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The Political Spectacle of Recruiting the “Best and the Brightest”

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Abstract

This study examines the practices utilized by TFA from its inception in 1990 to create its brand and how these practices have transformed TFA into a cultural icon within the national landscape of teacher education. Well-funded through both philanthropic foundations, corporate sponsorships, and federal monies, TFA’s use of its organizational and political networks, as well as the media, has enabled it to position itself discursively as a leader in the preparation of teachers in the U.S, resulting not only in transforming state and national discussions about teacher preparation, but in establishing a network of elites with a particular ideology of schooling for poor students.



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“We cannot substitute spectacle for politics.”

—President Barack Obama, 2nd Inaugural Address, 2013

“I have come to distinguish between the generally hard-working, smart, and idealistic TFA classroom teachers, and a national organization that is as sophisticated, slippery, and media savvy as any group I have ever written about.”

— Barbara Miner, *Rethinking Schools*, 2010

Each year, there are approximately 8,000 Teach For America (TFA) corps members (CMs) teaching PK-12 students in Title I schools. Often referred to in the media as “the best and the brightest” (Eidler, 2013; Huston, 2012; Riley, 2013), Teach For America recruits, selects, trains, and manages recent college graduates with varying degrees from top universities and then places them as two-year teachers in urban and rural schools. Though only one in ten CMs have considered teaching prior to being accepted and joining TFA (Farr, 2010), with only 5 weeks of summer training, corps members become teachers for thousands of students. TFA’s philosophy and business model has become popular with and is heralded by politicians, corporations, and privatization advocates; it suggests that *anyone* can teach without prior preparation in pedagogy, curriculum, child development, learning theories, or pedagogical content knowledge. While these stakeholders argue that TFA should be a major part of urban school reform, we suggest that this model of under-preparation would be problematic for other important careers and should not be acceptable for teachers of poor, Black, and Brown students who have been historically underserved. For example, would we choose to take a child to a doctor or dentist who only had 5 weeks of training (Kovacs, 2011a)? If we know someone excelled in college-level chemistry or history, should we automatically assume that he knows how to teach 5-year-olds important reading fundamentals like phonemic or phonological awareness or know how to engage fifth graders in learning fractions? Such rhetoric, though seemingly lacking in common sense, is disseminated by TFA and its supporters, and, in this article, we explicate two ways—the neoliberal political spectacle and master narratives—that such rhetoric is advanced, perpetuated, and accepted.

Facing challenging hiring conditions, including difficulties with teacher recruitment and retention, many urban and rural districts have turned to alternative initiatives like TFA. As a result, districts in 34 states pay fees of \$2,000 to \$7,000 per CM, plus salaries, benefits, and professional development. The majority are placed in urban schools that are traditionally hard-to-staff with quality educators. Though the media and some state and district policymakers frame the use of TFA as a response to a “teacher shortage,” research has continually showed that the number of qualified teachers is not the problem, rather it is that those teachers flock to suburban, high-paying districts, not to urban and rural centers (Dunn, 2013; Ingersoll, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). “We all know there’s not really a teacher shortage,” according to Darling-Hammond (2012), “Just a shortage of people willing to work for low salaries in poor working conditions.” Though the recent recession led to budget shortfalls, school closings, furloughs, and teacher layoffs around the country, TFA contracts were still being considered, fulfilled, and increased in Washington, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Texas, and Washington, D.C., among others. For example, in Huntsville, Alabama, although the district laid off over 300 certified teachers within two years, board members still considered a \$1.5 million contract that would bring in TFA corps members to fill vacant spots (Kovacs, 2011a, 2011b). And in a metropolitan district in Georgia, as credentialed educators were laid off in the hundreds, Teach

For America corps members and other alternatively-prepared educators were protected because of their special contract, even though they had less experience or lower evaluation scores (Dunn, 2013).

The demand for “highly qualified” teachers under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) catapulted alternative routes to teaching as a considerable source of “highly qualified” teachers for urban schools, where alternatively prepared teachers are now most likely to teach (Humphrey, Weschler, & Hough, 2008; Natriello & Zumwalt, 1993; Zumwalt & Craig, 2008). Though TFA and supporters of alternative recruitment use this discourse of “highly qualified” to assert that their “best and brightest” can reframe the school reform agenda by closing the achievement gap, critics like Darling-Hammond (2007) are displeased with the narrow definition of “highly qualified” and do not approve of under-qualified educators being placed in the classrooms of the neediest students. The 9th Circuit Court ruling on *Renee v Duncan* (2010) agrees with Darling-Hammond and determined that: (1) states and districts will no longer be able to concentrate underprepared and non certified educators like TFA corps members in low-income, high minority schools; (2) non-certified educators like TFA CMs will not be labeled as “highly qualified” teachers in communications with parents or reports to the public or politicians; and (3) districts and states will be held accountable for failing to supply certified teachers for students in low income and high minority schools.

