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## *Neoliberal Education Reform's Mouthpiece Education Week's Discourse on Teach for America*

Michelle Gautreaux  
*University of British Columbia*

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the relationship between neoliberalism, corporate education reform in the United States, and the news source Education Week. In order to understand the present context of the US school reform debate and the expansion of Teach for America (TFA), this first part of this paper begins with an analysis of the global education reform movement as part of neoliberalism, the globally dominant economic and political ideology since the 1980's. Within the context of neoliberalism, I focus on the impact of the report A Nation at Risk, the standards movement, and the founding of TFA. I then discuss the media's role in the corporate education reform context and in particular Education Week's historical connection to the neoliberal education agenda in the US. In the second part of this article, I employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine Education Week's coverage of TFA between 2009-2014, to illustrate how power, ideology, marginalization, and social domination are manifest and reinforced in the language and discursive strategies of the paper's columnists. By focusing on "teacher quality" and test score improvements based on problematic studies, Education Week uncritically proclaims the success of TFA teachers and marginalizes the voices of veteran teachers and teachers' unions, ultimately serving as a mouthpiece for corporate education reform in the US.*



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Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Shaul, 2000, p. 34)

Neoliberal corporate educational reform in the United States (U.S.), as part of the wider global education reform movement (GERM), serves to indoctrinate students into accepting and conforming to the present system of neoliberal global capitalism. Along with the rise of neoliberalism as the globally dominant political-economic ideology, GERM arose in the 1980's and has been embraced by many countries throughout the world (Ross & Gibson, 2007a; Sahlberg, 2013). GERM is promoted by private enterprises as well as international organizations, such as the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), who have become instrumental players in the education policy of many countries (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Sahlberg, 2013); the most notable countries include the United Kingdom, Chile, Australia, and the US. According to Pasi Sahlberg, GERM consists of the following five common features: standardization, the creation of “core” subjects, “low-risk” ways to achieve educational and student learning goals, borrowing and implementation of corporate management models to improve education, and test-based accountability policies (para. 5-9). One can observe all five of these corporate educational reform initiatives in the U.S.

Teach for America (TFA) is a central part of the global education reform movement. In the US, TFA has been embraced, promoted, and financially supported by an extensive network of philanthropic institutions, corporations, and policy makers who advocate for outcomes-based privatized corporate educational reforms (Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014). TFA's global version, Teach for All, currently operates in 34 countries, working with teachers and educational policy makers to import the TFA model to their respective countries (Teach for All, 2014). TFA employs the language of empowerment and revolution, proclaiming that its corps members “are helping lead an educational revolution in low-income communities across the country” (Teach for America, 2012, para.6). Although TFA's discourse appears to be well-intentioned, one must critically ask: What sort of revolution are they speaking of? For whom is this revolution? Who benefits and at whose expense?

Discourse cannot be analyzed in isolation, separate from the larger socio-political context in which it is found. Therefore, the first part of this paper begins with an analysis of neoliberalism. Within the context of neoliberalism, I will focus on the impact of the report *A Nation at Risk*, the standards movement, and the founding of TFA. I will discuss the media's role in the education reform context and in particular *Education Week's* history and part in supporting the neoliberal education agenda in the US. In the second part, I employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine *Education Week's* discourse around TFA.

### **Background**

#### *Neoliberal Context of Education*

Any discussion around current issues and trends in US education must include a discussion of global neoliberal capitalism. As many scholars have shown (Apple, 2004, Stedman, 2011, among many others), one of the main roles of schools is to perpetuate the social and

economic organization of society, whereby the interests of capital dictate the goals, directions, and purposes of education.

The rise of neoliberalism as the globally dominant political and economic ideology began in the Reagan and Thatcher era of the 1980's (Hursh, 2008) and is primarily based on the works of the economists Friedrich Von Hayek and Milton Friedman. According to Ross and Gibson (2007b), the basic pillars of neoliberalism are: “the free market, private enterprise, consumer choice, entrepreneurial initiative, [a rejection of the] deleterious effects of government regulation” among others (p. 2). Neoliberalism's strict adherence to the “free” market is based on the assumption that the market is a fair, level playing field that is always more efficient than the state. Such adherence to the free market calls for cuts in public spending, privatization of anything public (such as healthcare, education, telecommunications), and an extreme individualistic spirit, thereby destroying any concept of “the commons” (Ross & Gibson, 2007a; Hursh & Martina, 2004; Screpanti & Zamagni, 2005).

