interview data in this research gives insight into the ways in which insiders - think tank “experts” and others in the education policy field - situate themselves in relationship to one another and the dominant education paradigm. The backdrop to these discussions includes a dramatic increase in the number of conservative think tanks focused on education over the past twenty-five years (McDonald, 2008) and a more recent coalition of think tanks and advocacy organizations from divergent ideological positions coalescing around a neoconservative and neoliberal agenda (DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski & Scott, 2007; DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007; Kovacs & Christie, 2008).

The conservative movement in the U.S. has successfully used think tanks as social movement organizations (SMOs) to engage in diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing processes. Think tank staff themselves, attribute the growth in the number of think tanks to the 1983 *A Nation At Risk Report*. The diagnostic framing of the country’s educational system as one “in crisis” problematized public education and fueled a dominant discourse in Washington focused on educational standards and assessment. As Snow & Benford (1988) note, diagnostic framing not only includes identifying a problem, but attributing blame and responsibility for that problem. In the field of education, conservative think tanks and business coalitions blame teachers’ unions, the educational status quo, and the liberal pedagogy of the university for steering the U.S. education system into its current “crisis.” In prognostic framing processes social movement organizations seek to remedy the problem and articulate a solution (Snow & Benford, 1988). Privatization, corporate style management of schools, increased assessment, curtailing the rights of teachers’ unions, educational choice, and charter schools has been the primary remedy suggested by a range of think tanks and advocacy organizations.

However as Snow & Benford (1988) argue, SMOs often disagree on how to frame both the nature of the problem and remedies. This has occurred to varying degrees within the conservative movement’s attempt to influence education policy. As Apple (2004; 2006; 2011) notes, alongside neoliberal market solutions are neoconservative solutions of standards and a common curriculum, as well as religious conservatives concerned about secularization. Just as important is the emergence of “the professionally oriented new middle class who are committed to the ideology and techniques of accountability, measurement, and ‘management’” (Apple, 2004, p. 15). In addition to using diagnostic and prognostic frames,

conservative think tanks have also used motivational frames, which Snow & Benford (1988) describe as a “call to arms” where SMOs construct vocabularies to motivate collective action. In the case of conservative think tanks and education advocacy organizations, their websites as well as commentary in interviews uses the vocabulary of “choice,” “local control,” “market based solutions,” “inefficiency,” and “failure” to elicit outrage. As President Obama enters his second term in office there does not seem to be any significant change in the dominant discourse being used to shape federal education policy in the U.S.

Several scholars have spoken about the need for progressive counter narratives to enter the public sphere and challenge neoliberal discourse (Giroux, 2004; 2011; Lakoff, 2002; 2006, Kovacs, 2008). As Kovacs (2008) argues, this would require progressive scholars to develop infrastructure, translate academic work, amplify the message, and make their work accessible to legislators. A component of the infrastructure needed to reengage scholars requires funding sources willing to support research and policy recommendations that challenge neoliberal and neoconservative discourse. Congressional sanctions and concerns over protecting their tax exempt status led many foundations that formerly supported progressive causes and social change to retreat during the 1970’s and 1980’s. Simultaneously conservative foundations began to invest more heavily in conservative think tanks and advocacy organizations. Rather than donating funding to specific projects, where the proportion of political activity could be more easily regulated, conservative foundations instead gave general operating support to conservative think tanks with the sole purpose of impacting policy (Callahan, 1999; Covington, 1997; Krehely, House and Kernan, 2004; Rich, 2005). In many of my interviews with conservative think tank staff I was told that unions and liberal academics in Schools of Education are the only two things standing in the way of reforming education (in their neoliberal vision). While the Right has directed attacks at organized labor and continues to make inroads into corporatizing the university, their comments nevertheless speak to the potential that these institutions have in engaging the public and reframing the debate.

¹ It should be noted that Germany does not have a single public education system. Instead each state has its own education ministers who set policy.

² Capital Research Center Education Watch (formerly the Maple River Education Coalition). "U.S. Policy Embraces State Planned Economy." www.educationwatch.org (Accessed On: 09/19/06).

³ Congressman George Miller is the Senior Democrat of the U.S. House of Representatives Education and Workforce Committee.

⁴ Senator Edward Kennedy (1932-2009) served on the U.S. Senate’s Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

⁵ Freedom Works is a Right-wing advocacy organization and proponent of school choice that was headed by former U.S. House Majority Leader Dick Armey from 2003-2012.

⁶ Chester Finn is commonly referred to by his nickname “Checker Finn” by those in the U.S. education policy field.

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