It is within this context of staffing challenges, alternative recruitment models, and debates about what it means to be a qualified teacher that TFA corps members enter urban schools. Though other researchers have examined their experiences and pedagogy, here, we focus on the political environment and phenomena that make their continued recruitment and placement possible. First, we share the way that TFA’s success is evidence of the neoliberal political spectacle. Then, we explain the “common sense” master narratives that allow this model to flourish without question as a viable recruitment option for urban school reform. We argue that the confluence of political spectacle and master narratives, as well as their acceptance by stakeholders and policymakers, continues to make TFA a successful, yet problematic, source of recruitment for urban schools.

Theoretical Framework

We approach this analysis of TFA from three overlapping theoretical frames: neoliberalism, political spectacle, and master narratives. Neoliberalism is an economic theory that supports private over public interests and values the free market and competition. Previous research has analyzed other education reforms, including charters, vouchers, and high-stakes testing, through the lens of neoliberalism (e.g. Apple, 2000; Giroux, 2004; Saltman & Gabard, 2003). We argue that the neoliberal notion of valuing profit over people (Chomsky, 1999) can also be applied to the continued recruitment and placement of under-qualified urban teachers.

A second theoretical perspective that informs our argument is political spectacle, a theory originating in political science and developed by Edelman (1970). Edelman posits that politics and policies have two parts: the “onstage” rhetoric about reform that the public sees and the “backstage” reality that the general public may never see. He argues that the public rhetoric is turned into a “spectacle” by politicians and media, and that the spectacle serves a symbolic purpose of accomplishing a political goal that may not be as dire as the rhetoric makes it out to

be. Neoliberals are not alone in their use of the political spectacle; what changes, rather, as new political ideologies take hold are the purposes of the spectacle and the resulting political goals. For neoliberals, their use of the political spectacle is with the aim of advancing private interests and free markets.

Many researchers have demonstrated the creation of political spectacle surrounding education reform and policies on a national, state, and local level (Anderson, 2007; Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Cohen, 1980; Edelman, 1988, 1970; Koyama & Bartlett, 2011; Smith, 2004; Wright, 2005). Edelman (1988) provides many examples of how the media help create political spectacle, but also how educators' voices and perspectives have been omitted from school reform discourse. Berliner and Biddle (1995) present the historical memory of the present day rhetoric of failing schools that stems from the 1983 Nation at Risk report. Koyama and Bartlett (2011) explore the political spectacle surrounding bilingual education policy in New York City schools serving Latino immigrants, while Wright (2005) illuminates the political spectacle that ensconced Arizona Proposition 203. Most significantly for our study, Smith (2004) elaborates upon Edelman's theories through her analysis of initiatives like charter schools, and her categorization of political spectacle's most common components informs our analysis in the findings section below. Kovacs and Christie (2008) write about a phenomenon similar to political spectacle, what they call "political science abuse," wrought by neoliberal and neoconservative organizations like Education Trust that "perpetuate[s] discourses and narratives that stand in opposition to democratic school alternatives, ultimately reducing the likelihood that democratic school reform will ever take place" (p. 12). We argue that, when organizations like TFA take advantage of and exacerbate the political spectacle, they, too, stand in opposition to educational equity by diverting public attention away from the systemic failures of urban schools.

Finally, we utilize the theory of master narrative and evaluate the influence and use of these narratives in education policy and reform. A master narrative (Lyotard, 1984) is a story that tells people how to perform and act. It portrays common sense ways of understanding experiences that reflect and influence our understanding of power and society (Aldridge, 2006). These master narratives often use characters who act in familiar ways, so they are rarely challenged or deeply examined (McAdams, 1993). We will return to a discussion of the neoliberal political spectacle and master narratives after the review of literature.

Review of Literature

There is a dearth of independent research on Teach For America, which is disconcerting considering the federal dollars and educational outcomes that are at stake. Much of the research we do have is mixed and inconclusive. Some research has been conducted by TFA alumnae or affiliates and subsequently touted by TFA's central office (Farr, 2010; Kovacs, 2011). As Kovacs (2011) argues, "At best the empirical evidence is mixed, at worst, it is damning. Given that the organization has been around for 20 years, if it was so good, why aren't there dozens of peer-reviewed reports proving it?" We recognize that this special issue will contain in-depth reviews of TFA literature, so here we have focused on a few independent, empirical research studies.

Independent, empirical research with no methodological flaws is severely lacking for a recruitment program that is educating millions of students in our country. Only a handful of studies include data on Teach For America, with only a few in peer-reviewed journals (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin & Heilig, 2005; Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Veltri, 2008). As a whole, studies find the students of uncertified TFA teachers do significantly less well in reading than students of new, certified teachers, with the negative effects most pronounced in elementary grades. After TFA teachers obtain more preparation and certification (usually by the end of their second year), their students generally do as well as those of other teachers and sometimes better in mathematics. However, most TFA teachers leave after 2 or 3 years (more than 80% are gone after three years), so few students realize the benefits of this training and experience. Of additional concern is the number of CMs who are either not enrolled in any certification course, although it is required to do so, or are meeting the “enrollment in certification” requirement by taking a minimum of certification courses over their two years.

