

The Sham That is Teach For America (TFA) Education Radio -- The Education Radio Collective

(beginning of outline by Dick Atlee -- draft in process as of June 19, 2012)

Part 1: <http://education-radio.blogspot.com/2012/04/sham-of-teach-for-america-part-on.html>

mp3: http://dickatlee.com/issues/education/audio/TFA_sham_1.mp3

Part 2: http://education-radio.blogspot.com/2012/04/ongoing-sham-of-teach-for-america-part_15.html

mp3: http://dickatlee.com/issues/education/audio/TFA_sham_2.mp3

Summary of these programs

The theory -- TFA was started ostensibly to provide young, enthusiastic teachers to fill vacant spots in "under-resourced" urban and rural schools or where math/science teachers are scarce. TFA recruits idealistic students as "Corps members" (I'll call them TFAers), using the language of social justice and telling them that they are the new civil rights movement. TFA's Academic Impact Model (AIM) asserts that teachers are the key -- that problems caused by socioeconomic factors are merely excuses used by bad teachers and teachers unions, and that TFAers alone, using the TFA recipe, have the power to make students succeed -- a success measured solely by testing.

The practice -- TFA gives them less than 20 hours of practical training and inculcates in them the neoliberal education mantra of standardization, narrow curricula, high-stakes testing, the superiority of charter schools, and the dangers of teachers unions and traditional education training programs. TFA then puts them into a student teaching position for a month during the summer, with no supervision, and finally puts them alone in a real classroom for two years. They are young, malleable, with no responsibilities, and can be worked 70-80 hours a week (many until they break down). Unconnected from at low salaries, limited benefits, with no opportunity to mature as a teacher through a career, and eventually retire with a pension. To the inevitable extent that external problems interfere with student success, they are constantly told that the teacher is the real key, and thus they are personally responsible for any failures, adding significantly to the stress.

Spreading the gospel -- After those two years, many are encouraged to go into training as principals and superintendents, or become school board members or state commissioners of education. From these positions, armed with the "credibility" of TFA "experience" and citing research of questionable quality or validity, they will then push the neoliberal agenda at the local, state, and federal level, and move ever more TFA Corps members into schools. They w

The larger agenda -- TFA's originally claimed purpose was to staff schools that had teacher shortages. Now, however, they frequently require school districts to sign quota contracts, displacing professional teachers and credentialed applicants with these raw, never-maturing recruits. The resulting deprofessionalization of teaching cuts costs, while at the same time creating a docile, low-paid, unorganized work force pushing a narrow, unthinking curriculum that presumably will produce students who will become docile, low-paid, unorganized workers. This goes hand in hand with TFA's efforts to break teachers unions and parent-teacher associations -- which are the real links to the community and protectors of the learning environment -- and to crush the education schools. Eventually, to privatize public education.

The irony -- It is this express intent of TFA, behind its ironic misuse of social-justice/civil-rights language, that explains its widespread support among well-funded right-wing foundations and corporations, entities that have traditionally opposed -- and still oppose -- social justice efforts.

Introduction

(quotes from ER's closing summary)

This is "an attempt to disrupt the discourse that TFA and other ed reformers employ to manufacture public acquiescence to the imposition of an agenda that seeks to further consolidate knowledge, wealth and power for the few at the expense of the many."

The most jaw-dropping claims TFA founder Wendy Kopp makes for TFA and its partners are "the way they purport to be an essential force in working toward educational equity for poor students of color -- basically an essential part of a new civil rights movement that is grounded in the twisted logic that market forces and private profit provide the only pathway to justice and equality."

"Instead of working to strengthen and expand the democratic and equalizing function of universal public education and other public goods that are essential components of a robust democracy, TFA and its partners are working to protect and reinforce the status quo -- a worldview where the ideology of social Darwinism reigns supreme."

In response to accusations in comments on the show that it is biased, ER says it makes no pretense of being impartial, that the situation is very clear and they're telling it like it is.

The Resource People

1. Neha Singhal (NS)
Cohost of the show: business major, interested in social justice, joined TFA and was assigned to a school on the Texas/Mexican border
2. Jameson Brewer (JB)
Now near the end of 2 years in TFA; certified to teach high school history, couldn't get a job (recession, NCLB focus away from history/arts) -- in two years had only two interviews, one had 412 applicants within 2 days of posting; his calling was teaching, so though he was partially familiar with and not wholly comfortable with TFA, he applied, was accepted, and was placed in Georgia. See also: <http://nepc.colorado.edu/blog/jameson-brewer-hyper-accountability-1> and http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2012/02/teach_for_america_corps_member.html
3. Kevin Kumashiro (KK)
Professor of Asian-American Studies and Education and teacher educator at the University of Illinois at Chicago
4. (Wendy Kopp) (WK)
Founder of TFA, not an actual resource person, but quoted
4. Diane Ravitch (DR)
Education historian and former Assistant Secretary of Education
5. Philip Kovacs (PK)
Associate Professor of Education, University of Alabama - Huntsville (see also http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/living-in-dialogue/2012/02/phil_kovacs_responds_to_the_la.html)
6. Barbara Torre Veltry (BV)
Assistant Professor of Education, Northern Arizona University; wrote book: *Learning on Other People's Kids* (<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1607524422/>) based on her experiences and conversations she had with TFAers and their advisers, whom she mentored for years

What is the "Neoliberal Education Agenda" (as used here)?