In education, neoliberal policies can be seen in the promotion of school choice, the marketization of educational “services”, accountability through standardized exams, and standards-based assessment, all of which are pillars of the global education reform movement, as described above (Sahlberg, 2013.; Hill & Kumar, 2009; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Hursh 2008). Paradoxically, while neoliberal corporate reformers promote market-based educational initiatives and proclaim disapproval of federal government intervention in education, the current neoliberal policies in education consist of heavy state regulation through mandated high-stakes testing and common core standards. By imposing these common core standards and obliging students to take high-stakes standardized tests, the state intervenes and re-regulates to create and support competition to ensure efficiency and productivity in the global economic race.

According to neoliberal logic, education is understood as serving the demands of global capital with the primary purpose of training future employees of the global workforce (Lipman, 2011; Anijar & Gabbard, 2008). In other words, education is to ensure quality “human capital” for corporations and governments and prepare students for new types of work in an ever changing, volatile global marketplace (Saltman, 2008; Hursh & Martina, 2004; Lipman 2011; Kumar, 2014). These ideas are present in the National Commission for Excellence in Education's (NCEE) report, *A Nation at Risk*, which was published in 1983 and stated:

Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce and are today spreading throughout the world as vigorously as miracle drugs, synthetic fertilizers, and blue jeans did earlier. If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system for the benefit of all ... (NCEE, 1983, (p. 10)

*A Nation at Risk* claimed that the US was losing its competitive advantage in the world as a global economic power because of the unsatisfactory public education system. In addition to transmitting fear to the American public about the “failing” education system in the US, this report conceptualized education as a commodity, equating knowledge and learning with “raw materials” bought and sold in the marketplace. Linking the goals of education to the global economy, this report converted students into instruments for the US government to maintain its international economic and political hegemony (Anijar & Gabbard, 2008). It is important to note that these conceptualizations of education described above are now seen as “common sense” and

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have been naturalized and accepted as “non-ideological” by the American public (Mathison, 2008; Rizvi & Langard, 2010; Fairclough, 1995).

##### *The Standards Movement*

*A Nation at Risk* constructed the narrative of a failing public education system in “crisis” and claimed it had been caused by a decline in standards (Stedman, 2011). The resulting “standards movement” that was incited by the report and has called for a return to “the basics” of teaching, curriculum standards, accountability and testing, is based on two myths. The first myth is that student achievement declined drastically in the 1960's and 70's (as compared to previous decades) and the second is that schools were responsible for this supposed decline in achievement (Stedman, 2011). SAT score declines, as Stedman (2011) clarifies, “where they appeared, were modest and largely due to demographic changes in test-takers. Nor were they caused by an abandonment of traditional pedagogy and standards” (p 3.), as corporate education reformers would like the general American public to believe.

As many scholars have noted, the standards movement has reduced teaching to drilling and test preparation, thereby deskilling and disheartening teachers and numbing the minds of students (Stedman, 2011; Mathison & Ross, 2008). As Stedman (2011) observes, “Testing and grades, not learning, drive instruction” (p. 2) and teachers and students are increasingly alienated from their work. Test scores have become the indicator of whether a student is “learning”, whether a teacher is “doing his/her job”, and whether a school is passing or failing (Mathison, 2008; Anijar & Gabbard, 2008). As Sandra Mathison (2008) points out, the emphasis on standardized test scores in neoliberal education reform has its root in the “... predominant view that we truly know when something valuable exists when it can be objectively measured and statistically manipulated” (p. 165).

Standardized test scores provide us with “hard data” in the form of percentages and statistics, and the general assumption is that those numbers are an accurate measurement of “something valuable”, such as student learning, the quality of one's teaching or the overall quality of a school. Past and present neoliberal education policies in the US link school and teacher quality to test scores. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), used student test scores to determine whether schools were “passing” and making their annual yearly progress, or “failing” and in need of improvement. NCLB's successor, the Race to the Top (RttT) contest, turns education funding into a competition. RttT gives points to states according to student test achievement (among many other factors) and proposes teacher merit pay based on student achievement (which some school districts have adopted). However, as Stedman (2011) argues, any improvements that are made on test scores, although often heralded as great accomplishments and a sign of “teacher effectiveness”, are often short in their duration and a result of test drilling, and therefore do not accurately demonstrate the long term, internalized learning of a student.

