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# Is 'Teach for All' knocking on your door?

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*Abstract:* Over the past few decades there has been a rapid expansion in alternative 'fast track' routes for teacher preparation. Among the most aggressive of these are Teach for All (TFA) schemes characterized not only by their ultra fast entry to teaching (6 – 7 week course) but also by their underlying philosophy that the so called 'crisis' in poor rural and urban schools can be solved by attracting the 'best and brightest' university graduates for a two year appointment in 'difficult to staff' schools. With its missionary zeal TFA is heralded by some as one way to solve socio-educational problems that governments cannot. Others condemn such schemes as not only patronizing, but also as part of an ideologically driven and deliberate neoliberal attack on public education, teachers, teacher professionalism and working class or 'other' communities. Recently Teach for All came knocking on New Zealand's door. Concerned about the possible implications of this for the teaching profession and education more generally, the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) *Te Wehengarua* commissioned a review of the international literature on TFA schemes. This paper synthesizes some of the key findings of this review with particular focus on TFA's marketing strategies and the connections TFA schemes have with so called social entrepreneurs or venture philanthropists, many of whom are actively and aggressively engaged in shaping educational reforms in line with neoliberal agendas.

*Keywords:* teacher preparation, neoliberalism, philanthropists, human capital, teach for all

## Introduction

In the late 1980s Wendy Kopp, an American university student, conceived the idea of an ultra-fast track teacher preparation programme called Teach For America (TFA). Kopp's original proposal aimed to address what was portrayed as a crisis in education and a critical shortage of qualified teachers for urban and rural schools. TFA's alternative teacher preparation program

was designed to attract the 'best and brightest' Liberal Arts graduates from America's elite universities into its 6 – 8 week intensive training programs. On successful completion graduates were to be placed as full time teachers in rural and urban schools across the USA. The program not only attracted 'elite' graduates but also public and private funding and a great deal of mainstream media attention. Within the first year there were 500 recruits from the top ranking US private and public universities teaching in schools. By 2008 there were 6000 TFA recruits (known as 'corps members') teaching more than 400,000 students. An astounding 35,000 graduates applied for 4000 places available in TFA's 2009 program (Labaree, 2010). Twenty years after TFA was first launched "more than 8,000 corps members are teaching across thirty-nine cities and rural regions" in the US (Kopp, 2011, p. 2).

Alongside the rapid expansion of TFA in America was a burgeoning of international organisations under the banner of *Teach For All* (TFA). There are currently over 20 TFA type programmes in existence, all part of a globalised network of 'social enterprises'. TFA has a veritable A to Z of affiliates in countries including: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, China, Colombia, Estonia, Germany, Israel, Latvia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Pakistan, Spain, the UK, and the USA. While there is some local variance among TFA programmes in design and implementation, they have in common a particular set of beliefs about schools and teaching that deserves critical attention (Lahann, Randall, Reagan, & Mitescue, 2011).

It is these beliefs or 'systems of ideas' that aim to construct schools, students, teachers and teachers' work in a particular and deliberate way, that are the major concerns of this paper. The paper has emerged from the findings of a Literature Review commissioned by the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) *Te Wehengarua* to inform the decision making of the Association and its members regarding TFA schemes (McConney, Price, & Woods-McConney, 2012). The research team was asked to systematically review scholarly literature and relevant reports over the past 20 years in order to address a series of questions posed by the PPTA. Two of these questions are the focus of this paper. These relate to the marketing and recruitment models used by TFA, and the motivations and influence of philanthropic foundations.

## **Beware the Beast Knocking at Your Door: Neoliberalism and TFA**

When TFA was first conceptualized by Wendy Kopp in the late 1980s, it came on the heels of nearly a decade of 'Reaganomics' in the USA, Thatcherism in the UK and the increasing dominance of social and political ideo-

logies that promoted individualism and a marketised economy. These ideologies promoted a belief that the private sector could solve economic, social and educational ‘crises’ that big government bureaucracies notionally could not. Privatisation was the key plank of this neoliberal reform agenda and as Thatcher simplistically claimed ‘there is no alternative’ (TINA).