Looking across the studies, TFA comparisons are favorable only when the comparison group is even less prepared than the TFA recruits. For instance, two studies present evidence showing TFA corps members’ students achieved comparable or better gains in learning when compared to similarly experienced teachers in similar schools (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001; Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004). However, the comparison group of teachers in both studies is disproportionately untrained and uncertified. Neither investigation explicitly looks at TFA teachers compared with teachers who had traditional preparation and certification, or controlled for student, teacher, and school variables. When Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, and Heilig (2005) use the same six-year data set from Raymond et. al’s study and controlled for these variables and prior achievement, they find that certified teachers consistently produced significantly stronger student achievement gains than uncertified teachers, including those from TFA. Uncertified TFA teachers had significant negative effects on student achievement for five of six tests. Kovacs (2011b) reviews twelve “studies” that were available on the Teach for America website and argues that TFA’s claim that “a large and growing body of independent research shows that Teach For America corps members make as much of an impact on student achievement as veteran teachers” is false, based both on the studies they had commissioned and shared on their website, and on other studies by non-TFA researchers that were not included on the website.

These studies, as well as research commissioned by TFA, reflect a consistent focus on large scale, quantitative data. Such studies, while vital to understanding the scope and impact of TFA from a macro level, fail to examine the behind-the-scene machinations and policies of TFA. Our analysis, as a case study of TFA through the lens of political spectacle and master narrative theories, helps to complete the picture of the complicated connections between district policies, TFA, and their missions. Finally, we hope that our analysis presents a finer level of granularity through which scholars, policymakers, teachers, and others may better understand the phenomenon of TFA.

Neoliberal Ideology and Teacher Recruitment

Teacher recruitment and reform is located at the forefront of the neoliberal education agenda. Weiner (2007) identifies four ways that neoliberalism is reflected in ongoing debates and

challenges to teacher recruitment and preparation: (1) privatization, such as the proliferation of for-profit teacher training and staffing programs, charter schools, and vouchers; (2) fragmentation of control and oversight of schools; (3) use of standardized tests to determine teacher quality and effectiveness; and (4) the weakening of teacher unions as a leader in the dialogue on teacher quality. Sleeter (2008) also sees the influence of the neoliberal agenda in the ways that teacher education has become redefined as solely a means to increase student test scores. Several of these examples of the neoliberal agenda within teacher education will be further discussed and linked to Teach For America's role below.

TFA recruitment strategies are evidence of Sleeter (2008) and Weiner's (2007) typologies of neoliberal education reform in teacher preparation. First, TFA CMs often staff charter schools in urban areas, contributing to the neoliberal ideology that choice (of both teachers and schools) will improve educational outcomes for urban students. Second, districts pay a "finders' fee" to TFA, plus benefits, professional development, and salary to corps members, which is money that opponents of TFA argue could be better spent on reducing class sizes, professional development for veteran teachers, 21st century technology, or teaching materials. Third, starting in Fall 2012, TFA began certifying their own recruits by bypassing university programs for their own brand of training and certification. Fourth, TFA has often criticized the role of teacher unions as an obstacle of teacher education reform.

Another example of the intersections of neoliberalism and TFA that warrants further discussion is the valuing of profit over people. In a 2011 discussion with Malcolm Gladwell, Wendy Kopp, the founder of TFA said, "TFA is not a teaching organization, but a leadership development organization." In framing TFA as such, it focuses on careers beyond what is seen as a two-year volunteer or service opportunity for many CMs. Teach For America offers monetary incentives that, for many college seniors, are better than other opportunities they may be considering post-graduation. They earn a salary and benefits while earning Americorps funds, which can be used for graduate school for post-TFA careers. In addition, participation in TFA often leads to greater wealth and connections once their teaching commitment is completed (Labaree, 2004; Maier, 2012). While Ingersoll & Perda (2008) find that the low social status of teachers leads many to view teaching as a semi-profession with the lowest status being afforded to urban teachers, research shows that TFA credentials eliminate this low social status and has the opposite effect for TFA alumni (Labaree, 1997, 2004; Maier, 2012; Veltri, 2010). Maier states that TFA increases corps members' use and exchange value by recruiting tens of thousands of applicants from top universities, immersing them in a social, resource, and educational network that expands access and significantly reduces costs for its alumni to pursue non-teaching careers after their two-year "service." He asserts, "TFA members can easily exchange their credential for well-paid jobs or acceptance into top graduate schools; non-TFA teachers cannot" (p. 11). For instance, TFA boasts a well-established network of partnerships with Fortune 500 companies and graduate schools that provide alumni with such advantages as (a) deferring graduate school acceptance until their two-year commitment is complete; (b) offering lucrative scholarships that are reserved specifically for TFA alumni; and (c) creating internships and career mentoring for alumni. TFA corps members have little to lose in accepting this opportunity as they are eligible for Americorps funds, no-interest loans, grants to cover travel and relocation expenses, and graduate degrees.