1. An insistence on factors that would be unacceptable in the schools where the supporters of this agenda send their own children:
 - a. a curriculum that is
 1. centrally determined and standardized, far from the community and removed from influence and reality-references of the community
 2. narrow (without the arts, music, recess, etc.)
 3. increasingly based on corporate-prepared materials.
 - b. success (both student and school) measured purely by high-stakes context-less testing
 - c. failure accompanied by punishment
2. An insistence on teachers as the primary variable of student success or lack thereof, and an explicit or implicit discounting of socioeconomic and cultural factors.
3. Deprofessionalization of teachers
 - a. Elimination of curriculum flexibility
 - b. Elimination of tenure, encouragement of low-paid transitory teachers
 - c. Denigration of education schools
4. Denigration of the primary protectors of student learning conditions and connections to the community -- teachers unions and parent-teacher organizations
5. The use of market values in analyzing and "fixing" education
6. Increased corporate involvement in education
 - a. setting the agenda
 - b. producing profit-making standardized teaching materials
 - c. running profit-making charter schools, often displacing or squeezing public schools
7. A radically different concept of education -- movement
 - a. toward privatization and competition in education (e.g., quasi-private charter schools).
 - b. away from the concept of a right of all children to an equal-quality education
8. Primary target: lower-income, powerless people
9. Bipartisan

What is TFA?

1. The organization
 - a. Non-profit founded by Wendy Kopp (based on Princeton thesis) in 1990
 - b. Original purpose: to send recent college graduates and some young professional to teach for two years in under-resourced rural and urban school.
 - c. Similar to Peace Corps and Americorps, but non-volunteer: pays full teacher salary
 - d. 2011: 48,000 applicants for 5,000 positions
2. TFA process
 - a. 5 weeks "training" -- the "Institute"
 1. Teaching as Leadership (TAL):
 - a. lesson planning, "backward planning," classroom management
 - b. "Induction" -- told they are the vanguard of the new civil rights movement
 2. Different experiences
 - a. 16-20 hours teaching students (BV)
 - b. 18 hours team teach with 2-3 other TFAers (JB)
 - c. 4 solo weeks in charge of class of summer students (guinea pigs) (NS)
 - d. Contrast: Idaho cosmetologist: 2200 hours under supervision of professional, with periodic licensing visitations

- b. Then placement as "teacher of record" (sole teacher) in a classroom -- not in the place where "training" was done.
- c. Serve for two years (unless, as frequently the case, they burn out -- see STRESS)
- d. Encouraged to move into leadership positions
 - 1. Principal (Columbia for 1.5-2 years) -- some TFA areas have numeric goals for number of TFA-alum principals
 - 2. Superintendents -- Brode Superintendents Academy (the wealthy Brode Foundation is a big TFA financial backer)
 - 3. School board -- some areas have numeric goals
 - 4. State commissioners -- Louisiana, Tennessee, DC

The Record and the "Research"

- 1. Three cities cited for TFA success
 - a. WK (in her book *A Chance to Make History*)
 - 1. New York City, New Orleans and DC on everyone's list of hardest-to-change schools
 - 2. Thanks to TFA, these are the fastest improving schools in the U.S.
 - b. DR
 - 1. New York City
 - a. Lots of TFA teachers
 - b. No closing of racial gap in 10 years
 - c. Claims for NYC are actually based on data for whole state
 - d. Lack of progress known before *A Chance to Make History* was published
 - e. Even w/testing -- NAEP (federal National Assessment of Educational Progress) -- NYC was either unimproved or one of the least improved.
 - 2. New Orleans -- this is a model???
 - a. School system and union wiped out
 - b. Can't compare before/after Katrina because it's a whole different population
 - c. 70% of students now in charter schools
 - d. 79% of charters rated "D" or "F" by the state
 - 3. DC
 - a. Michele Rhee a TFA alum
 - b. More than half of teachers hired by Rhee and deputy Kaya Henderson, so any change should be on a dramatic scale
 - c. Claims of improvement overwhelmed by massive cheating scandal
 - d. Rhee appointees at center of this resigned
 - e. DC has the biggest black/white achievement gap in the country
- 2. "Supportive" "research" on the TFA website's research page
 - a. Claim: TFAers have as much impact on student achievement as veteran teachers
 - b. PK analyzed the 12 reports "supporting this claim"
 - 1. 1/3 are irrelevant to claim (non-peered reviewed; about assigning teachers to low-income schools, effects of voluntary youth service, etc.)
 - 2. Only two peer-reviewed pieces
 - a. Claim: TFAers go on to "pro-social" jobs
 - b. Actually shows non-TFAers more politically engaged
 - 3. 6 or 7 depend on defining "achievement" as test scores
 - a. Some are prefaced as to weak to use (data shaky, too much noise, etc.)
 - b. Some show mixed results

- c. None show TFAers as better than certified teachers at raising test scores, much less intangible aspects real achievement.
- 4. One survey of principals
 - a. Said they were enthusiastic about TFA
 - b. Only one page
 - c. Not peer-reviewed
 - d. No details of study (cherry-picking?)
 - e. Affected by political danger to principals who felt otherwise?
- 5. North Carolina "Portal" study
 - a. TFAers did produce good gains
 - b. But only in second year
 - c. Drop-out rate so high it cancelled the effect
 - d. TFA can't be considered sustainable -- every position filled by TFAers eliminates an avenue for someone to mature into a great, effective teacher.
- 6. **PK's challenge in Huntsville**
 - a. **TFA claim: teachers are the sole determinant of student success,**
 - b. **Test this:**
 - 1. **Swap all the teachers in high and low performing schools.**
 - 2. **In three years, the situation should be reversed**
 - c. **No one has taken him up on it.**