The push for higher standards and the emphasis on accountability places the responsibility for student achievement on teachers, administrators and schools. This “one-way accountability” does not take into account circumstances and out of school factors that affect student learning (Berliner, 2006). Corporate education reformers have disregarded and ignored abundant evidence that illustrates how structural poverty and inequality negatively affect student achievement (Berliner, 2006). As Berliner (2006) argues, “And yet when we now have research establishing analogous connections between poverty and educational attainment we ignore them.

Instead we look for other causal mechanisms, like low expectations of teachers, or the quality of teachers' subject matter knowledge, to explain the relationship" (p. 961).

### *Teach for America (TFA)*

The talk on "teacher accountability" is based on the assumption there is a lack of "quality" teachers in US classrooms. Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach for America (TFA), drew on *A Nation at Risk* to make her case for the creation of the program that recruits young graduates from America's top ranked universities to commit two years to teaching in a school that is designated "in need" (de Marrais, Wenner, & Lewis, 2013). Most of these schools are in low-income areas of the nation and struggle to meet their goals on annual standardized exams. Veteran and traditionally certified teachers are blamed for the lack of "quality" in US schools and TFA teachers are touted as "passionate, high-achieving individuals who will do whatever it takes to help their students succeed" (Teach for America, 2012, para 1).

In addition to being blamed, under corporate neoliberal educational reform, veteran and traditionally certified teachers (those who have gone through traditional university certification programs) are de-professionalized and undervalued. As Pitzer (2010) points out, "... urban teachers and their unions [are] seen as unknowledgeable and unable to comment on their experiences in urban schools (while TFAers have the monopoly on knowing "what's best for kids")..." (p. 61). Blaming certain teachers and creating a whole new prototype of the "effective" teacher illustrates neoliberal capitalism's influence in the education reform: if a teacher does not conform to a certain image of what an "effective teacher" should be, he/she is completely expendable and discarded (Goldstein & Beutel, 2008).

### *News Media and Education Week*

With the help of the media, TFA has become a "cultural icon" (Kavanagh & Dunn, 2013). Although many forms of media may claim that their reporting is fair and balanced, critical scholars have shown how the media works to shape public opinion on issues in order to gather support and consent for proposed or existing policies (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Cohen, 2010; Rhoades, 2008). The mainstream corporate media represents the interests of the elite. Through framing, agenda setting and propaganda, the media shapes the public's perception and understanding of education, influencing the public to think of education in terms of capitalist values and thereby accept and support market-based reforms emphasizing competition and choice (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Anderson, 2007; Goldstein, 2011). Which policies are promoted and whose voices are represented in media is a question of social power relations (Cohen, 2010; Van Dijk, 1996). As Fairclough (1995) argues, "Access to the media is most open to socially dominant sectors, both as 'reliable sources' and as 'accessed voices' appearing in represented discourse and interviews" (pp. 62-63).

Self-appointed as the "newspaper of record", *Education Week* was founded in 1981 by the non-profit Editorial Projects in Education (EPE), with the support and funding from the Carnegie Corporation (EPE, 2014). *Education Week* began as a mouthpiece for the Reagan administration's propaganda campaign against public education with *A Nation at Risk*. As *Education Week* writes on its website:

Those concerns, emerging against a backdrop of global competition and economic dislocation, gained rhetorical force and policy momentum with the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. The ensuing waves of K-12 improvement measures known simply

as “the reform movement” helped establish, in turn, *Education Week*’s role as the most trusted source of news and analysis on one of the biggest continuing stories in American society. (EPE, 2014, para. 5).

*Education Week* has shown support for the neoliberal reform movement from its very inception. Indeed, *Education Week* seized the opportunity of the initial stages of the reform movement to carve its space as “the most trusted source of news” in the story of American public education. Establishing this historical connection between *Education Week*, *A Nation at Risk* and neoliberal corporate education reform is helpful for understanding the newspaper’s pro- reform discourse and pro-corporate agenda in its coverage of TFA.