Maier (2012) points out three possible interrelated explanations in the extant literature for the success of TFA's recruitment and placement of teachers in low-income schools. These include deregulating entry to teaching, delayed career decisions, and social justice. By reducing preparation from 4 years to 5 weeks, TFA allows members to explore teaching without investing time or money in a traditional teaching degree that is perceived as less valued. The two-year commitment allows TFA members to delay their career choice or wait for the job market to get better, while building their resume. The huge spike (60% in just five years) in TFA's applications align with the tough job market for college graduates as the U.S. economy struggled with a recession. The third explanation for their recruiting success is their strong publicity, lobbying, and marketing messages emphasizing that committed, hard-working, dedicated teachers can eliminate the achievement gap in high-needs schools. This educational equity message resonates with many college-age students' desire to make a difference and change the world (Veltri, 2010). In turn, because these students are seen as the best and the brightest with many job opportunities, their two-year commitment to teaching in high-needs schools is seen as "philanthropic service" and they are portrayed as quasi-volunteers engaging in public service, while traditional teachers hold no such admirable status. For instance, Veltri's analysis of more than 300 TFA teachers found that the majority of her participants from "middle-upper class families viewed TFA like domestic community service," a chance to "fulfill a duty and save kids," while "seeking personal fulfillment working on a social mission" (pp. 27-28). Veltri points out that we should "question federal and state policies that support CMs as beneficiaries of the AmeriCorps stipend, funded through the Edward M. Kennedy Service America Act of 2009" (p. 31). In addition, how can this be "service" when they are getting paid by the U.S. government and the school district, while teachers doing the same job in the same school are not given such noble labels or financial incentives?

To be sure, we do not argue that all CMs value profit over people and subscribe to neoliberal beliefs about education and urban reform. Some people become involved with TFA with good intentions and with the goal of staying in teaching for the long term; we know and respect several of these committed and passionate educators. However, the TFA model that encourages CMs to focus more on the connections and monetary incentives that come with being a TFA alum—as well as the social capital and exchange value that can not be accurately quantified—is evidence of a neoliberal agenda at an organizational and policy level. TFA's rhetoric and policies encourage the recruits to think about the added value that TFA will give them in the long run, and to ignore the reality of how neoliberal "solutions" to urban "problems" only intensifies inequity. TFA, by operating as an institution that propagates the notion that you only need to be smart and leadership-oriented, values profit over people, and builds a model that ultimately exacerbates failed urban school reform for poor and minority children.

Political Spectacle of TFA

TFA uses neoliberal language of corporatization, deregulation, and marketization. This rhetoric, when left unexamined, leads to a political spectacle that exploits novice teachers and jeopardizes urban schools, students, and communities. According to Edelman (1970), those in power (and the media who report on people in power) use social problems, political leaders, enemies, news and events, and language in symbolic ways that create a spectacle of politics, rather than a reality. Smith (2004) applied Edelman's theory to educational policies, and we analyze TFA in light of her taxonomy here. This taxonomy of political spectacle includes the

following elements: (a) symbolic language, (b) dramaturgy, (c) democratic participation as illusion, (d) illusion of rationality, (e) casting of characters, (f) distinction between onstage and backstage action, and (g) disconnect between means and ends.

Symbolic Language

Smith's (2004) examination of educational policies reveals, as Edelman (1970) posits, how language is used for political purposes, to emphasize certain ideologies and problems at the expense of others. However, the language is merely symbolic because, though it conjures much emotion, it is more rhetoric than reality. For example, Smith points to the symbolism of words like patriotism, democracy, accountability, high standards, and freedom of choice. Similar language is reflected in the marketing and recruiting materials of TFA and in their training of new CMs. Words and phrases like "equity," "standards," "accountability," "high expectations," "mission," "100% compliance 100% of the time," "movement," "increased student achievement," "data," and "vision," all have common sense understandings and multiple definitions and avenues depending on the audience. This focus on onstage rhetoric ignores the backstage realities of teaching and learning in urban schools. For example, corps members are led to believe they will be taught *how to teach*, but they spend much of their 5 weeks learning the TFA mission, philosophy, and how to be a good corps member and support organizational goals (Veltri, 2010). The symbolic language is peppered throughout CMs' classrooms, conversations, and assignments, but it does little to prepare them for the realities of classroom instruction, classroom management, lesson planning, and effective motivational and teaching strategies. Despite this seemingly altruistic language that the novice corps members, politicians, and public hear, the realities of scripted programs, a limited toolkit of teaching, management, and motivational strategies leaves many corps members struggling with what and how to teach, especially in the first year (Veltri, 2010; Kavanagh, 2010).

