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Problems, Politics, and Possibilities

Imagining a Teach for America that Really is for America

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Abstract

Teach for America (TFA) charges its recruits with an important mission: ensure that children in low-income communities receive an excellent education. Underlying this charge is the assumption that educational inequity is a problem that can be solved by putting the right teacher in every classroom. A former TFA corps member and an education professor combine memoir and theory to argue that TFA starts the wrong conversation about inequality and demeans traditional teachers in the process. We identify problematic aspects of TFA's "savior model" by analyzing some of the organization's practices and values. We also describe how TFA is rooted in neoliberal ideology and supported (both financially and politically) by the corporate education reform movement. Together, these initiatives hide the complex causes of inequality and contribute little to its resolution. We propose changes, recommending TFA better prepare corps members, cooperatively partner with existing teachers, and increase resources for schools.



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For the past three decades, critics have painted the landscape of American education as consistently bleak and dismal (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983); for many on both the left and the right, Teach for America (TFA) has been held up for the last two decades as one of the few bright spots on that landscape. David Labaree, a scholar of education reform, writes of TFA:

This is a remarkable success story, which has earned the organization kudos from a large array of leaders in politics, business, and philanthropy. Op-ed columnists like Thomas Friedman (2009) and David Brooks (2008) at the *New York Times* love it as a force for school reform, foundation heads and corporate executives admire its mix of social mission and efficient administration, and President Barack Obama is only the latest of a string of presidents to sing its praises. (Labaree, 2010, p. 48)

While we, the authors of this essay, are fully aware of the risks of looking directly into the sun, our goal is to interrogate and complicate the “brightness” that surrounds Teach for America (TFA). Despite TFA’s growing popularity, we argue here that the program’s mission, values, practices, and politics are inherently and profoundly problematic.

No one disputes the existence of a profound gap between the educational attainment of high-income and low-income Americans. Students in low-income communities are much more likely to attend schools characterized by low student achievement and high teacher migration (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2009). Racial inequality in educational attainment is also undisputed (Kao & Thompson 2003); many identify tax policies and district boundaries as significant contributors to the maintenance and exacerbation of this inequality (Kozol, 1991; Muijs et al., 2009; Walters, 2001). For decades, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners across disciplines and ideological locations have called attention to and examined these academic achievement gaps. However, there is profound disagreement about the origins of the gaps as well as how best to address them or evaluate improvement on narrowing them (Wiggin 2007). TFA represents an increasingly popular response that has garnered the enthusiastic and growing support of individuals, organizations, corporations, foundations, and government officials. Rather than being enthusiastic about TFA, though, we are troubled by many aspects of the organization itself, as well as by the sources of support that it receives.

One of us (Kathleen Greene) is a teacher educator, and the other (Erinn Brooks) is a doctoral student in Sociology and former Teach for America (TFA) Corps Member (CM). Over the years, the two of us have had countless discussions about TFA, beginning when Erinn was an undergraduate considering TFA and Kathy was her professor, continuing throughout the two years Erinn was a TFA CM, and, most recently, since Erinn has been a doctoral student. This essay is the outcome of those conversations. Experience is an important way of knowing (Collins, 2000), and we incorporate Erinn’s reflections on her time as a CM to provide context for our broader critique of TFA. We ground this critique in evidence from TFA’s values and practices, as well as evidence from the education and sociology literatures. For ease of reading, Erinn’s reflections are italicized.

In this essay, we critique TFA in two major ways. In the first section, we identify problems with the organization, arguing that TFA relies on a “savior model” that misidentifies the causes of, and solutions to, educational inequity. The second section contains an examination of TFA’s politics. We identify connections between TFA, neoliberalism, and corporate education reform. These alliances start the wrong conversation about educational inequity by hiding its complex causes. In the third and final section, we suggest possibilities for TFA, recommending a number of potential changes.

Problems

Mission and Structure

According to TFA, its mission involves “growing the movement of leaders who work to ensure that kids growing up in poverty get an excellent education” (Teach For America [TFA], 2013a). This means working toward TFA founder Wendy Kopp’s well-publicized vision that “one day, all children in our nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education” (Kopp, 2011, p. 12). TFA describes its organization’s approach as twofold. In the short term, TFA recruits and trains CMs who commit to teaching for at least two years in low-income communities. In the long term, TFA connects and supports alumni, some of whom remain educators, others of whom move on to administrative or policymaking positions within the education sphere, and still others who enter professional fields, including academia, politics, law, and medicine¹. TFA’s overarching goal is to create a movement of leaders—individuals with hands-on teaching experience, who will work towards closing the achievement gap in whatever capacity their future careers allow (Farr & TFA, 2010).

