
TOWARDS A NON-MANAGERIAL, NON-HELPER VISION OF TEACHING: DOCUMENTING A FUSION OF HORIZONS FOR STUDENT EMPOWERMENT

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America has a demographic mismatch in its schools. As noted elsewhere, a majority of the teachers in public primary and secondary schools are white,¹ while increasingly more of their students belong to communities of color.² Because of the history of racism in this country, this demographic mismatch creates issues of power. A picture of a white teacher in front of a classroom of exclusively Black and Brown students draws on oppressive and disempowering histories of segregation and even slavery. This picture becomes especially troubling when teachers position themselves as having access to rational standardized knowledge that they are trying to help their Black and Brown students know.

Teacher educators have been investigating ways to rob the demographic mismatch of this disempowering history. How can white preservice teachers be prepared to do meaningful work with communities of color? Joyce Elaine King and Gloria Ladson-Billings observe the need for “a theory of emancipatory teacher education.”³ This emancipatory teacher education would surely involve a training in culturally responsive pedagogy in which teachers prepare culturally relevant curricula for students.⁴ However, scholars have been skeptical of the ability of white teachers to become fully culturally relevant.⁵ Aaron Schutz worries when teachers with privilege in relation to their students seek to “help”

¹ “Spotlight A: Characteristics of Public School Teachers by Race/Ethnicity” in “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups,” *National Center for Education Statistics*, last updated February 2019, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/spotlight_a.asp.

² Table 203.5 “Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2018” in *National Center for Education Statistics, 2018 Digest of Education Statistics*, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_203.50.asp?current=yes.

³ Joyce Elaine King & Gloria Ladson-Billings, “The Teacher Education Challenge in Elite University Settings: Developing the Critical Perspectives for Teaching in a Democratic and Multicultural Society,” *The European Journal of Intercultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 27.

⁴ Geneva Gay, “Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 53, no. 2 (2002): 106-116.

⁵ Aaron Schutz, “Home Is a Prison in the Global City: The Tragic Failure of School-Based Community Engagement Strategies,” *Review of Educational Research* 76, no. 4 (2006): 691-743.

their students, they necessarily formulate their students as having deficit knowledge.⁶

If this is true, then what are we to make of programs like Teach For America (TFA) that attempt to deal with problems stemming from the above demographic mismatch in education by paradoxically recruiting mostly white graduates from elite universities to teach in under-resourced communities? Does the willingness of these recruits to “help” communities of color necessarily make them oppressive in the way Schutz identifies? In this paper, I theorize an answer to this question as well as necessary components of the theory of emancipatory teacher education. Using interview data from a study of teachers trained by TFA, I argue training in culturally relevant teaching does little to prepare teachers to succeed in culturally diverse classrooms unless it includes some engagement with the cultural Other. I pair these data with the work of Herbert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor who argue encounter with the Other can be a Gadamerian “fusion of horizons.” I will demonstrate how this fusion of horizons allows teachers to escape Schutz’s worries and move closer to embodying culturally responsive teaching.

POSITIONALITY AND METHODOLOGY

Before getting to this argument, though, it is necessary to establish how I came to this work and explain why the qualitative interviews are a crucial part of the investigation done here. As a white 2013 TFA corps member myself, I was left feeling unprepared for the work I was expected to do as a ninth-grade algebra teacher in Detroit, teaching exclusively Black and Latinx students. Despite reading critical race theorists like Derrick Bell and feminist pedagogues like bell hooks, I had never had the requisite fusion of horizons that would have given me a focus on the goals my students had for themselves. While this experience was the start of the questions with which I engage in this essay, I recognized its incompleteness in theorizing about the experience of other TFA corps members. I did semi-structured interviews with educators who were trained by TFA to supplement my experience and intuitions.⁷

In what follows, I will be using these interviews combined with scholarship to investigate and complicate three main theses: (1) TFA positions teachers as managers even when they try to include culturally responsive teaching materials in their training; (2) TFA recruits those who want to be helpers; and (3) teaching of culturally diverse students depends on reaching a fusion of horizons in addition to pedagogical knowledge and skills.

⁶ Aaron Schutz. “Teaching Freedom? Postmodern Perspectives,” *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 2 (2000): 215-251.

⁷ These interviews received IRB Exemption. All names of participants are changed.

