

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Jeffrey Henig, *Spin Cycle: How Research is Used in Policy Debates: The Case of Charter Schools*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008, 316 pp. \$US 32.50 hardcover (978-0-87154-339-4)

Charter schools are the marvels of contemporary American education, having gone from virtual obscurity just 15 years ago, to now numbering about 4000 schools, and enlisting US presidents among their supporters. Their aim is to make public education more accountable, innovative, and decentralized. Charter school laws grant funds and operating autonomy to a variety of providers in exchange for their compliance with a distinct mandate, such as serving specific populations, offering unique pedagogies, or meeting various performance indicators. These schools are a lesser phenomenon in Canada, with only a dozen such entities currently operating in Alberta, and having been discussed in policy circles in only a few other provinces. The social forces that make these schools far more popular and controversial in the United States provide the focus of this book.

Jeffrey Henig's thoughtful, engaging, and informed book uses the American debate on charter schools to speak to the wider role of research in democratic deliberation. At local levels, supporters champion these schools as escape routes from ineffective school boards, while opponents see them as diverting scarce funds from needy public schools. At the national level, this debate takes on a deeper ideological tenor. Supporters tout charter schools as emblems of much-needed market incentives in education, and as permanent solutions to the inherent failings of public bureaucracy. Opponents see charter schools as an initial step onto a slippery slope of full-blown privatization that can only exacerbate social inequalities and undermine civic cohesion. Henig's analysis of the political infrastructure that supports this debate, and the role played by research within it, provides worthwhile reading for educational and non-educational scholars, in the United States and Canada alike. Yet the book draws its inspiration from a unique event.

In August 2004, the *New York Times* reported a study sponsored by the American Federation of Teachers which claimed that standardized test scores were lower among charter school students than among those in public schools. This finding was newsworthy because charter schools

are repeatedly touted by their advocates, including the Bush administration, as vehicles for boosting student achievement. Charter school sympathizers were outraged, and soon afterwards, in an unprecedented move, paid \$116,000 to run a full-page counter-ad in the *Times*. Thirty well-known academics, including Harvard's Caroline Hoxby and Paul Peterson, and Nobel laureate James Heckman, rebuked the *NYT* and AFT for uncritically reporting a study that they saw as falling below the standards of proper social science. Their ad gave *Times* readers a crash course in research design, issues of causality, and multivariate controls — fun summer reading! Soon afterwards, Hoxby used other data to claim that average test scores in charter schools were actually higher than in public schools. Later, Peterson reanalyzed the same AFT data but came to the exact opposite conclusion. The ensuing acrimony prompted some journalists to wonder aloud if educational research could ever rise above political partisanship and reach any kind of consensus and definitive conclusions.

This incident and others like it motivated Henig, a political scientist who studies charter schools, to interview 36 fellow researchers, advocates, funders, and journalists in that area. He aimed to uncover why charter school research had gained such a high media profile (at least by academic standards), and how it had become so contentious and adversarial. Henig's interviews convinced him that charter school research may be less of a war-zone than it appears. Some researchers and advocates who took intransigent public stances in their writings and speeches actually held personal views that were less entrenched. In private conversation, they acknowledged contrary empirical evidence, particularly from a body of high quality research that is being conducted "outside the spotlight." This less politicized scholarship, Henig argues, belies the cynical belief that educational researchers can never rise above their rivalries and accumulate a set of widely embraced findings. Specifically, Henig sees research as converging on several findings. Charter schools do not on average boost achievement, but nor do they worsen levels of segregation, partly because they vary widely in type, quality, and innovativeness. The low levels of achievement in some charter schools stems in part from either their newness and/or their high numbers of disadvantaged students (a reverse selection bias). Charter schools can generate high levels of customer satisfaction, but do not appear to spark the kinds of competition that spur local public schools to improve. And, most importantly, socioeconomic background remains a potent predictor of student success in any type of school, charter or public. In sum, these studies offer a more nuanced image of charter schools than that admitted by their political supporters (who are convinced that market forces must

surely boost school performance) or by their detractors (who are certain that markets can only worsen social segregation). Henig believes that these lower-profile studies should be informing public discourse about charter schools, and yet they remain overshadowed by those with bolder claims.

To understand how this has happened, Henig looks to the influences of national-level politics. Rather than being viewed as a pragmatic experiment in decentralized schooling, charters have instead become fodder for an explosive controversy over the virtues of markets versus government. This broader framing was promoted in part by newly arrived “shadow” research communities, which themselves have peculiar origins. Periodically over American history, leftists and conservatives have each expressed their distrust of social research, but in the 1970s, some conservatives decided to take action. Believing that academic research was becoming a tool to justify the expansion of government, these conservatives sought out counterweights that could produce pro-market policy ideas. Wealthy patrons began to finance private sector coalitions, think tanks, and “soft-money” centres in universities, and eventually steered their attention to education. They soon triggered national-level debates about the role of market forces in schooling by publishing high-profile reports on vouchers and charter schools. For Henig, the key issue is that this new milieu can politicize research and undermine its established norms and practices. Private foundations, he notes, may care about research, but they do so in an instrumental fashion that promotes their particular mission. Some bypass peer review procedures, and send their reports straight to the mass media, packaged in catchy sound-bites and stylized conclusions. Henig worries that this environment rewards scholars for audacious conclusions that may in fact be premature, tendentious, or one-sided. Scholars in this milieu who might be otherwise inclined to offer careful, cautious, and qualified findings can now risk accusations of capitulating to the “other side.”

Henig also looks beyond the immediate role of think-tanks to consider a broader tension between the norms of research and the enterprise of democratic politics. Many political actors find standard research practice to be too slow, too removed from immediate issues, and too aware of what is unknown. They want quick closure on complex issues, and are likelier to be swayed by timely anecdotes than by, say, a complex study that does not yield a singular message. Likewise, the media can also help polarize discourse on an issue by shying away from research that offers more ambiguous findings and conclusions, and instead spotlighting those scholars who are willing to take more extreme stances. The typical newspaper reporter on the beat, he notes, will shy away from

intricate issues like research methodology, and will opt instead to present multidimensional debates in a more stylized manner, such as a point-counterpoint clash between adversaries.

Henig is no postmodernist, and sees much harm in any “scientific pluralism” that denies the authority of established research practices and institutions. If research becomes mere politics by other means, he argues, it will be ultimately de-legitimated in the public eye. His experience in the field of charter schools has convinced him that researchers need to uphold guiding norms of integrity, objectivity, and caution. While Henig is aware that policy research can never be entirely free of politics, he refuses to see it as just a manipulated weapon for partisan battle, and instead calls for social research that can contribute to the pursuit of collective rationality and democratic deliberation of public issues. To do so, Henig argues that we must reduce the influence of political bias in research by bolstering institutions such as double-blind peer review, quality journals, and clear standards. Scholars, he urges, need the confidence to defend these slow-tempo practices, and resist the lure to cut corners when tempted by political or monetary incentives.

CJS readers will need to ponder the implications of Henig’s more empirically oriented analyses for our situation north of the border. Canadian educational politics are rather different; our “shadow” research communities are probably smaller, and the menus of choice offered in Canadian schools appear to have defused much of the demand for more drastic initiatives such as charter schools or vouchers. But Canadian sociologists in a variety of specialities would do well to heed his broader prescription to avoid “spin cycles,” and hold the course, engaging in careful, empirically verified research. It is not easy to have our work contribute to sophisticated public debate on social issues, but it is within our grasp.

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