TFA and its champions frame educational inequity and the achievement gap as problems that can be solved by raising the quality of teachers and their motivation to be excellent. Throughout the paper, we refer to this framing as a “savior model” because it suggests—sometimes explicitly and other times implicitly—that TFA can solve educational inequity by sending its corps members to “fix” schools around the country. Other scholars have offered similar criticisms, positing that TFA sends in “missionaries” (Darling-Hammond, 1994, p. 24) for a “‘saving’ scenario” (Veltri, 2010, p. 173). In his Foreword to TFA’s book, *Teaching as Leadership* (Farr and TFA, 2010), Jason Kamras provides an example of the savior model:

This inequity, which has given rise to the indefensible achievement gap, is the greatest injustice facing our nation today...Of course, there are countless factors that influence student learning and achievement that are beyond the control of the teacher...But excellent teachers can make a dramatic difference in children’s lives. In fact, I believe that teachers are the locus of power in the fight to close the achievement gap. (p. xi-xii)

¹ We see a third, unstated but central aspect of TFA’s organization: attracting public and private funds, in concert with capturing the attention and political support of wealthy individuals and organizations. These partners have economic, political and ideological interests in influencing the course of American education, as well as the power to do so. We discuss this aspect in detail later in the paper.

This excerpt suggests that ineffective teachers are the primary reason that the achievement gap exists². Just a few pages into the Introduction to *Teaching as Leadership*, Farr describes two teachers. One is ordinary, but the other is outstanding. Although it is not said outright, the reader gets the distinct impression that the outstanding teacher is a TFA teacher, and the ordinary teacher a “traditional” one.

In what follows, we describe how TFA’s practices (i.e., recruitment, training and placement) and values (i.e., working continuously, respect and humility) support a savior model. For each practice and value, we describe TFA’s policies using Erinn’s reflections as a jumping off point for discussion.

Recruitment and Getting Started

For its corps, TFA selects “the best and the brightest”: those individuals who demonstrate a record of strong achievement, leadership ability, perseverance in the face of challenges, problem solving skills, and exemplary planning and organizational ability (TFA, 2013b). Journalists note the increasing number of CMs who graduate from elite institutions, boast impressive resumes and experiences, and elect to defer opportunities in business and finance to join TFA (Eidler, 2013; Winerip, 2010). A TFA employee acknowledges that the organization “‘tends to focus the bulk of its attention and outreach on select institutions,’ because ‘there is a gathering of really high-performing students at Ivy Leagues and other prestigious schools.’” (Schwarz & Wang, 2013). In 2011, for example, 12% of Ivy League seniors applied to TFA. That year, the acceptance rate for applicants was only 14%—less than the acceptance rate into most universities (TFA, 2011).

TFA has increased its recruitment of CMs from diverse backgrounds. Kopp (2012b) boasted that, in the last two years, TFA has almost doubled the number of African American and Latino corps members³. 35% of CMs now come from low-income families, and 23% are first-generation college graduates. TFA expresses pride in the socioeconomic and racial diversity of the CMs that it recruits, presenting those individuals as especially qualified to teach students with shared backgrounds, since they started in similar circumstances but managed to achieve at high levels (Kopp, 2012b; TFA, 2013c).

I entered TFA as a first-generation college graduate from a working-class background, and I was excited to be placed in my preferred city. The city was far from home, but I had saved a modest amount, secured a TFA transitional loan, and convinced a car dealership that I really would have a job soon. When the time came, I flew to TFA orientation with a few bags, planning to return for my big move following training. I soon learned of all that needed to be accomplished logistically in order to become a teacher. I had to obtain fingerprints and background checks, take more state exams, file for

² Although TFA comments on the many factors that influence the gap (TFA, 2013), we will argue the organization’s structure and approach reinforce the idea that ineffective teachers are to blame. In addition, many politicians (e.g., Arne Duncan, see McNeil, 2012) and philanthropists (e.g., Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2013) have gotten behind solutions that emphasize teacher quality.

³ According to TFA (2013c), 13% of 2012 CMs were African American and 10% were Latino.

credentials, and enroll in a teaching certification program through TFA's partner university. I remember the financial strain and emotional turmoil that emerged with each step, since I was promised a job in the fall but lacked any way to cover such expenses in the short term. In particular, I remember feeling confusion and anxiety as I signed up for university credentialing courses that had a price tag higher than my student loan balance from four years of private college.

Even when I finished my training, I was faced with finding and furnishing an apartment—not to mention turning on the water and electricity—a full two months before my first paycheck would arrive. During my first month of teaching, I regularly bought groceries with a credit card and lesson planned without a table or chair. My first payday was a memorable one that started with excitement and relief but ended in a lot of bill-paying and very little security. It occurred to me early on that TFA was not designed with someone from a working-class background—someone like me—in mind.

I've noticed that some of my most salient memories are of moments when systems of inequality and privilege became momentarily visible. In hindsight, my experience in TFA was no exception. I remember in great detail those interactions that communicated to me the ways in which I was a just little bit different from the "typical" CM. My new car was a big deal and also a big debt. My unfurnished apartment was nothing to be proud of. Participating in TFA at all was a financially disastrous decision. That said, I benefited from more class privilege than many of the individuals in my hometown. It remains difficult for me to fathom how someone worse off could make it through the first few months of TFA, much less two years.