The purpose of this article was to examine the discourse of TFA in *Education Week*, a national education “paper of record.” First, articles were culled from *Education Week* about TFA from the period between 2009 and 2014. Then, I employed Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Van Dijk, 1996) to analyze how power, ideology, marginalization, bias, and social domination were manifested in the language and discursive strategies of *Education Week*’s coverage of TFA. The aim of this study was guided by posing two questions:

1. What is the dominant frame through which TFA and veteran teachers are discussed?
2. What discursive techniques does *Education Week* employ in order to reinforce the corporate neoliberal reform agenda through its coverage of TFA?

## **Methods**

Queries were conducted using the “Teacher Reference Center” database to compile my data set for this paper, searching for all articles including the phrase “Teach for America” in *Education Week* between 2009 and 2014. TFA has become more prominent and influential since 2009, with many states using their Race to the Top competition funds to expand alternative teacher education programs, which the competition promotes. This study was concerned with the media discourse surrounding TFA during this period.

My initial search returned 47 articles in total. I narrowed down this data set by reading through each one, eliminating articles where TFA may have been mentioned but was not the central topic of the article. I analyzed in detail 10 articles by *Education Week* columnists and 14 opinion pieces, for a total of 24 articles. Due to the limitations of space, this paper focuses in detail on three particular articles from *Education Week* columnists that are consistent with the others in their treatment and representation of TFA, and offers a brief overall analysis of the opinion articles.

According to Van Dijk (2001), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power, abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p 352). Power often remains invisible in discourse and dominant ideologies appear as “common sense.” An aim of CDA is to investigate knowledge that is passed off as invisible in discourse, making the tacit knowledge of a communicative event explicit—thus, exposing social inequality, abuse, power, and domination (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Van Dijk, 1996). CDA is

concerned with critically investigating complex social phenomena which necessitates an eclectic “multi-disciplinary and multi-methodical approach” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p 2).

In CDA, discourse is understood as a “form of social practice” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258) and the relationship between discourse and social events is dialectical; discourse shapes social events, and in turn, these social events are shaped by discourse (Fairclough, 2009; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Employing CDA to analyze *Education Week's* discourse of TFA provides a way to analyze social structures and relations in the US, as well as expose how this news source reproduces the hegemonic social domination of corporate education reformers in education and teacher quality discussions in the U.S.

First, I analyzed the headlines of TFA news appearing in *Education Week*. Investigating the headlines of news articles has utility for understanding the main topic of a news article and serves as a summary of what will be discussed overall (Van Dijk, 1998). After analyzing the headlines of each news article, I analyzed the content of each article with a specific focus on the strategic placement of information and quotations, discursive strategies that columnists employed to convey emotions (e.g., sarcasm or authority about a topic) and information and voices that were marginalized from the news articles.

## Results and Discussion

### *TFA in Education Week*

The reporting on TFA in the articles I analyzed generally (but not exclusively) emphasized two points: teacher quality/effectiveness and student test scores. Table 1 shows the articles written by *Education Week* columnists that are framed around teacher quality/effectiveness.

Table 1  
*Articles Linking TFA and Teacher Quality*

Date	Author	Title	Phrases used to describe TFA
2009-06-17	Stephen Sawchuk	N.C. District Lets Go Of Veteran Teachers, But Keeps TFA Hires.	“the teachers are doing well”, “getting good results”, “bringing something to the table” that other teachers are not (quoting Walsh)
2010-08-25	Erik Robelen	New Orleans Schools Seize Post-Katrina Momentum; Devastated District Emerges From Storm's Shadow Changed and Challenged	“a pipeline of talent”
2009-10-14	Anonymous	Mayors Can Be 'Prime Movers' of Urban School Improvement	“To improve principal and teacher quality”
2009-09-16	Stephen Sawchuk	Growth Model; Long criticized for the short duration of its training, Teach For America has invested heavily in the professional development of its teacher corps.	“selective program”; “rapidity with which it refines its professional-development system”; “commitment to helping its recruits exhibit effective teaching practices.”; “commitment to supporting and constantly improving the quality of its training”
2011-02-23	Liana Heitin	At TFA summit, calls for 'revolution'.	“U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan praised TFA for 'changing the face of public education in this nation'.”