TEACH FOR AMERICA AND TEACHER AS MANAGER EVEN WITH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

As TFA-founder Wendy Kopp was putting together her plan for TFA, David Berliner was proposing to think of teachers as kinds of managers.⁸ The image of teachers as managers did not develop in a vacuum. Policymakers were critiquing traditional teacher preparation programs in the 1990s over hysteria around *A Nation at Risk* in which a Department of Education commission declared that all school achievement was declining. E. D. Hirsch testified in front of a 1998 US Congressional Hearing on Teaching Preparation Initiatives, arguing that teacher preparation programs in colleges of education were partly to blame for low student achievement.⁹ Elsewhere, Hirsch listed the skills and dispositions teacher preparation programs were not giving their students: “clear focus, definite standards, diligent practice, and continual monitoring through tests and other means:”¹⁰ decidedly managerial characteristics.

Wendy Kopp’s plan flipped Berliner’s proposal on its head to achieve the kind of work practices Hirsch and policymakers were looking for from teachers. Instead of teachers as managers, she proposed managers as teachers: elite college students who were planning to enter careers in investment banks or consulting firms had the right kind of work ethic to be successful as teachers in districts with teacher shortages if there was a venerable and quick path to filling those shortages.¹¹ Thus, it made sense to begin using texts like *Teaching as Leadership* when training new recruits who had been recruited for their leadership qualities and accomplishments.¹²

I have argued elsewhere that texts like *Teaching as Leadership* necessarily contribute to imaginings of students as lacking and requiring help to be remade with the kind of skills, knowledges, and even motivations which will allow them to flourish beyond the classroom.¹³ In a racist, capitalist society, the necessary motivations for success beyond the classroom means those motivations that will allow students to compete economically for high-paying

⁸ Wendy Kopp, “An Argument and Plan for the Creation of the Teacher Corps,” Senior Thesis (Princeton University, 1989); David C. Berliner, “If the Metaphor Fits, Why Not Wear It? The Teacher as Executive,” *Theory Into Practice* 29, no. 2 (1990): 85-93.

⁹ E. D. Hirsch, speaking on Teacher Preparation Initiatives, on February 24, 1998, to the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth, and Families of the Committee on Education and the Workforce, 105th Cong., 2nd sess., 9.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED443184.pdf>.

¹⁰ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need and Why We Don’t Have Them* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 230.

¹¹ Wendy Kopp, *One Day, All Children. . . The Unlikely Triumph of Teach For America and What I Learned Along the Way* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 4-5; Kopp, “An Argument.”

¹² Steven Farr, *Teaching as Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher’s Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

¹³ Spencer J. Smith, “The Color of Mind Discourse as Educational Debt,” *Educational Theory* 71, no. 2 (2021): 267-287. DOI: 10.1111/edth.12475.

jobs in a capitalist market and achieve financial empowerment. Teaching objectives organized in this way frequently move to displace and replace the goals of students.

This displacement can be seen in Herter's study Schutz uses to theorize oppressive helpers. Herter studies a group of white, middle-class college students in a class called "Theater and Social Change," who were facilitating a night class for African American working class students that fulfilled an English requirement.¹⁴ Herter observes that the college students were wrapped up in using the texts, theories, and abstractions they were studying for their college course and thus missed some of the goals students had for themselves in the course.¹⁵ Schutz notes the problem of trying to apply theory like dialogic instruction whole sale onto a specific context.¹⁶ This application problem means some teachers may enact liberatory practices in a managerial way from either lack of training or because of the demands of their specific contexts.

Similarly, my participants often encountered problems in their teaching placements that the theories they were learning did not give them a handle to successfully solve. For instance, multiple white participants told me about navigating conversations about the N-word with their predominantly Black students. While one participant, Zoe, worked with a veteran teacher trained by TFA to scaffold a conversation with high school students about using the N-word when reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she was critical of TFA for not giving her practice at navigating issues that would arise from racial difference in her specific context. However, while Zoe was critical of TFA's teaching of the theory, she ultimately felt like the support she received from TFA after her training enabled her to enact the theory that she learned.

Conversely, another teacher experienced problems with his handling of the use of the N-word in his classroom. As an individual being newly inducted into anti-racist ways of thinking, he knew the N-word was not an appropriate word for school settings. But since he had no relevant experiences before his time with TFA to suggest how to handle the use of the N-word otherwise, he adopted a managerial, helper approach to his students. He conceptualized their use of the N-word as a deficiency that would hold them back educationally. He asked his Black principal how to instruct his students not to use the word, and his principal told him the way she cut down on students saying it is by saying it herself. She suggested he might try something similar, so he did. His actions resulted in a small classroom controversy causing angry parent phone calls to the school. In this situation, the high school teacher was trying to be helpful, so he was surprised at how his actions were interpreted oppressively.