TFA upholds its savior model even as it recruits and accepts more racially and socioeconomically diverse CMs. The organization praises diverse CMs as exceptional individuals who have achieved success in the face of challenges and can help their students do the same (Kopp, 2012b; TFA, 2013c). Thus, the organization draws from and reinforces the achievement ideology, or the steadfast American belief that anyone can realize social mobility and economic success through hard work. This ideology includes extraordinary, rags-to-riches stories, which suggest that, if one person accomplishes the dream, then all may. In reality, this rationale maintains inequality by making opportunities appear equal, and outcomes seem fair, when they are not (MacLeod, 2009). Although TFA criticizes unequal opportunities, the organization also suggests that hard work and excellent teachers are sufficient to ensure that "poverty is not destiny" (Farr & TFA 2010; TFA, 2013d). We agree with others (e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Marsh, 2011), who have written that substantially more is necessary to provide real opportunities for social mobility. Embracing the achievement ideology distracts from the complex, structural bases of racial and class inequality, to which we later return.

Training and Placement

TFA's "Teaching as Leadership Framework" (TAL) guides CM training and support. This framework lays out specific expectations for goal setting, planning, instruction, and improvement. It also directs CMs to invest in students and families and to work continuously to overcome challenges (TFA, 2013e). The organization describes TAL this way: "Through years of studying the habits, beliefs, and actions of corps members and other teachers who have been successful at putting their students on a

different life path, we have realized that what makes them similar is their choice to employ principles used by great leaders in all circumstances” (TFA, 2013e).

In addition to sharing TFA’s required qualities and elite college experiences, TFA’s careful and systematic training practices lead to CMs entering their placement schools with similar attitudes, goals, and pedagogies. According to TFA’s description of teacher training, CMs are taught that they are leaders in a pressing, urgent, TFA-led movement to end educational inequity—a movement that begins with putting excellent teachers in every classroom (TFA, 2013a). TFA charges CMs with making an immediate impact in schools by promoting and measuring skill acquisition, and by motivating students to work hard enough to achieve 1.5 years of academic growth in a single school year (TFA, 2013m).

In the typical training experience, CMs take and pass the state exams required for their teaching assignments (TFA, 2013f). They read TFA-assigned materials on teaching methods and TAL and attend a one-week “Induction” in their placement cities. Then, during a five-week “Institute,” CMs teach summer school in small groups. They receive instruction and feedback from TFA coaches, as well as non-TFA veteran teachers. This is still an atypical student-teaching experience though, since CMs are in the classroom for a very short time and have limited contact with their mentors. At summer’s end, CMs start teaching at placement schools across the country (TFA, 2013e).

CMs are hired without the same preparation, certifications, and credentials as career teachers. As the TFA website states,

Corps members don’t have to have studied education prior to applying to the corps. In fact, most corps members did not. But all corps members must receive a teaching credential before they’re hired by a school and they must be considered “highly qualified” according to state-specific requirements. Since most corps members haven’t completed a traditional course of study in education before teaching, they’re considered “non-traditional” teachers in most states. The credentials they receive are often referred to as “alternative” certificates or licenses. (TFA, 2013f)

CMs secure their positions via TFA-coordinated placement fairs or individual interviews. In order to maintain positive relationships between TFA and its partner schools, TFA requires that CMs accept the first positions that they are offered (TFA, 2013n).

Although I prepared for an assignment at the elementary school level, I was hired as a ninth-grade math teacher. While relatively good at math and certainly willing to teach it, I had little training in the pedagogy or content of this area. Further, I worked at a charter school that asked me to plan my own curriculum but provided no books for my students and only a single textbook for me. I spent dozens of hours planning with my program director, a TFA advisor who was trained and experienced in mathematics education. The first few months of school were an absolute whirlwind, as I tried to figure out how to manage a classroom and develop rapport with my students, all while re-teaching myself Algebra before planning each day’s lesson. Ultimately, I taught for a full year and a half before becoming credentialed to teach secondary mathematics. I was able to remain a teacher during that time because, believing that I was a good teacher, my

school's principal helped me navigate district and state bureaucracies to stay on as a "long-term substitute" until I became certified.

When I interacted with the other math teachers at my school, I felt terribly under qualified. They knew a lot about math, were intrigued by it, and wanted to share that passion with their students. I cared a lot about teaching but perceived math as pretty dull and struggled to find ways to help my students develop a taste for it. During my university coursework, my instructor talked about Algebra teachers laying the foundation for calculus, and I knew that I simply lacked the knowledge and skills to do this. Despite TFA's rhetoric about putting excellent teachers in every classroom, I felt like I was doing a disservice to the students in mine. Did TFA make a mistake when they let me in? Was I just teaching the wrong subject? Or did other CMs feel this way, too?