Neoliberalism’s fundamental core is an all-encompassing belief that individualized, market-based conceptions of competition are far superior than any other form of socioeconomic system. Such views are paraded in public discourses and mediatized texts as quite simply ‘common sense’ (Mudge, 2008). When ideas become accepted as commonsense they become unquestioned and unquestionable. Key words that abound in neoliberal texts include *entrepreneurial self*, *knowledge society*, *autonomous*, *flexible*, *life long learning*, *personal choice and responsibility*. Such key words, as Apple (2006) and Gee (1999) have often pointed out, have ‘complicated histories’ and multiple meanings. Importantly, from a critical perspective, it is necessary to examine how these seemingly commonsense words are shaped and used by hegemonic discourses such as neoliberalism to sweep us along with their education and workplace reform agendas (Price, Mansfield, & McConney, 2012).

Historically, Mudge suggests that neoliberalism has often been an ill-defined concept in the social sciences (2008). She sees it as an ideological system that is “born of struggle and collaboration between three worlds: intellectual, bureaucratic and political.” At the intellectual level its “geographical anchoring is within Anglo-American academe” (Mudge, 2008, p. 4). In particular, a great deal of neoliberal economic thought emerged out of networks of free-market think tanks and right wing elites with their beginnings in the business schools and economics departments of universities like Chicago, Stanford and Harvard (Webber, 2007). Stagflation and the economic ‘crisis’ of the 1970s provided fertile ground for the rise of neoliberal thinking which blamed Keynesian economic management and the welfare state for the ‘crisis’.

Bureaucratically, neoliberalism emerged through state policies that promoted deregulation, privatization, depoliticisation and monetarism. Such reforms are, according to Mudge (2008), aimed at getting governments out of businesses and ‘desacralizing’ institutions such as health and education that have, under the welfare state, been partially protected from marketisation. Politically, the state’s responsibilities, from a neoliberal perspective, are to unleash market forces as much as possible (but not completely) and minimize political interference and decision making. The role of the state is to create the “appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operations” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 314, as cited in Kascak & Pupala, 2011)

This paper also conceives neoliberalism as more than just a type of economic rationality that underlies political and economic decisions made by governments (Kascak & Pupala, 2011, p. 147). Neoliberalism, in its contemporary forms, has shifted from being a political or economic hegemony to a discourse that is increasingly being accepted as a pervasive and commonsense version of the whole of human existence. And, as the neoliberal hegemony becomes increasingly understood as commonsense the values that underpin it pervade all aspects of life.

Neoliberalism...has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world. (Harvey, 2007, p. 3, as cited in Read, 2009)

The individual that dominates the neoliberal project is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur (Read, 2009).

Ball (2012, p. 17), has for example written about the way neoliberalism has impacted his own subjectivity as an academic – where he has been required to become “calculable rather than memorable.” Ball reminds us of Peck’s (2003) notion that neoliberalism is not just “out there” but “in here” or in other words it becomes part of an individual’s worldview (cited in Ball, 2012, p. 19). Whilst acknowledging its very real economic and political project based on the commodification of all that is educational, Ball also highlights that neoliberalism has the capacity to get inside peoples’ minds and souls – into the way they think about themselves (as entrepreneurs, producers, consumers) and how they think of others (consumers, competitors, clients). This leads to new forms of pedagogy and a view of knowledge as capital.