¹⁴ Robert J. Herter, "Conflicting Interests: Critical Theory Inside Out," in *Literacy and Democracy: Teacher Research and Composition Studies in Pursuit of Habitable Spaces*, eds. Cathy Fleischer & David Schaafama (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1998), 157.

¹⁵ Herber, "Conflicting Interests," 172.

¹⁶ Schutz, "Teaching Freedom?", 242.

These examples of classroom issues around the N-word show TFA's trouble with fully preparing white teachers to be prepared to enact culturally responsive praxis even if these teachers theoretically understand what is expected of them. However, another participant, Erin, noted a complete disconnect between the culturally relevant teaching theory her TFA training provided her with and her specific teaching context.¹⁷ Although her training included thinking about how to do managerial things like utilize student test data to support student learning outcomes, the training in culturally relevant teaching was the most prominent part of her training. She was particularly taken by practices of building relationships with students and communities, committing to these practices as part of an antiracist praxis. However, she felt constrained in her ability to enact this praxis by the policies of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter where she was hired: "I don't think I learned to be an anti-racist teacher when I was policing Black students... consistently and being taught to do so." This teacher clearly was expected to do managerial teaching practices even while TFA preached something different to her in their training.

While most of the examples in this section demonstrate perceived discrepancies between the theory of TFA and its practices, I want to end the section with a participant, Padma, who felt supported in her rejection of managerial, helping teaching practices. As an early childhood teacher, Padma often gave advice to parents about the schools in which they should enroll their students. In one instance, a Black mother wanted to know if she should keep her student in the system the early childhood program would lead into, which was a No-Excuses school like KIPP, in which behavior is policed radically to support high academic expectations. Padma said, "I could see this future playing out where he would have been penalized potentially ... put into that prison school-to-prison pipeline for being himself and we had identified that in pre-K. So ... don't go down this road." Padma's goals for her student had been altered by interaction with him, and she saw other tracks beyond a racist, capitalist system would allow him to be more successful.

When I questioned this current TFA staff member about how this advice might conflict with some of TFA's teachings as in *Teaching as Leadership*, Padma corrected me very quickly, saying TFA hasn't used *Teaching as Leadership* in their training materials for a while and their new training in culturally relevant practices gave her the knowledge and skills to be able to recognize what could potentially be a disastrous educational future for her student. Moving to training involving more culturally relevant practices allowed TFA to re-inscribe the cultural context of particular students as important to make sense of the discrete separable skills of managerial teaching. This re-contextualization is promising because philosophers like Derek Gottlieb have

¹⁷ It is important to note that culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant teaching are not synonymous, though Gay uses Ladson-Billings's conception of "culturally relevant teaching" in her development of a culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002).

argued focusing on discrete “highly-effective” teaching moves risks obfuscating the role context plays when determining good teaching practice.¹⁸

DOES TEACH FOR AMERICA RECRUIT THOSE WHO WANT TO HELP?

TFA intentionally positions its teachers as helpers in the Schutzian sense. This positioning happens through TFA’s articulation of the problem they are trying to solve. The goal of TFA is “to raise achievement levels in low-income schools.”¹⁹ This goal is concerned with the gaps in school achievement that exist between low-income, and frequently Black and Brown, students compared with their higher-income and frequently white peers.²⁰ It has been documented how this goal, paired with TFA’s recruitment efforts at elite predominantly white universities, has contributed to what Teju Cole has referred to as the “white savior industrial complex,” in which white Do-Gooders, or helpers in Schutz’s language, work in Black and Brown spaces.²¹

In Schutz and Herter, it seems to be a necessary part of oppressive helping for the helpers to conceive of what they are doing as helping. Consequently, maybe this oppressive helping feeds into the white savior industrial complex. This conception means a deficit model for students,²² casting any knowledge or skills or goals students might already have as lacking. It is useful to interrogate the data from the interviews to see if teachers trained by TFA were active recruits in TFA’s white savior industrial complex.