Despite TFA's encouragement of CMs to think of themselves as saviors, we agree with others that CMs are underprepared to teach children in already underserved communities (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2011). First, as Erinn's case illustrates, schools sometimes relax or lower their standards in order to hire TFA recruits (see also Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003). TFA's clout can provide some flexibility for CMs to bypass procedures required for traditionally prepared teachers. According to Linda Darling-Hammond (2005), TFA "is often seen as an existence proof for the argument that bright, committed individuals can teach successfully without formal teacher education training" (p. 2). Second, existing research suggests that CMs are less effective than traditionally trained teachers of the same cohort (Darling-Hammond, 2011), and that their retention rates are lower (Heilig and Jez, 2010)⁴.

Working Continuously

The ideals and instructions expressed in TAL teach CMs what it means to be an excellent teacher and, by extension, what it means to fall short of that standard. For example, TFA introduces the "Work Continuously to Overcome Challenges" principle this way: "Our most successful teachers go above and beyond the traditional role of 'teacher' and do whatever it takes to help their students reach their big goals. They refuse to allow inevitable challenges to become roadblocks and work hard to overcome them so that their students can succeed" (TFA, 2013e). On its website, TFA profiles Maurice Thomas as an exemplar of working continuously:

Because he is obsessed with his students' college trajectory, Maurice Thomas (Metro Atlanta Corps '08) has made it his personal mission to do everything humanly possible to help them get on this path. He offers tutoring during lunch hour and after school every day except for Tuesday, which is reserved

⁴ This is a hotly debated point. TFA (2011b) argues that research speaks favorably of CM performance in the classroom. However, this is typically measured on the basis of standardized test scores (e.g., Dobbie, 2011; Noell & Gansle, 2009). We believe this is a poor—and sometimes completely invalid—way to measure both teacher performance and student achievement (e.g., Harris et al., 2011; McNeil, 2000). In addition, the savior model implies that all CMs should be dramatically and consistently outperforming traditionally trained teachers; they are not.

for faculty conferences. Maurice also runs a Saturday school from 8 a.m. until noon. (TFA, 2013e)

With recurring examples similar to this one, TFA fosters a sense of urgency regarding the achievement gap. The organization exerts intense pressure on CMs and encourages them to do whatever it takes to produce particular results.

During my two years in the corps, TFA seemed to praise CMs for demonstrating increasingly intense forms of perseverance. Our monthly professional development workshops were engaging and supportive, but they were also filled with CMs boasting about who was leading what after-school activity and even who had slept the least. I was always annoyed by these displays, but I also felt self-conscious when I had nothing to report on our periodic surveys. I wasn't a department head, I hadn't started a club, I didn't plan to join a board; I was just tired.

Throughout my first year of teaching, I arrived at school before 7am, taught throughout the day (often without a prep period), tutored after school a few days per week, and planned and graded when I arrived home in the evening. I averaged 5-6 hours of sleep per night. There was no taking a day off or showing a movie in order to catch up, not only because my placement school frowned upon these things, but also because I felt painfully guilty for placing my own needs above those of my students.

Despite all my hard work, I was heartbroken to confront a number of challenges that passion and persistence could not overcome. How could I remediate ninth graders who struggled with fifth-grade math skills? How could I support children who had witnessed the deaths of loved ones in neighborhood shootings, or who had moved across the country without their loved ones following Hurricane Katrina? How could I influence the kids who were kicked out of my charter school? How could I support students with serious learning disabilities, when our special education staff was stretched so thin? Even for those situations that I was able to mitigate, I seriously doubted whether I was altering my students' life paths, as my TFA mission and my own desire for social justice demanded.

In my experience, the "Work Continuously" principle meant that CMs and I should make ourselves completely available to students and their families. We were encouraged to give out our cell phone numbers, arrive early to school and stay late, and meet with parents whenever and wherever they were available. Even prior to any face-to-face contact with TFA, my corps read numerous examples of teachers who would walk home with students in order to build rapport with kids and communicate with parents. These above-and-beyond norms sent the message that teachers who do anything less are selling their students short and perpetuating the achievement gap.

The TAL principle of working continuously makes at least two problematic assumptions that contribute to the savior model. First, it assumes that every challenge *can be overcome* and can be overcome *by a teacher*. Second, it assumes that traditional teachers fail to demonstrate such tenacity. The hype surrounding TFA as a solution to educational inequity implies that non-TFA teachers do *not* want desperately or work tirelessly to educate the nation's children. In addition, TFA and others publish books that

promote TFA's savior model, encouraging career teachers to follow CMs' example in maintaining a pace and intensity that are not sustainable (e.g., Farr and TFA, 2010).