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate the connections between TFA and neoliberalism both at the level of discourse and in terms of the actual financial and political support provided by philanthropic foundations with neoliberal agendas. Highlighting the association between TFA programmes and neoliberalism is even more critical in countries or regions, like central Europe, where concepts like ‘Governmentality’ and ‘neoliberalism’ have only recently emerged in pedagogical discourses (Kascak & Pupala, 2011). These authors warn, though, that within central Europe and Scandinavia the neoliberal metanarrative is moving to the level of ‘manifestation’ at least in part as the result of European Union policies on schooling and education. Related to this, Inglis (2011) has portrayed this shift from Modernist and even postmodernist narratives to neoliberalism in the following way:

I suggest that our epoch is tearing itself away from the narratives that have bestowed meaning and continuity upon the northern hemisphere since 1945, and lost reason in 1989 at the end of the Cold War. What is dying is plain enough; but what rough beast, its hour come at last, slouches towards us remains unimaginable. (Cited in Ball, 2012, p. 17.)

Thus, our central aim in this analysis is to draw attention to key features of TFA discourses that clearly represent and promote neoliberalist ideologies and tactics.

## Method: The Literature Review

The methods we used for the initial review of the research literature on fast track TFA teacher education schemes comprised several systematic, interrelated steps. First, we conducted an extensive search of the research literature using various strategies, including electronic searches of established academic databases, searches of archived proceedings and other publications of topic-relevant associations, and hand searches of the past 20 years of prominent journals for teacher education research. We also searched the websites of relevant organizations whose activities or research encompasses the topic area, including the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and, the websites of TFA programmes themselves.

Second, as an external check on the comprehensiveness of the research literature gathered, a small group of leading experts in the provision of initial teacher education (ITE), and research surrounding ITE, was asked to review the results of our initial search. The reviewers were also asked to suggest relevant articles, books and/or reports that they believe important to the topic, but which were missing from our initial list. The group of external reviewers included: a Professor Emeritus of Education at a large public university in the USA; a well-experienced independent researcher in New Zealand, with expertise in teacher preparation and professional development; and, a Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at a leading university in the UK whose research is concerned predominantly with the experiences of and support for trainee, and recently qualified teachers. Thus, the external reviewers were all highly regarded experts in research on initial teacher education and were representative of a range of national contexts (USA, New Zealand, and UK) in which fast track TFA schemes have been operating, or are under development. As a result of this external review, we

re-examined our initial list of studies and about a dozen relevant studies that had been missed in the first instance were added. In all, 101 published studies or publicly available documents were included in the final review.

## Method: Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis formed one important aspect of our review of the published literature surrounding TFA schemes. Using critical discourse approaches, our aim in this paper is to gain a better understanding of the values and beliefs that underlie TFA programmes (Gee, 1990, 1999). Within this theoretical framework TFA can be viewed as a kind of 'social text', parts of which are articulated through written and oral texts as well as through a range of policies and practices that constitute TFA programmes. Discourse analysis helps in:

...elucidating how texts are produced, their relations to their socio-political contexts, the social reality they construct, the claims they make or the agendas they advance, the assumptions they contain, the social positions of the authors of these texts and the social relations they assume or perpetuate. (Ka Tat Tsang, 2001, section 2, para. 5)

Such analysis also helps to uncover and expose what Gee refers to as the "Big 'C' Conversations" about society that are carried within discourses (Gee, 1999, p. 13). Big 'C' Conversations are long running and important themes about, for example, schools, education, students, teachers and teachers' work. As carriers of these Big 'C' Conversations, discourses have the power to influence attitudes and values that permeate a society (Price, 2005). Drawing on the work of Gillies, this paper seeks to better understand how TFA programmes "rationalize a particular social imaginary" (2011, p. 229), one that we suspect is unreservedly neoliberal with an economic rationalist view of education, driven by human capital agendas and an emphasis on market principles, individualism, so called 'parental choice' and competition. Various texts produced by and about TFA programmes were analysed to examine the extent to which discourses contained within them represent or promote neoliberal worldviews.

## Schools in Crisis

Perhaps the foremost feature of TFA discourses that clearly represents neoliberalist ideologies and tactics is to claim that the schools are in a state of crisis and in need of saving. This is one of the core messages in almost all TFA literature and is used extensively in its marketing and recruitment strategies.