Some of my participants did join TFA to do good and be helpers. One white teacher, Brooke, joined TFA after receiving a degree in education because she felt called to work in a high need area because of her experience growing up in a middle-class school district with parents who did not have college degrees. Brooke wondered how things might have been different for her had she not been surrounded by other families and educators who assumed college was the destination of the majority of her high school classmates. She wanted to be that encouraging adult for other students.

Ultimately, to be an encouraging teacher for her students, though, Brooke felt like she had to go beyond TFA. While TFA stressed what Brooke called militarized behavior management in the classroom, she received a different model from her partner teacher who was an experienced educator. With her partner teacher, Brooke learned to treat her students like students. She noted that her colleagues, many of them TFA corps members, didn’t understand what was happening in her classroom. Her students were some of the happiest, most

¹⁸ Derek Gottlieb, “Beyond a Rule-Following Model of Skillful Practice in Teacher Development,” *Educational Theory* 62, no. 5 (2012): 504.

¹⁹ Kopp, *One Day...*, 174.

²⁰ Kopp, 174.

²¹ Colette M. Cann, “What School Movies and TFA Teach Us About Who Should Teach Urban Youth: Dominant Narratives as Public Pedagogy,” *Urban Education* 5, no. 3 (2015): 288-315; Teju Cole, “The White Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012.

²² Schutz, “Teaching Freedom?”, 242-243.

high-achieving students in her school while the students in militarized behavior management classrooms were often mad and angry.

Brooke serves as a counterexample to the idea that all white TFA recruits seeking to “help” students of color necessarily become conscious parts of the white savior industrial complex. Brooke was motivated to help her majority minority students, but she distanced herself and her praxis from the white savior industrial complex. She said, “There is a big responsibility placed on you if you are a white woman teaching Black students or Black and Brown students certain topics because you are sitting in a role of privilege disseminating information and you want to make sure... you’re not playing the white savior role.” Other white participants similarly articulated differences between their work and their perception of the white savior, or they worried about whether their work would be perceived that way. However, the industrial part of the white savior industrial complex suggests it is a power that goes far beyond the individual.

Unlike Brooke, most of my white participants did not join TFA to do good. Rather, it was something they came to as a way either to quickly and cheaply relocate or as a cheap way to enter the teaching profession. In these cases, perhaps these individuals become the whiteness for TFA’s white savior industrial complex. It does look like TFA allows recent white college graduates to quickly enter a professional world, but many of the educators of color I interviewed noted the same draw to TFA. For instance, Veronica, a Mexican American, studied to become a teacher and chose to do TFA to quickly earn a job and the ability to move outside of the metropolitan area she grew up in.

Even this example, though, is part of the white savior industrial complex. Cann writes, “The White savior industrial complex proposes band-aid solutions in the form of White saviors, ignoring the deeper entrenched forms of institutional racism.”²³ Even if its teacher-recruits aren’t always white, TFA still represents a band-aid solution to educational inequity. TFA offers these “quick fixes” of supposedly new and talented teachers instead of thinking about the conditions that create an economic environment in which so many people of color as well as white people feel like TFA is the most convenient economic option even when these people have studied education in the traditional way. And this band-aid is a gamble because TFA has no control over whether the teachers they train will actually become successful teachers of minoritized students because, as I will argue in the next section, success depends upon the fusion of horizons.

Before turning to that argument, though, it is worth revisiting the thesis tested in this section: “TFA recruits those who want to be helpers.” Following a simplified Schutz and Herter, conceiving of teaching as helping is oppressive. The evidence from cited research and the interviews suggest a more complicated idea. Some TFA teachers, like Brooke, certainly join TFA in order to do good in the world, but the image of helper in TFA’s teacher training is often insufficient

²³ Cann, “What School Movies and TFA Teach,” 291.

to care for TFA teachers' particular students. Brooke, Padma, and Erin all went beyond TFA's explicit training in varying degrees to best serve their students. Perhaps one can say helping becomes oppressive in the teaching and learning relationship when the teacher assumes the goals of her students. This kind of helping becomes paternalistic. Brooke, Padma, and Erin resisted paternalistic visions of teaching to better appreciate the context of their students. Just as a managerial vision of teaching de-contextualizes teaching so too does a paternalistically helper vision of teaching. If a teacher assumes her praxis is helping just by virtue of being a teacher, then she closes off any input from students detailing how they can be served. In other words, she might miss the different learning needs of Padma's student and therefore fail to best serve him. Padma's dealing with her student is a good example of what Charles Taylor calls a fusion of horizons.