TFA also employs symbolic language of globalization. They have recently expanded their role in teacher recruitment beyond U.S. borders with the creation of Teach For All, their global initiative to expand their reach, mission, and philosophy in over 26 countries. Teach For India, Teach For Australia, and Teach For Pakistan are just a few examples of the "global network" that purports to address inequality around the world. Concurrent with the use of globalization rhetoric is TFA's use of corporate and market-driven language. A common theme in TFA is "investment," and a TFA alum may later be hired as a "Manager of Teacher Leadership and Development (MTLD)," an individual who manages incoming corps members. They might also be hired as a recruiter, fundraiser, or individual responsible for the summer training. The description of Teach For All uses market language of "social enterprise" and even calls for the global network to "generat[e] public and private sector support... save time, climb learning curves more quickly" (Teach for All, 2013). With such obstacles as TFA acknowledges like global poverty and systemic inequality, one might assume that "saving time" is a logical goal. After all, who wants such injustice to continue any longer than necessary? However, pushing a private-sector model and time-saving management techniques on children and schools around the world only leads, in fact, to more oppressive conditions and the use of such children as pawns in the educational version of *Risk*.

Dramaturgy: Political Stages, Props, and Costumes

A spectacle, as any staged show, must include some elements of theatre in order to be successful. Smith (2004) calls this the dramaturgy of political spectacle, in which a narrative is created, using political stages, props, and costumes, in order to sell a policy or contest it. A prime example might be political conventions. In turn, TFA uses a number of political stages and props for recruitment and marketing. First, TFA's political lobbying efforts amounted to over \$120,000 for the 2006 tax year (Veltri, 2010). Lobbying enables TFA to have a stage upon which to sell their narrative of urban school reform. Further, this stage yields political support and federal funds, with recent taxpayer support yielding over \$43 million. Ivy League colleges and other elite universities also serve as stages for recruitment, where posters of smiling children of color with beaming young adults leaning over them and pointing to a paper, are the props used to sell TFA's model. Another example might be the "Institute" that begins 5 weeks of teacher training. The "teacher as leader program" and narratives of "goals," "vision," "mission," "saving students," "educational equity," and "changing a life trajectory" are all examples of storylines and scripts found in recruiting materials, videos, books, and information sessions. The dramaturgy is enhanced by props, including "make and takes" where CMs make signs with their visions, big goals, and classroom management color charts with rewards and consequences. These charts of rewards and consequences, goals, and visions are displayed prominently in CMs' classrooms, allowing visitors to know immediately who is a current or former TFA member immediately upon entering.

Casting Political Actors as Allies and Enemies

Edelman (1988) suggests that the flow of information is increasingly obscured through the creation of political spectacles. The media does not necessarily create the spectacle by itself, but it often reports a spectacle that has been constructed by outside sources, usually in deceptive ways. According to Smith (2004), the political spectacle also includes characters who are cast and created to appeal to "intuition, emotion, and tacit assumptions" and suggest to the masses that policies such as those employed by TFA "can readily correct deeply embedded social problems" (p. 19). By painting problems as individual versus institutional and societal, the political spectacle "place[s] the responsibility for decline and crises at the doorstep of teachers, parents, and children, rather than on politicians and policies" (p. 19). This is evident in recruiting materials, website videos, slogans, and testimonials as TFA leadership continuously emphasize the students' challenges are solvable in just one year of an inexperienced teacher/leader working "relentlessly." TFA CMs are cast as "saviors," "missionaries," "volunteers," "the best and the brightest," and "change agents" throughout recruiting materials, testimonials, and the popular press. In turn, recruits are quickly socialized to think that they alone are all that stands between their students' successes and prison, which places a great deal of emotional and physical stress on the novice teachers as they and their students are tracked with daily, weekly, and monthly data trackers (Veltri, 2010; Kavanagh, 2010). This message simultaneously ignores systemic and site-based issues of racism, classism, inequitable school funding, lack of school and community resources, and low wage jobs in the communities they serve. Additionally, beyond their classroom interactions, TFA casts current corps members and alumni as leaders who go on to influence educational equity through careers in policy, healthcare, education, and business. Despite the controversies, disputes, and negative press, several alumni are heralded as the stars of this "leadership" narrative, including Wendy Kopp, the founder of TFA, Michelle Rhee,

former Chancellor of DC schools, and KIPP charter school founders, Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg.

On the contrary, TFA casts other groups as enemies of educational reform, namely university teacher education programs and teachers' unions. They cite a variety of reasons for casting these two groups as enemies, including not challenging teacher tenure; making teacher education longer, harder, and more of a financial investment than it needs to be; and keeping bad teachers in the classroom. Creating emotional reactions rather than critical and thoughtful reactions lies at the heart of the TFA philosophy, recruitment, and press.