Respect and Humility

One of TFA's expressed core values, that is, one of the central ideas that guides its decisions and actions, is "respect and humility." On TFA's website, under the heading, "Respect and Humility," is this statement:

We value the strengths, experiences, and perspectives of others, and we recognize our own limitations. We are committed to partnering effectively with families, schools, and communities to ensure that our work advances the broader good for all children. (TFA, 2013h)

This beautifully written statement might ring false for TFA's harshest critics (e.g., Rubenstein, 2013; Ravitch, 2013; Hartman, 2011). However, like the system of delicate semantics, pressures, and unwritten rules that perpetuate race and class inequalities in the contemporary United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), what TFA is providing here is reassuring rhetoric that actually does little in the way of facilitating authentic respect and humility.

I learned about the core value "respect and humility" during Induction week, and I was surprised when a staff member mentioned that CMs typically do not receive warm receptions at their placement schools; in fact, some teachers even resent their presence. The appropriate response, we were told, was to cooperate and be respectful when those behaviors seemed appropriate but mostly just focus on the task at hand—ensuring our students set big goals and achieved big gains.

Throughout my time with TFA, staff consistently exhorted my corps to exercise respect for the students, families, and communities we encountered. We learned a number of ways to incorporate culturally relevant materials, from both TFA instruction and university coursework. For example, the "hook" was a standard component of our lesson plan. It was a short activity, example, or illustration designed to capture the interest of our students. By definition, any hook had to be culturally relevant and age-appropriate.

*As a beginning CM, I envisioned the traditional teacher who did not appreciate TFA as someone who was old, stuck in her ways, resistant to reform, and certainly not as eager to close the achievement gap as I. By the time this stereotypical image hit the big screen in *Waiting for Superman* (Birtel, Chilcott, & Guggenheim, 2010). I knew real teachers who were apprehensive about TFA but not the least bit reflected in such caricatures. Instead, the career teachers at my school were passionate, hard-working, and skilled. They cared about the kids they taught, as well as the broader issues of inequality that undergirded their work. These teachers were also excellent mentors and collaborators. In seeking their guidance, though, I felt less excited about my TFA affiliation, much less calling attention to the fact that I was leading (or perhaps trying to lead) a classroom after only five weeks of training in a craft that they had studied and worked years to master.*

I realize in hindsight what my broader respect-and-humility training lacked. In spite of TFA's commitment "to partnering effectively with families, schools, and

communities” (TFA, 2013h), I was not trained to partner with traditional teachers who did not support “the movement.” We did not discuss what it would mean to respect schools, unions, and teachers, nor what their perspectives were and how they had developed. What I did come to understand is that I was learning the one best way to teach. And by extension, I had to believe that this could be learned in five weeks, given that smart, motivated people were the ones “picking up the trade.”

TFA’s core value of respect and humility is not enough to counter the implicit arrogance of the savior model. The preparation and deployment of CMs sets the stage for adversarial relationships between TFA affiliates and career teachers. The organization draws media attention to the dire state of American schools, emphasizes the potential impact of individual teachers, then independently recruits and trains “the best and the brightest” (TFA, 2013o) and places them in schools that teach the most disadvantaged students⁵. Rather than pausing to ask experienced, traditionally trained teachers what challenges they face, why their schools might be low performing, and what wisdom they can offer, TFA sends in ambitious first-year teachers to save public education. Although TFA sometimes incorporates traditionally trained teachers on its staff (TFA, 2013i), consults them or their work in creating training materials (Farr & TFA, 2010), and praises them for their dedication (TFA, 2013e), the organization’s actions send a different message—one that is antithetical to the qualities of cooperation, humility, and support for career teachers. Our narrative would look very different if the organization required CMs to establish mentorships with career teachers, extended support and professional development opportunities to teachers outside the corps, or sent a portion of their significant resources to placement schools and their communities. Actions like these would frame CMs as eager to learn and help in the fight against educational inequity, rather than eager to win it on their own terms and by any means necessary.

Politics

TFA frames educational inequity as the most important problem facing the United States, as manifested by achievement gaps among the country’s poor children and children of color. TFA claims its mission is “to build the movement to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting the nation’s most promising future leaders in the effort” (Farr and TFA, 2010). However, there is persuasive evidence that educational inequity and the achievement gap have increased rather than decreased during the two decades of TFA’s existence, even where TFA’s presence has been greatest (e.g., Harris & Herrington 2006; Heilig & Jez, 2010). Despite this lack of progress, TFA and its spokespersons have acquired many powerful friends and relatively few enemies. Donna Foote (2008), in her book, *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach for America*, claims that this is no accident. Foote writes that Wendy Kopp, “has tried to

⁵ TFA’s mission centers on placing CMs in schools predominated by low-income students, and many of these students are also children of color. However, an increasing proportion of CMs are now being placed in high-performing and extremely well-resourced charter schools (Strauss, 2012). While such charter schools have been accused of “creaming” students (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002), their populations still experience disadvantage compared to middle- and upper-class populations. Placing inexperienced teachers in these schools may still be problematic.

avoid direct confrontation with the powers that be,” and describes TFA as “politically nimble” (Foote, p. 35).