*TFA Teacher Quality and Effectiveness Frame*

In all of the above articles written by *Education Week* columnists, TFA teachers were framed as more effective, better performing teachers as compared to veteran and union teachers. Phrases such as “pipeline of talent” and “bringing something to the table” are used to describe TFA teachers. I will focus on the article headlined: “N.C. District Lets Go Of Veteran Teachers, But Keeps TFA Hires: Performance trumps seniority in officials' decisions” because it talks about TFA’s quality and effectiveness in most detail (Sawchuk, 2009, p. 10).

From this headline, the implied conclusion is that veteran teachers are not performing, but the TFA teachers are doing their job. The idea that veteran teachers expect their seniority to automatically guarantee their job security is also suggested. The message is that school districts are “cracking down” on supposedly “ineffective” veteran teachers and that performance is what matters now, not the seniority that many of the veteran teachers had over the TFA teachers.

Turning to the actual article content, Sawchuk (2009) presents the voices of the school board and district administrators as the “official” voices, giving them authority over the teachers’ unions. Veteran teachers’ and teachers’ unions’ claims and arguments are put into question and their voices are squashed and discredited. To illustrate this, I will focus on how Sawchuk treats former National Education Association’s executive director John Wilson’s remark that the North Carolina school district’s firing and hiring practices described in the article were unfair and discriminatory because TFA teachers were kept on and hired while veteran teachers were fired, both in a time of budget cuts.

Firstly, Sawchuk puts the word 'discriminatory' in quotation marks and places a question mark after the word 'practice,' both of which serve to put into question the claim made by Wilson. Secondly, Sawchuk includes the rebuttal arguments of three different individuals supporting the hiring of TFA teachers and the firing of veteran teachers. He includes lengthy quotations, giving their voices a great authority in the article. He does not, however, include any other argument or voice from anyone explaining in more detail the teacher union’s side. In the entire article, there are only two examples where the teachers’ union’s voices are included in the form of a quotation by a representative. However, there are five examples where school board officials and administrators’ voices are included in quotes. Those who represent the dominant voices in neoliberal education reform are quoted more often, at greater length, thereby getting their message across to readers much easier than the teachers’ union, which is marginalized.

Not only does Sawchuk quote the corporate education reformers at greater length in this article, he also gives them the last word, which is done strategically, as the last point made in an article is what the reader is left with. Ending with a quote by Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, the article reads:

If I were a union, I'd be upset, too, but the more productive way to channel that upset is to begin addressing what separates [TFA recruits from other] teachers," Ms. Walsh said. "The unions need to be asking themselves why it is superintendents would even consider a strategy which looks so patently unfair to veteran teachers.... They've got to come to grips with the fact that TFA is clearly bringing something to the table," she said, "that other teachers do not appear to be bringing. (Sawchuk, 2009, para. 24)

Walsh's claim that “she would be upset too” if she were a union displays a false sense of empathy with teachers’ unions. The NEA’s objection to the North Carolina district's hiring and

firing policy is presented as if it were unwarranted, further marginalizing their voice. Walsh claims these practices are justified based on what “TFA is clearly bringing to the table” that veteran teachers are not, a statement which serves to de-professionalize and de-value the work and experience of veteran teachers and unions. Walsh, along with the North Carolina school district officials, hides behind so-called “evidence” and “facts” of teacher performance to justify unjust hiring and firing practices. Under such logic, there aren't unfair hiring and firing policies. The onus is on the teachers' unions to “up their game” so to speak in the grand competition between TFA teachers and veteran/union teachers. In this article, Sawchuk actively reproduces and justifies the power and dominance that neoliberal corporate education reformers have over teachers' unions in the U.S.