TFA recruits are often portrayed in the media through anecdotal stories “of dismal schools where TFA teachers worked diligently in the interests of oppressed youth” (Tellez, 2011, p. 30). Schools, particularly in inner city areas, are depicted by TFA as failing, drug riddled and dangerous places. As an example, one TFA supporter’s recently published account of schools in the USA and the role of TFA is entitled “Relentless Pursuit – A Year in the Trenches with Teach for America” (Foote, 2008). Foote begins her book with vivid depictions of a day in the life of teachers and students at an inner city high school in the US. It abounds with common mediatized images of swearing, aggression, graffiti, teenage pregnancy, inter racial rivalry and gangs. And as the title suggests, Foote likens teaching in such schools to ‘living in the trenches’.

In an effort to explain the reasons for this state of affairs in schools, Foote turns her attention to a series of racial riots in US cities in the 1960s. And by way of justifying her later position she emphasises the outcome of the McCone Commission into the Californian riots. Led by an ex-CIA chief, the report laid the blame for the violence on, among other things, bad schools (Foote, 2008, p. 17). Typical of neoliberal analysis – schools are blamed for what are deep and complex social issues (Smyth & McInerney, 2007). Continuing with her ‘analysis’ of the causes of the crisis in schools, Foote shifts the reader to the famous Los Angeles riots of 1992, again evoking graphic mediatized images of violence, looting and drug abuse. Having set the scene Foote goes on to relate how such schools could be “cleaned up” (2008, p. 25) and turned around. Part of the solution is to hire TFA teachers who, like the US Cavalry, arrive with youthful enthusiasm and a “missionary zeal” to save the students. To compliment the imagery, TFA recruits are called ‘corps members’ – a military term evocative of troops in the US Marine Corps.

One former TFA corps member has drawn attention to TFA’s worrisome use of the Academic Impact Model (AIM) in its intensive training programmes. Brewer describes AIM as a “neoliberal and hyper accountability model for gauging student and teacher outcomes” (2012, p.1) The Academic Impact Model places the cause of every student’s success or failure solely with the teacher. External realities, such as poverty, are deemed irrelevant to student achievement and the belief is posited that good teachers, that is, those who follow TFA scripted teaching methods, can overcome these broader factors. Brewer also notes that TFA uses Steven Farr’s book, *Teaching as Leadership* (2010) as a text. In this text, arguments about the impact of socioeconomic realities on students’ academic success are condemned for absolving teachers and schools for students’ success or failure.

## Teach for All or Just the "Other"?

While the name of the organization would suggest that TFA is a form of teacher preparation providing teachers for *all students* there are serious concerns raised in the critical literature that it is in fact specifically aimed at poor, working class, rural and /or racialised minority groups for whom the TFA graduates have little or no preparation to teach (Darling-Hammond 1994). Telez notes that "teacher/student cultural discontinuity warranted only a brief discussion" during the 6 week TFA preparation course (2011, p. 29).

This concern was also the subject of Popkewitz's book, *Struggling for the Soul, The Politics of Schooling and the Construction of the Teacher*, which reveals the "pedagogical discourses that differentiate, distinguish and divide the children and teachers who inhabited the urban and rural schools where Teach for America placed its recruits" (1998, p. 2). This 'urbaness/ruralness', according to Popkewitz constructs a space for the child that is different from others and importantly one in which s/he can never be 'average'. Urban and rural children are then assigned certain 'qualities' for which particular pedagogical practices are required. TFA's missionary agenda to 'save' the children of poor and rural communities sets up a normalizing assimilationist discourses which constructs the rural/urban child as 'other' and therefore requiring 'other' types of teachers and teaching.

Popkewitz argues that expert systems of knowledge that organize teaching, learning, classroom management and curriculum inscribes a certain selectivity in what teachers "see, think, feel and talk about regarding children and school subjects" (1998, p. 5). Veltri has also drawn attention to what she has called TFA's "Master Narrative" (2010, p. 180). This narrative portrays poor and rural schools, in particular, as perennially in a state of crisis and children in need of rescue. It also conveys a strong message that teaching in such schools equates to a type of redemptive community service through giving back to the community.