Democratic Participation as Illusion

An additional component of political spectacle is the illusion that participation matters equally from all participants. Smith (2004) sees democratic participation as a formality; this façade conceals that the decisions have already been made or are in the process of being made by a select group of elite stakeholders. The danger lies in the fading façade, if people realize that their participation does not matter. This leads to reduced participation because they feel their efforts will make no difference. Principals do not always have a choice to hire TFA corps members as districts have TFA contract spots they must fill even when layoffs of veteran teachers have affected the district (Veltri, 2010). One way we might see this illusion in action, then, is when administrators try to resist hiring TFA CMs at first, but eventually stop resisting because they believe their efforts will be in vain. A second way that this plays out is with the actual placement of the corps members in particular grade levels, subjects, schools or states that they did not choose. In these examples, it is the organization that has the power and voice instead of equitable discussion by the school, organization, and corps member for the best placement. This is echoed in Veltri's (2010) findings where CMs learned how to be "good corps members" and not question methods or decisions made by the organization or the TFA way.

Illusion of Rationality

According to Smith (2004), "actors in the political spectacle often use numbers and the results of polls and research studies to bolster their claim that they are acting rationally" (p. 26). However, as Smith argues, someone has to ask certain questions and make definitions for the initial poll, thus making value judgments that could be irrational (p. 27). Indeed, Smith contends, in politics, actions are emotional and personal, not rational. In TFA, we see this presumption that polls and statistics are unbiased and rational in their employment of faulty, inconclusive, and misleading statistics and research about TFA's success (Kovacs, 2011). For instance, in bold, large lettering, there is the following statement on the TFA website: "Rigorous national studies and statewide studies in Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee concluded that Teach For America corps members have a greater impact on student achievement than other new teachers." As our previous literature review revealed, research showed nothing of the kind, and general statements like this are problematic and misleading. At the time of writing, there has not been a study that explicitly investigates TFA teachers compared with new teachers who had traditional preparation and certification, or controls for student, teacher, and school variables. Misleading statements like this allow for inaccurate and unfair assumptions about university-based preparation programs, new teachers, and TFA corps members.

Distinction between Onstage and Backstage Action

Once the stage has been set, the actors have been cast, and scripts have been rehearsed, there is still, in the political spectacle, a difference between what happens onstage and what happens backstage. There is the action that the public sees and that which is hidden in the wings. According to Smith (2004), often this onstage performance involves hiding the truth behind masks:

In times of political spectacle, politics for the promotion of egalitarian, compensatory, and communitarian values are forsaken. Education policies in the political spectacle serve the special interests of a few (often policies that stratify and segregate) and hide behind a mask of common sense and the common good. (37)

Within TFA, the major distinction between onstage and backstage action is what TFA says happens in CMs' classrooms (onstage) and what really happens (backstage). These stories revolve around achievement, equity, and learning. In particular, TFA propagates stories that corps members outperform their colleagues, despite corps members who admit to not knowing what to teach or how to teach, especially in the first year (Veltri, 2008, 2010; Kavanagh, 2010). Even further "backstage" than CMs are the students in urban schools. Indeed, they are so far behind-the-scenes that their voices are rarely, if ever, heard onstage.

Disconnect of Means and Ends

Finally, the last common feature of political spectacle is the disconnect of means and ends. In this element of the spectacle, the costs of a policy or public effort (the means) are disconnected from, and often not worth, the results of such policies (the ends). TFA's mission is one that many scholars, teachers, parents, and community members share: to improve educational opportunities and outcomes in urban schools. The "end" of educational equity, according to TFA, can be reached when students educated in the best schools become CMs and teach those students in the worst schools, regardless of experience. However, the means to this end involves the uncritical recruitment of individuals whose lack of educational preparation drastically limits their complex and critical understandings of effective pedagogy, educational theory, and child development. For Edelman (1970), one of the dangers of the political spectacle is that it "empowers certain groups and disempowers and silences the voices of others" (p. 29). We see this very clearly in the disconnect between the means and end; that is, the means of success for CMs occurs at the expense of their students. While there is no guarantee for students' success, TFA corps members are guaranteed lifelong personal, professional, academic, and monetary benefits, regardless of the success and outcomes (or lack thereof) in their classroom.

A glaring example of the disconnect between the means and ends of TFA is in this description of Teach For America, where one sees that education, children, or teachers are not evident at all:

We are a high-growth, outcomes-oriented organization, with a \$220 million budget and over 1,500 staff. In 2011 and 2012, we were named a Fortune 100 Best Company to Work For. We operate in an entrepreneurial environment, maintain focus on quantitative measures, and are committed to continuous improvement. It is

a leadership development organization - committed to fostering staff members, corps members and alumni who establish a clear and bold vision for the future, set measurable and ambitious goals, work purposefully and strategically to achieve that vision, always operate with a deep sense of possibility and with perseverance, and define broadly what is within its control to solve. (Teach for America, 2012)

As this quote demonstrates, TFA sees itself as a stepping stone to other careers instead of identifying education-specific problems and opportunities. What is left unsaid in this description speaks volumes. It demonstrates the excellent marketing, lobbying, and dramaturgy surrounding this organization. If TFA's recruitment idea is such a noble, laudable recruitment alternative, why not allow TFA teachers to teach in high income schools that mimic their own educational background and free up the most experienced teachers for urban and rural schools? Why does the practice of giving the neediest students the most inexperienced teachers not seem laughable as an educational reform agenda?