*Raising Test Scores as an Indicator of "Effective" Teaching*

The second point that was salient throughout several of the articles was TFA teachers' ability to raise test scores. The table below includes the articles framed around TFA and raising test scores. Discourse around performance dominates these articles and TFA is described using words like “outperform”, “outshine”, “holding their own.” TFA teachers' “outperformance” of veteran teachers is highlighted in three of the five articles (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Articles Linking TFA Teachers and Test Scores*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Phrases used to describe TFA</b>
August 10, 2011	Stephen Sawchuk	Teacher Characteristics and Student Achievement: Evidence from Teach for America.	“Aspects of Teach For America’s selection process are linked to student-achievement gains”, “ the study found that students who had TFA teachers who scored higher on its measures of achievement, leadership, and perseverance”
October 26, 2011	Jaclyn Zubrzycki	Teacher Training: "2011 Report Card on the Effectiveness of Teacher Training Programs"	“outperform veteran teachers”, “outshone traditional college programs and alternative-certification programs statewide.”
2013-04-24	Stephen Sawchuk	Teacher Quality: "Evaluation of Teach For America in Texas Schools"	“holding their own”, “outperforming other novice teachers and veteran teachers”, “positive effect size for TFA teachers”
2013-09-18	Stephen Sawchuk	TFA Educators Found to Boost Math Learning	“capable secondary math teachers”, “helped students learn more”, “outperformed experienced teachers”, “more effective”, “policy lightening rod”, “improved student achievement more than other teachers”
2014-03-12	Stephen Sawchuk	Teach For America Targets Retention, Longer Preparation; Move signals shift in group's direction	“tend to do about as well as other novice teachers”, “its preparation efforts remain controversial”

The article that discusses TFA teachers' performance in most detail is from September 18, 2013. The headline reads: "TFA Teachers Found to Boost Secondary Math Learning" (Sawchuk, 2013, p.1). Embedded in this headline is the commonly held, taken for granted assumption by the general public that learning can be equated with a test score.

Sawchuk (2013) refers to a US Department of Education financed study carried out by Mathematica Policy Research to make the claim "evidence builds that TFA produces capable secondary math teachers" (para.1) and uses discursive strategies to justify this claim. Firstly, he refers to the study as "federally financed" in order to give the study more legitimacy and hide the interests of neoliberal corporate education reform that are at its core. Technically the study was federally financed and Sawchuk explains that Mathematica carried out the study, but he fails to mention or question the fact that Mathematica has carried out research on TFA teacher effectiveness for more than ten years and each report publishes results praising the effectiveness of TFA corps members. Both TFA and the Department of Education, as part of the corporate education reform initiative, pre-pay for studies from the same research institute that will publish results supporting their agenda. Thus, the fact that a study is federally financed does not necessarily mean that it is more reliable or independent from corporate interests.

The second strategy is to refer to the research as "rigorous". Using words like "rigorous" gives the illusion that the report is based on conclusive, well-grounded research. However, as Philip Kovacs and Erica Slate-Young's (2013) analysis of the TFA "research" illustrates, the studies on TFA teacher effectiveness are problematic, laden with methodological errors, and many times not peer reviewed.

Kovacs & Slate-Young's (2013) analysis is especially important for understanding *Education Week's* reporting on TFA, since the *Education Week* columnists refer to those same TFA research reports to support their claims. Columnists such as Stephen Sawchuk and Jaclyn Zubrzycki do not investigate TFA's claims with scrutiny nor do they critically engage with what they report. They merely accept and simply reproduce the prepackaged "study" already published by TFA, sometimes giving the news article the same name as the TFA report it is referencing. *Education Week* therefore serves as a mouthpiece for TFA, ultimately converting its educational news reporting into pure propaganda. Such manipulative and substandard reporting directly contradicts *Education Week's* mission of "raising the level of understanding and discourse on critical issues in American education" (EPE, 2014, para 12).

Sawchuk (2013) further misleads readers by providing numbers and statistics without sufficient technical and contextual detail which are crucial to understand what the results of the study actually indicate. He does not mention any socioeconomic factors that are essential in analyzing and interpreting the test results. On a similar note, he states that "TFA teachers improved student achievement by .07 of an effect size more than other teachers", but does not explain what that means and how it translates to "2 1/2 more months of student learning" (para 13). Julian Vasquez Heilig and Su Jin Yez (2013), who studied the actual Mathematica report on which this article is based, argue that there are several problems with the way statistics were reported in the study as well as some fundamental errors. In response to the claim about the .07 effect size, Vasquez Heilig and Jin Yez (2013) write:

While 2.6 months sounds impressive from an educational policy perspective, it may be more appropriate to compare this impact with the impact of other educational reforms. For example, class-size reduction was found—in the most

conservative meta-analysis to date—to have an impact of 0.20 standard deviations, which Dr. Eric Hanushek has described as being “relatively small.” In other words, class-size reduction has 286% more impact than TFA. (p. 6)

As illustrated, the claims made in this report attempt to make the apparent “gains” seem much more impressive than they may in fact be.