## TFA's Sales Pitch: Saving Souls and Transforming Education

Perhaps not surprisingly TFA has developed a highly successful and internationalized marketing strategy that positions its programmes as uniquely different from traditional or alternative teacher education. Recruitment is aimed at young and talented graduates from elite universities who want to 'make a difference'. TFA advertising appeals to a sense of altruism and philanthropy, where largely (economically and socially) privileged students are able to 'give back to society' by volunteering to teach for two years in



poor, minority or rural schools. TFA recruitment websites invite applicants who want to play a role in the “movement against educational inequality” and “immerse themselves in understanding the root causes of educational inequality” (McConney, Price, & Woods-McConney, 2012, p. 16).

Beyond these ‘noble’ missionary appeals to social justice and altruism, TFA also promises the potential for career progression and professional networking. Teach for Australia for example promises that involvement in its programme “will open many doors for graduates.” Associates have the opportunity to be “mentored by public and private sector leaders” and “access to exclusive job opportunities, within and outside of the education sector” (McConney, Price, & Woods-McConney, 2012, p. 16).

As well as altruism and future professional networking opportunities, TFA applicants are enticed by the flexible career opportunities presented by the programme. The short (6-7 weeks) duration of the programme and the transferability of the skills learned are emphasized in TFA’s recruitment materials. This strategy has proven attractive to those who do not see teaching as a long term career but rather a stepping stone to other careers.

In the long term TFA Corps Members and Associates are encouraged to become leaders for educational change through their active membership of private and public organizations that can influence educational policy at local or national levels. In Kopp’s words a core aim of TFA is building “a leadership force for long term change” (Kopp, 2011, p. 2). This “unparalleled leadership pipeline in education” is portrayed as a means to accelerate the educational changes TFA envisages (2011, p. 147). One part of this process is to “grow the political community by ensuring our future leaders have been successful teachers in low income areas” (Kopp, 2011, p. 163). The other is “[I]n the tradition of the most aggressive political action committees in this country [USA].... we must create powerful organizations that shape, choose, and support candidates with the most potential (Kopp, 2011, p. 163). Whilst TFA is restricted in its direct political activities, a separate organization called Leadership for Educational Equity (LEE) is able to provide direct resources for TFA alumni interested in politics and policy development (Kopp, 2011, p. 164).

Finally TFA schemes are looking for people who want to pursue their particular vision of education. This commitment to the TFA vision was commented upon by ‘Steve’ the subject of Telez’ case study (2011). In this seven-year study of one teacher who began his career as a TFA recruit, Steve explains how perplexed he was initially when he gained an interview with TFA with a sociology degree, but his girlfriend with a partly completed teaching degree did not. In later interviews Steve “recognised that it was TFA’s intention to recruit Corps Members who were ‘untainted’ by the influence of [mainstream, university-based] teacher preparation” (Telez, 2011, p. 22).

## TFA as Part of the Neoliberal Philanthropic Agenda

Behind the neoliberal education project in general and Teach For America in particular are groups of super wealthy 'social entrepreneurs' willing and able to influence public education policy and provide financial backing to support their agenda. In 2011, Teach for America received nearly \$50 million from the Walton Family Foundation, one of America's wealthiest social entrepreneurs. This donation was the single largest gift to Teach for America in its 20-year history and meant that it became the recipient of the largest privately sourced grant for teaching and learning in the USA (McConney, Price, & Woods-McConney 2012).