TFA alumnus Gary Rubenstein published a letter with a similar message, criticizing TFA for maintaining “a party line.” In a written public response, Kopp acknowledges and provides a rationale for her neutrality: “In fact, in the past I’ve chosen not to ‘take sides’ or communicate my thinking on certain issues precisely because opinion varied so widely within our community. I felt responsible for creating a big tent” (Strauss, 2013).

TFA has worked astutely and successfully to maintain its neutrality and to resist being identified with political or ideological positions in the way it conceptualizes and approaches educational reform. Yet, the organization unapologetically characterizes itself as an agent of reform (TFA, 2013k). There is an ideological consistency among the researchers who support TFA’s philosophy, the actions of charter school leaders who recruit primarily from TFA’s ranks, and the goals of the private and public groups who fund TFA. All of these, as well as the organization’s activities, language, and sponsorship are consonant with neoliberal corporate education reform.

In his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey (2005) presents neoliberalism as:

theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices... if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. (p. 2)

Within this neoliberal ideology, a particular approach to education reform has emerged that vaunts personal opportunity to work hard and achieve success, encourages entrepreneurial solutions, and is suspicious of anything constraining individual choices (Kumashiro, 2012). This approach, often labeled corporate education reform, is founded on a prevailing and well-reinforced common sense that American public education is failing miserably and putting the “nation at risk” (Haas, 2008). Larry Cuban (2012), an established educational scholar, summarizes the opposition to corporate education reform:

Critics of the contemporary school reform agenda of test-based accountability, evaluating and paying teachers on the basis of test scores, more charter schools, and Common Core Standards point to the stakeholders in the civic, philanthropic, and business led coalition (e.g., Walton, Gates, and Broad foundations, hedge fund managers, mayors who have taken over city schools, testing companies) that have linked education and the economy since the 1980s. These critics argue that this reform agenda seeks to turn schools into market-driven organizations where consumer choice reigns and

teaching and learning are commodities to be packaged and delivered. (Cuban, 2012, para 1)

Although Cuban (2012) disagrees with the idea that corporate education reform represents a conspiracy, arguing that the efforts are nowhere near that concerted, we agree with scholars such as Philip Kovacs who see the corporate education reform movement as a “revolution [that] is the evolving product of over 30 years worth of well-planned, well-funded, concentrated action” (Kovacs, 2010, p. 229). And, even if it is not (technically) a conspiracy, Dave Hill (2010) asserts, and we agree, that,

the architects of neoliberal and neoconservative policies know very well who they are. Nobody is denying capitalist class consciousness. They are rich. They are powerful. And they are transnational as well as national. They exercise (contested) control over the lives of worker-laborers and worker-subjects. If there is one class that does not lack class consciousness, *the subjective appreciation of its common interest, and its relationship within the means of production to other social classes*, it is the capitalist class...And they govern in their own interests, not just in education reform, but also in enriching and empowering themselves—while disempowering and impoverishing others—the (white and black and other minority, male and female) working class. (xv-xvi)

TFA has been successful at generating a sparkling public presence, and even more successful at garnering financial support. A glance at TFA’s list of donors (foundations and individuals) reveals not only how well stocked are TFA’s coffers, but also an interesting combination of funders. According to TFA (2013l), as of January 2012, the Walton Family Foundation had donated more than \$50 million to TFA, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had donated between \$10 million and \$25 million. U.S. taxpayers are also generous funders to TFA; in 2010 alone, the federal government made grants of over \$90 million to the organization (see Table 1). These figures do not include financial support of TFA’s spinoff organizations, such as KIPP schools, which were founded by two TFA alumni (Mathews, 2009), and whose current CEO is married to Wendy Kopp (Dillon, 2008). The Walton Family Foundation has donated more than \$60 million to KIPP, and the Gates Foundation has contributed between \$5 million and \$10 million.

TABLE 1
Selected Federal Government TFA Grants or Contracts in 2010

Agency	Program	Nonfederal Money	Federal Money
Department of Education	Investing in Innovation Scale Up Grants	\$10,000,000	\$50,000,000
Department of Education	Fund for the Improvement of Education	\$0	\$18,000,000
Corporation for National & Community Service	AmeriCorps Fixed Amount Grant	\$0	\$9,648,366
Corporation for National & Community Service	AmeriCorps Education Award Program	\$0	\$11,401,362
National Aeronautics & Space Administration		\$0	\$3,000,000

Source: Cohen, 2013

What unites philanthropic organizations such as the Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the United States government with TFA? Kenneth Saltman (2010) differentiates what he calls venture philanthropy from old-fashioned philanthropy:

[Venture philanthropy] has a strategic aim of “leveraging” private money to influence public schooling...The central agenda is to transform public education in the United States into a market through for-profit and nonprofit charter schools, vouchers, and “scholarship” tax credits for private schooling or “neovouchers.” (p. 3)

Venture philanthropy, Saltman (2010) argues, is not what it appears:

What is largely represented in both mass media and educational policy literature as generosity, care, and goodwill is nothing short of a coordinated effort to destroy public education. That is, what appears as generosity and goodwill is in reality its diametrical opposite: the destruction of universal provision for public education, the foundation for deepening educational inequality rather than an attempt to remedy it, the production of a system primarily designed to benefit investors at the expense of the poorest citizens, and a worsening of the racial and gendered inequality that currently structures public schooling. (p. 34).