Sawchuk (2013) also uses the rhetoric of performance to put TFA teachers against traditionally certified teachers, emphasizing the better performance of the latter. In this article he writes, “Secondary math teachers who enter the profession through TFA helped their students learn more in mathematics than colleagues who entered teaching through a less-selective fast-track program or a traditional, university-based program (Sawchuk, 2013, para. 2). He does not provide any explanation of how the claim that TFA teachers “helped their students learn more in mathematics than colleagues who entered teaching through a less-selective fast-track program or a traditional, university-based program” is demonstrated. Rather, he employs vague language to make overarching claims that are often based on fundamentally flawed studies, as previously pointed out by Kovacs and Slate-Young (2013) and Heilig and Jez (2014).

The excerpt below illustrates how Sawchuk (2013) employs the rhetoric of performance to undermine teacher preparation programs:

Still, the evidence of its teachers' effects is among the most convincing to date of TFA's impact on secondary math. It also stands in stark contrast to the teacher-preparation field at large: Most, if not all, programs lack experimental evidence of their impact. (para.7)

Sawchuk shows his support of the corporate education agenda by claiming that “...Most, if not all, [teacher education] programs lack experimental evidence of their impact”. This delegitimizes university teacher education programs and sends the message that teachers who completed teacher education programs at universities are not to be as trusted in the classroom and their preparation is questionable. It also suggests that university teacher education programs are not concerned about or actively partaking in research related to the quality of their graduates' work in the classroom. By delegitimizing teacher education programs, Sawchuk supports the corporate education reform agenda's effort to push towards alternative teacher certification programs.

The third article I will discuss is headlined “Teacher training; 2011 Report card on the effectiveness of teacher training programs” and is an example of a “sound bite” article, a short article that makes strong claims about TFA but is not long enough to allow any development or explanation of the evidence. This is another discursive strategy that *Education Week* employs to praise TFA. As part of the “report roundup” section of that edition of *Education Week*, it claims:

The report, produced by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, shows which of the state's teacher programs tend to produce teachers who boost students' test scores and which do not. Teach for America in Memphis and Nashville outshone traditional college programs and alternative-certification programs statewide. Nine other training programs were cited as yielding less effective teachers. The state report card includes data only on the 35 percent of teachers in state-tested subjects and grades. (Zubrzycki, 2011, p. 5)

Zubrzycki (2011) does not provide any details as to how the above claims are supported with evidence. In addition, Zubrzycki mentions the fact that “the state report card includes data only on

the 35 percent of teachers in state-tested subjects and grades” in a nonchalant way when it is really a major limitation of the study. As Kovacs & Slate-Young (2013) argue, the results of this report are “problematic at best” (p. 72). Few of the results are actually statistically significant due to “the small numbers of teachers in each comparison group and those small comparison groups being measured against state averages”, which tremendously reduces the “statistical power of the analysis” (p. 71).

### *Critiques of TFA Consigned to Blogs and Opinion Articles*

After analyzing the articles on TFA written by *Education Week* columnists, I moved on to the commentaries, to investigate if any diversity of opinion was present that perhaps portrayed TFA in a different way than the reporting columnists. My findings and analysis regarding *Education Week's* representation of TFA align with Susan Ohanian's (2013) argument that *Education Week* relegates any critical discussions surrounding important or controversial issues to its blogs (which do not appear in the print edition) and/or the opinion sections of its print edition. As McChesney (2004) argues, article placement in a newspaper is well thought out and purposefully located, not randomly placed. The closer an article is to the front page, the more importance it is deemed to have and the more likely it will be read. The closer it is pushed to the back, the more marginalized it becomes. Similarly, Ohanian (2013) points out how *Education Week* only advertises the blog posts of its own reporters, thereby marginalizing the voices of critical bloggers.

In addition to the 10 articles written by *Education Week* columnists, I analyzed 14 opinion articles written by various guest authors about TFA between 2009-2014. The majority of these opinion pieces were published in a special issue of *Education Week*, “Teach for America 20, Perspectives on TFA in its 20th year,” from March 16, 2011. Out of the 14 opinion articles, two were critical and unsupportive of TFA and five supported TFA wholeheartedly. Seven articles were mixed in their opinions of TFA, highlighting some of the organization's problems as well as its strengths. These seven articles offered soft criticisms and in general called for a collaborative approach between “alternative” and “traditional” routes to teacher preparation. For example, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) calls for TFA and the AFT to “work together to unite the extraordinary success”(2011, para. 7).