Master Narratives of Teaching and Learning in Urban Schools

In addition to the political spectacle, we argue that recruitment strategies like TFA frame and perpetuate problematic master narratives of teaching, learning, and educational equity. A master narrative is a story that tells people how to perform and act (Lyotard, 1984). It portrays common sense ways of understanding experiences that reflect and influence our understanding of power and society (Aldridge, 2006). These master narratives often use characters who act in familiar ways, so they are rarely challenged or deeply examined (McAdams, 1993). Mishler (1995) asserts that "master narratives define rights and duties and incorporate values of dominant social and political groups. Their unexamined taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world is and ought to be conceal patterns of domination and submission" (p.114). Furthermore, *political master narratives* shape the way in which particular groups in society are perceived, and they help craft social policy (Gring-Pemble, 2003; Sandlin & Clark, 2009). Political master narratives "create a particular kind of social world, with specified heroes and villains, deserving and underserving people, and a set of public policies that are rationalized by the construction of social problems for which they become solutions" (Bennett & Edelman, 1985, p. 159). These master narratives construct images of groups, problems, and solutions and are internalized by the public and policymakers. We argue that the political spectacle and master narratives work hand-in-hand to obscure the reality of TFA and its role as a cause and consequence of urban school reform.

It is imperative to illuminate and complicate the popular and political master narratives in urban education that influence how citizens, business leaders, politicians, and TFA recruits come to know and understand complex issues in education. For example, the master narratives of "savior teachers" for urban schools and teaching as an easy profession that anyone can do (Zirkel et. al, 2011) uncritically inform discourse, recruitment, and funding programs like TFA. Such a narrative, which is often framed more specifically as a "White savior teacher for poor Black and brown children" can be seen in films like *The Freedom Writers* or *Dangerous Minds*. The characterization of TFA as service, volunteerism, a mission, and a movement in popular media and its own marketing promotes this narrative (Labaree, 2007; Maier, 2012; Veltri, 2008, 2010). The programs themselves add to the narrative that, to be a "good" teacher in urban schools, all one needs is leadership abilities, intelligence and content knowledge, and a desire to make

transformational change by working hard. These narrative propagations contribute to a false understanding of what teachers need to know and do to provide equitable education and access to urban students. For example, during their summer Institute, CMs create goals, visions, lesson plans, and behavior plans for their students when CMs do not know their grade levels or students yet. How can they develop goals without knowing their students or involving them in the creation of these goals? At Institute, CMs often co-teach in grade levels that are different than the ones they will subsequently be placed in. Further, the “savior” narrative suggests that the art and science of pedagogy, child development, content methods, and classroom management—not to mention a deep understanding of the community, history, resources, and people that live in the district—can all be learned upon placement or in five weeks at the summer institute.

The meritocracy narrative, much like the American Dream master narrative, dictates that individuals rise and fall solely on their hard work and drive while it ignores systemic racism, classism, and inequities inherent in our society, educational system, workplace, and communities (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). This narrative is consistent with two messages in TFA’s literature and mission statement: (1) If you are a smart, driven, committed person who has been a leader during college, you can teach P-12 students any subject and change the *life trajectories* of your students in just one year; and (2) Inexperienced corps members teaching for a two year commitment in urban schools are what is needed to close the achievement gap and make students “achieve.” Again, these two master narratives of learning are loaded with assumptions about an individual teacher’s abilities, while simultaneously ignoring the overarching structures that continue to oppress students and families in urban communities. The messaging that CMs receive is that they make or break a student’s life because they can and should change life trajectories and close the achievement gap. What a daunting task to place on the shoulders of young CMs! Even the notion of the achievement gap is historically fraught with assumptions and deficit thinking, as Ladson-Billings (2010) argues in her re-framing of the gap as an educational debt.

Another master narrative is that urban schools are failing because bad teachers and bad schools are *the* problem. This master narrative can be seen in films such as *Waiting for Superman* and *Won’t Back Down*, and in TFA dialogue around teacher unions and teacher tenure. While few educators will dispute that there are “bad” teachers in our system or that many urban schools are struggling to meet the needs of their student population, it is problematic to place blame solely on teachers and unions (Kumashiro, 2011). This master narrative ignores systemic problems in schools where “urban teachers must be able to accommodate the greatest diversity of student needs under conditions that continually subvert their efforts to personalize and individualize education” (Weiner, 2000, p. 371). One might ask if the millions of federal, corporate, and private funds that are funding TFA, coupled with enormous placement fees, could be better put to use buying much-needed classroom supplies, creating smaller class sizes, providing meaningful professional development for teachers, and developing innovative after school programs. By placing the blame on bad teachers, this master narrative diverts attention from problematic recruitment schemes like TFA.