Those espousing neoliberal corporate education reform frame education inequity as reducible to a measurement—the achievement gap—and they frame that gap as solvable by individuals, for example, through the relentless efforts of effective teachers (i.e., CM “saviors”). By identifying the relentless efforts of effective teachers as the solution, TFA diverts attention from the complex roots of educational inequity. Of course, teachers play an important role in students’ education. Research shows that they can either facilitate or inhibit students’ growth (Hallinan, 2008; Rist, 1970). But while staffing every classroom with an excellent teacher is an important, worthy goal (that career teachers and unions share, we note), theoretical and empirical evidence strongly suggests the efforts of an excellent teacher alone will not be sufficient to close the achievement gap, much less to overcome educational inequity (Marsh, 2011).

Residential segregation based on class and race, combined with decentralized funding formulas in education, work together to produce and maintain severe resource disparities between poor and middle-class schools (Kozol, 1991; Ryan, 2010), as well as between Black and white districts (Education Trust, 2010; Massey, 2007). Extra demands for parent involvement and participation in extracurricular activities mean that schools are intrinsically better equipped to educate middle- and upper-class children, whose parents are themselves prepared by their resources and backgrounds to satisfy those extra demands for involvement (Lareau, 2011). Outside of the educational realm, a widening wealth gap and a disintegrating social safety net mean that increasing proportions of low-income and even middle-class children face barriers in receiving adequate health care and child care, proper nutrition, safe shelter, and reliable transportation (Massey, 2007).

More discouraging still is the bleak labor market that awaits even those children who beat the “achievement gap” (e.g., Lin & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2013; Massey, 2007). Bowles and Gintis (2011) theorize a “correspondence principle,” analyzing an association between one’s socioeconomic status and schooling quality. They reveal the economic reality that there simply are not enough high-paying, autonomous jobs to employ a nation full of successful students. Scholars support this basic premise and theorize the mechanisms involved. For example, when opportunities expand to broader cross-sections of the population, elites mobilize to increase education and credentialing requirements, in order to restrict entry into high-status positions (Parkin, 1979; Walters, 2000).

CMs certainly grapple with the complexities of educational inequity described here. We are not arguing, in other words, that they do not think or that they do not care. However, the rhetoric that “poverty is not destiny” (TFA, 2013d) provides an easy talking point for politicians and business leaders, who stand to profit from the platform issue of educational inequity if they can target teachers and unions as the source of the system’s ills. This has the result of disempowering public workers, while allowing the more covert and complex causes of the achievement gap to go unaddressed.

Possibilities

We are confident that every aspect of TFA is intentional, and we harbor serious doubts about the extent to which it can change. However, because the organization has gained tremendous influence, we would like to propose a few changes that might be beneficial for TFA, CMs, the students they teach, and the schools in which those students

are taught. We would advocate that TFA be restructured in a way that maintains the dignity of those who serve, but strengthens American education through (1) more diversified preparation of corps members; (2) cooperative partnerships with existing teachers; and (3) increased support for placement schools.

First, TFA should recruit graduates who demonstrate a commitment to learn and serve and then train them with these ends in mind. The organization could select for many of the same qualities it already seeks, but add humility and collaboration skills, as well as an ability to grapple with complexity and ambiguity. CMs should be encouraged to resist easy answers and demonstrate a willingness to “speak truth to power.” Their preparation to teach can then help them develop these characteristics and skills.

In addition to studying the Social Foundations of Educational Foundations, we would like to see CMs study Sociology of Education and Anthropology of Education. In the Sociology class, CMs would develop an understanding of the social and institutional structures affecting education. CMs would examine the notion of meritocracy, the achievement ideology, and the complex functions of public education in the United States. Importantly, CMs would learn to analyze critically how they came to be in the positions that they are in, as well as how the students and communities that they will serve came to be in the positions that *they* are in. While many CMs would probably describe themselves as “lucky” or “fortunate,” this class should create a critical consciousness that helps CMs identify the opportunity structures and educational mechanisms that contribute enormously to their own good fortune.