The most recent (and most critical) opinion article was from February 5, 2014. It was written by Ann Evans de Bernard, a retired principal who currently works as an adjunct professor of Education. Evans de Bernard (2014) argued:

The current "reform movement" does nothing more than highlight purported deficits and use them to justify paying already-wealthy people to fix the problems that they themselves identified and named... “we do not need programs like Teach For America that consider our cities third-world countries where the missionary spirit can thrive. (para. 8).

Evans de Bernard is the only person to criticize the corporate reform movement as a whole and reference the larger social issues and problems that are outside the school in her critique. The rest of the opinion articles discuss TFA in terms of teacher quality and professional development, mirroring the framing set forth by the media.

The other critical opinion piece, titled “With Teach for America, who needs experience?”, written by Liz Wisniewski (2009), is a letter to the editor in response to the

*Education Week* story I discussed above about the school district in North Carolina's decision to lay off veteran teachers and hire TFA teachers. In her article, Wisniewski employs sarcasm to make her point: “Let these energetic and smart young folks be our nation's teachers—they are just as effective, and cheaper” (para. 2).

Instead of using numbers and statistics to make their claim, the opinion articles that wholeheartedly supported TFA appeal to readers' emotions through personal narratives. For example, Steve Zimmer (2011), a TFA alumni and current teacher in Los Angeles, ends his article titled “The students” by saying, “What matters is that, through TFA, we all met Konisha and Juan. And we believe with every ounce of our hearts and our souls that they can change this world” (para. 7).

All of the arguments, whether in favor or against TFA, are made with the assumption that the TFA “debate” is primarily about teacher quality and teacher preparation routes, thereby failing to see how TFA is part of a larger global neoliberal education reform movement. When the conversation is focused on only one aspect and fails to make the connection to a much larger issue and global trend of which it is a part, teachers, administrators, parents and education policymakers are missing the bigger picture. As Berliner (2006) and Stedman (2011), as well as many other scholars have argued, school reform cannot be separated from larger socio-political and economic contexts, both local and domestic, as well as global.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, I have attempted to show *Education Week's* discourse surrounding TFA as part of a larger context of orchestrated defaming of American public education guiding by neoliberal capitalist principles to have education serve the demands of the global economy. The corporate education reform movement, with TFA as a central player, falsely proclaims a call to justice and an end to educational inequity. Corporate education reform policymakers ignore the role of structural and systemic factors that, in large part, cause the educational inequity in US education, such as underfunding and poverty, among others. Instead, teachers, teachers' unions and university teacher education programs are blamed. *Education Week* columnists legitimize the blaming and give authority to TFA and pro-corporate education reformers.

The conversations on both sides- those who support corporate education reform and those who are opposed- have one thing in common: they both fail to place school in its larger global, social, economic, and political context. Corporate neoliberal education reform is not unique to the US. As Rich Gibson (2008) argues, “Anyone interested in confronting our conditions today must follow Hegel's dictum: 'The truth is in the whole.' The whole is capitalism” (para 58). In other words, our understanding of and approach to education reform must be grounded in an understanding of global capitalism and what it means to live in a globalized capitalist society. When we talk about education, we must talk about how education functions in a capitalist society. This will help us to understand the trends that we currently see in the global corporate education reform movement, such as the role that education has been given to serve the global economy and produce “human capital”. Understanding the “whole” of capitalism is also necessary when analyzing how media in a capitalist society works to represent the interests of the corporate elite, marginalize dissent and shape the public's perception into accepting capitalist values.

The possibility of working towards Freire's notion of education as the practice of freedom can seem daunting and not very hopeful, especially as neoliberal policies in education have been accepted and naturalized by a large portion of the American public and the global education reform movement does not appear to be losing any momentum. However, there *is* an alternative to the current global education reform movement, contrary to what we are being told by policy makers and corporate education reformers. Education does not have to serve the demands of the global economy. As Freire (1998) reminds educators in *Pedagogy of Freedom*, "...we know ourselves to be *conditioned* but not *determined* (author's original italics). It means recognizing that History is time filled with possibility and not inexorably determined- that the future is *problematic* and not already decided, fatalistically (author's original italics p 26).

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### **Author**

Michelle Gautreaux is a PhD student in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia.

## Appendix A

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