These master narratives, coupled with the political spectacle and neoliberal agenda, frame the educational reform debate writ large and, more specifically, the policies, practices, and public face of Teach For America. Such spectacles and narratives need to be critically deconstructed by teachers, parents, educators, policymakers, and district hiring personnel. Narratives always have

intentionality, and we suggest the political master narratives above are undermining educational equity for urban students and communities.

Significance and Implications

Though discussions of TFA are becoming increasingly common in popular media, little research exists that critiques the program from a research-based and theoretical standpoint. This paper demonstrates the importance of considering the multiple ways that alternative recruitment strategies are employed for urban schools and pay particular attention to the intersections between politics and public messaging. We do not disagree with the goals of programs that seek to empower new teachers or serve urban communities; it is the means to achieve these goal—through a deliberate refusal to acknowledge research and practice about the importance of teacher preparation and long-term professional development—with which we take issue. Research like Smith’s (2004) and Dunn’s (2011, 2013) demonstrates how the political spectacle is seen in other educational policies; as these policies continue to evolve and more neoliberal policies are implemented, additional scholarship should continue to examine the ways that spectacles and narratives are or are not evident and the impact of those on teachers, schools, and students.

In addition to using new empirical data to make policy decisions about recruitment and placement of teachers in urban schools, policymakers can consider ways to spend the funds typically used to pay recruitment agencies. For example, how could these funds be used to attract teachers to urban districts and provide professional support that encourages their continuous pedagogical and leadership development? Further, nearly all research in teacher education shows that experience matters. The authors agree that there are some excellent educators in TFA, but those outliers do not make for strong and long-term policy. Policymakers should use independent empirical data, not exceptionalities, to craft the urban school reform agenda.

We also suggest, in addition to improved research and policy, that the personal be connected to the professional in ways that combat neoliberalism through the power of counternarratives from TFA alumni and students. For example, in July 2013, a group of TFA alumni and their former students gathered with activists, parents, and professors at Free Minds, Free People, an educational summit focused on social justice and liberatory education. The group intends to counter TFA’s role in privatization and are some of the first alumni to speak out against the TFA model and its effects on teachers and students. For example, according to Holpuch (2013), one alumna stated that, “In the end, I felt the way I was teaching brought me and my students and their communities pain, and that’s why I’m part of this movement now... It doesn’t have to be like that.”

The struggles with TFA are ongoing, and this article is not meant to present a "static" view of such struggles. In fact, even as we write, new developments around the country make us more aware of the ways that TFA’s political spectacle and master narrative thrives. For example, over 2,600 teachers (many of them tenured) were laid off in Chicago Public Schools, after the closing of 48 schools that serve predominantly Black and Brown children in low-income neighborhoods. At the same time, "The Board of Education voted to increase its payment to Teach For America from \$600,000 to nearly \$1.6 million, and to add up to 325 new TFA recruits to CPS classrooms" (Chicago Sun Times, 2013). This reflects not only a disregard for the

extensive body of knowledge on the value of experienced educators in urban schools, but also a misunderstanding of what schools, communities, and students need from their teachers. The master narrative is alive and well in Chicago.

Finally, there are aspects of TFA that could be enhanced to better serve students, schools, communities, and corps members. Considering that TFA is supposedly designed to help with the national teacher shortage, one must ask if this is still the case. Yet, since research has continually demonstrated that the teacher shortage is more accurately an issue of teacher distribution and retention (e.g. Ingersoll, 2002, 2003), why the continued expansion? Perhaps there are other ways these recruits could be utilized in a way that best meets their specific skill set or the needs of the schools, districts, and communities. Second, while recruiting alternatively certified candidates is not wholesale a problematic idea, there must be standards in place. For example, we should not be satisfied with certification-only programs that do not include pedagogical preparation or those, like TFA, where TFA alum with only two years of experience themselves serve as the instructors. Our children deserve better. Most importantly, rethinking the first year of CMs' placements to better learn and develop the art and science of teaching would benefit the corps members and the students that they teach. We would assert that the first year could be revised in one of several important ways: (a) corps members co-teach under the wing of a veteran teacher; (b) two corps members co-teach together; (c) corps members have a smaller teaching load and observe and co-teach with veteran teachers the rest of the day and attend professional development designed with them in mind; or (d) corps members teach in schools that are not serving historically underserved students to free up veteran teachers for the schools that need more qualified teachers. To be sure, this would require more monetary investments from TFA and districts, but if the long-term benefit is increased student success and less teacher turnover, the ends, in this case, *would* justify the means.

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