In the anthropology class, CMs would study closely their placement school, including its neighborhood and population. The purpose of this would be to help the CMs develop a more intimate understanding of the micro-cultures in which they will be working. An ethnographic analysis, for example, could involve shadowing school personnel and rotating through the various jobs at a school (e.g., spending a week each working with the school custodian, in the breakfast and lunch room, and with the nurse and school counselor or psychologist). Recruits could also shadow one student or one family at a time, sitting with them in classrooms, going with them to lunch, accompanying them on the playground, and visiting them at home.

Second, TFA currently puts CMs into the role of saviors, appealing to their noble impulses and successfully using these to recruit and motivate. We recommend that, instead, TFA introduce an apprenticeship model, which would place CMs in true positions of learning from and with experienced teachers. An apprenticeship model represents a more humble approach that would encourage CMs to learn and serve, rather than teach and lead. CMs may very well emerge as leaders in schools, districts, and communities, but these are positions to be developed and earned, rather than assigned. As an apprentice, a CM could engage in a year-long mentorship at the placement school and even participate in an extended homestay with a career teacher. In addition, CMs should also study TFA classrooms specifically to observe and analyze the educational costs of test-driven instruction. This would help facilitate individual and organizational reflexivity, and it would also start a conversation about different approaches to instruction, as well as their underlying philosophies.

An apprenticeship model would increase the required length of service to at least three years with the aim of developing excellent, longer-term teachers. As such, it might eliminate the program's current allure for applicants who, while interested in teaching and concerned about the achievement gap, use their service as a resume-building stepping stone to other career pursuits. Creating allies for educational equity in a variety of spheres is a noble goal, but not one that should be pursued at the expense of real children in real classrooms.

Third and finally, the re-imagined TFA should also allocate resources and programming to CM placement schools. This would decrease the divisiveness between TFA affiliates and career teachers by eliminating the notion that a CM or two can "save" any school or community, or "fix" the teaching profession. Instead, TFA could offer concrete support to existing schools and communities, *while* addressing the complex roots of educational inequity. Since TFA is already an Americorps program, it might tap this relationship to create after-school activities, parent education initiatives, technology upgrades, or healthcare services at each school where a CM is placed. Existing teachers have long begged for these types of resources and programs, often sacrificing their own time and money to provide them. Ambitious CMs and career teachers do the best they can to lead extra-curricular activities, organize field trips, provide academic tutoring, and develop parent relationships, but no single teacher can accomplish these feats alone. By making a significant change to its structure and approach, TFA could not only lend support where schools need it most, but also send the message that "it takes a village" to close the achievement gap and guarantee an excellent education for every child. It is also worth noting that the exemplary charter schools touted by corporate reform advocates (e.g., Tough, 2008) boast not only excellent teachers, but also student- and community-support initiatives like the ones listed here (Bancroft, 2008).

Teaching requires knowledge, skills and dispositions that are developed over time, with the help of capable and experienced mentors. Teachers are decision makers and become so through scaffolded opportunities for risk-taking and constructive feedback. They are curriculum designers, who create, modify, enact and evaluate educative experiences for children. Teachers are members of professional communities of practice, working in conjunction and solidarity with other teachers and community members. If TFA were to view teachers (CMs as well as career teachers) as professionals, it could implement structural changes that make the most of the fact that professionals become more expert over time.

Conclusion

TFA's financial, political, and ideological foundations contribute to a weakening of the educational system that remains when its teachers leave after their two-year "mission trips." We have argued that TFA selects capable and high-achieving CMs, who come to occupy positions in public schools that are strikingly different from those of career teachers. TFA offers disingenuous forms of respect and humility, suggests that an excellent teacher can overcome any challenge, and measures that teacher's success in terms of quantitative data alone (i.e., standardized test results). TFA's savior model not only demeans traditional teachers, but also reinforces the achievement ideology while glossing over the structural roots of inequality. This occurs because of the organization's

structure and approach.

Further, TFA has attracted wealthy and powerful allies in business, government, and foundations, due at least in part to its explicit and implicit identification with neoliberal education reformers. TFA diverts financial support from public schools, and it reinforces the belief that failure to close the gap in academic achievement is attributable to the inadequacy of (traditional) teachers, including how they are prepared (teacher education), how they perform (teacher accountability), and how their work is protected (teacher unions). While CMs are making a sincere effort to close the achievement gap, neoliberal education reformers and venture philanthropists have ideological and financial interest in choosing to criticize teachers rather than tackling problems like poverty, segregation, and labor market inequality.

We question neither the sincerity nor the commitment of TFA CMs and staff; we believe that these individuals want to make a positive difference, and they give of themselves generously to do so. Nevertheless, sending underprepared, enthusiastic, and elite college graduates—many of whom are privileged by race and class—into underserved schools represents a shortsighted and inadequate solution to a persistent and complex structural problem. We hope that an alternative reform effort rooted in true respect and humility may be just as appealing to the illustrious graduates of the prestigious colleges and universities that TFA has been attracting for over two decades.

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