The Walton Foundation is one of a group of so-called wealthy social entrepreneurs or venture philanthropists who have been driving a neoliberal agenda in education in the US since the 1990s. Sue and Steve Mandel and the Walton Family Foundation are at the top of the list of TFA's 'life donors' who have committed over \$50 million to the cause. Other big donors include the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the Robertson Foundation, the Doris and Donald Fisher Fund and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. These wealthy entrepreneurs openly drive a neoliberal education and social agenda through their foundations. Education is characterized by these social entrepreneurs as in a 'state of crisis', which can only be fixed by competition, marketisation and private investment. Systematic reform of schools is one of the Walton Foundation's priority funding areas. The key planks to this reform agenda are privatization, promoting 'school choice' (e.g., through voucher schemes), establishing and financing Charter Schools, competition, deregulation, high stakes testing and performance pay for teachers (McConney, Price, & Woods-McConney 2012).

According to the Walton Family Foundation website their large financial support is based not simply on TFA's "ability to place the best and brightest college graduates in classrooms that need them most but also *their proven track record in producing leaders for parental choice and education reform movement.*"<sup>1</sup> The Walton Foundation is part of what Barkin has called the Corporate Reform Movement in the USA (2011). Super wealthy social entrepreneurs have invested millions of dollars over the past few decades in promoting their neoliberal educational reform agendas. Over \$60 million was spent canvassing candidates from both major political parties by the Broad and Gates Foundations, for example, in the lead up to the 2009 US Federal election. Upon the election of President Obama the Broad Foundation celebrated:

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1 <http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/mediacenter/educationreform/tfa-grant>.

With an agenda that echoes our decades of investments, charter school, performance pay for teachers, accountability, expanded learning time and national standards – the Obama administration is poised to cultivate and bring to fruition the seeds we and other reformers have planted. (Broad Foundation Report, 2009/10, p.6)

Many of these social entrepreneurs donate heavily to TFA indicating that its model of teacher education and philosophies regarding schools and teaching are closely aligned with the educational vision of these foundations.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to draw attention to the connections between TFA schemes and neoliberalism. It is our contention that TFA is not just an alternative teacher preparation programme – it is a specific and deliberate way of thinking about teaching and learning. It is not only a highly technicist and minimalist approach to teacher preparation that rests on the assumption that anyone who is bright and enthusiastic can teach but it also promotes a discourse around schooling that is in need of critical attention.

So concerned was the New Zealand Post-Primary Teachers' Association *Te Wehengarua* about the implications of TFA schemes, that it commissioned a review of the literature. Other teacher unions and professional associations internationally have been vocal in their opposition to TFA schemes on a number of fronts. Short cut preparation and short term contracts are seen by some as adding to job insecurity for teachers. This is not only harmful for the teaching workforce but also for students especially when TFA teachers are often placed in schools that need the most stability in terms of staffing. In the UK, the General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers argued that “[t]he result of a degree does not correlate to how good a teacher you can be. Having knowledge of a subject and being able to teach it are two very different things. Many potentially excellent teachers may well be lost to the profession”.<sup>2</sup> Another teacher union in the UK, the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) goes even further in its condemnation of programmes like TFA. Such programmes, they say, are insulting, they say, are insulting to working class children and the teaching profession.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.teachers.org.uk/node/12395>

...predicated on the fetishisation of troops and the insulting suggestion that physically powerful adults (men) are needed to teach working class children. It downgrades the professional status and expertise of teachers, suggesting that effective teaching for some groups of young people can be reduced to the use of simplified, structured materials and operating manuals.<sup>3</sup>

TFA schemes are in the business of promoting neoliberal positions and relations that seek to place schools and teacher education in the hands of private entrepreneurs. TFA discourses simplistically blame schools and teachers for what is perceived as a crisis in education. Broader socioeconomic, historical and political factors that contribute to educational inequality are neglected in these discourses and solutions are posed which may in fact further aggravate such inequalities. This perhaps will be the result of positioning children from poor rural and urban communities as the 'other' and in need of standardized curriculum aimed at passing tests taught by minimally trained teachers on short term two year contracts.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/system/search/index.htm?search=which+way+now&stype=QUICK>

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