FUSION OF HORIZONS

Many of the examples given above involved moments shared with cultural Others that created a fusion of horizons. Instead of trying to control students with their managerial rules, educators I interviewed often used encounter with their students to shape their teaching. Zoe sought out additional training and preparation when trying to negotiate culturally sensitive conversations about the N-word with her Black students with whom she recognized she did not share culture. Despite (or maybe because of?) having significant training in teaching and education, Brooke recognized the value of the body of knowledge of her partner teacher who had lived in the community of their school her whole life. Even Padma went beyond her training when encountering the needs of a particular Black student.

It is useful to consider these moments as examples of what Herbert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor following Gadamer call a fusion of horizons.²⁴ Horizons are like languages, and, just as two interlocutors find a unique language as they come to understand each other, so too might their horizons for understanding change. A fusion of horizons happens not by some rule but by engaged interlocution with the Other.²⁵ In his Gadamerian discussion of how cultures come to understand each other, Taylor describes the fusion of horizons: "The 'horizons' here are at first distinct; they are the way that each has of understanding the human condition in their nonidentity. The 'fusion' comes about when one (or both) undergo a shift; the horizon is extended to make room for the object that before did not fit within it."²⁶ Taylor writes this fusion changes

²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), 289. *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 304., cited in Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, "Fusing Horizons," in *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 110, DOI: 10.4159/9780674287136.

²⁵ Dreyfus and Taylor, "Fusing Horizons," 111.

²⁶ Charles Taylor, "Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes," in *Law's Hermeneutics: Other Investigations*, eds. Simone Glanert & Fabien Girard (London: Routledge, 2017), 34-47, DOI: 10.4324/9781315648651.

the languages both of the knower and the known, or the teacher and the student. When encountered with the learning needs of a particular Black student, Padma’s language of educational understanding must be extended to include this particular student’s needs. This extension allows her to make a non-standard recommendation to the student’s mother in an effort to empower him.

Or consider white TFA recruit Cecily whose life goals changed because of engaged interlocution with her Black and Latinx students. Cecily noted that her students would frequently “blow up for seemingly no reason.” These blow-ups motivated Cecily to find ways to help her students beyond the academic curriculum, so she talked to her school’s social worker who told her that many of her students had experienced intense levels of trauma even beyond racism and classism in their communities, even though race and class were added traumas too in a racist and classist society. These conversations motivated Cecily to go back to school to become a social worker so she could be better prepared to help students manage their trauma.

As these examples show, a fusion of horizons allows an educator to see the goals of her students as just as consequential as the goals she has for them. In some cases, this means redefining the educational pathways recommended for them. In others, it means using different methodologies and techniques to support students in their own learning. But always it demands the teacher to perceive her students not as objects to be managed but as unique, particular humans. A fusion of horizons solves Schutz’s issue of oppressive helpers. If the college students in Herter’s study had been able to experience a fusion of horizons with their high school theater students, then they would have supported their high school students in achieving what they wanted for themselves.

CONCLUSION: FUSION OF HORIZONS AS MORE THAN REFLECTION ON IDENTITY

To conclude, we might consider how teacher preparation programs might encourage fusion of horizons in their teacher candidates to move individuals from being oppressive helpers to culturally responsive supporters. Many of the TFA-trained educators I interviewed spoke with me about the identity work they did in their TFA training. Several educators of color told me how TFA was the first educational space where they were encouraged to think consciously of their racial and cultural identities. This work is necessary in preparing educators capable of fusions of horizon. Indeed, in describing the necessary conditions for a fusion of horizons, Dreyfus and Taylor propose the slogan: “no understanding the other without a changed understanding of self.”²⁷

Linda Darling-Hammond relates four understandings teachers need in order to learn to teach for social justice—(a) “understanding self in relation to others,” (b) “understanding social contexts,” (c) “understanding students,” and

²⁷ Dreyfus and Taylor, “Fusing Horizons,” 125.

(d) “understanding and transforming schools and classrooms.”²⁸ Like they note the importance of (a), Dreyfus and Taylor also note the importance of (b)-(d). As teacher candidates come to understand the horizons of their future students through study and experience, they are better able to understand “what is distorting [their] understanding ...”²⁹ To encourage a fusion of horizons, teacher preparation programs ought to prioritize allowing teacher candidates to work within minoritized or culturally diverse communities, while providing them language to understand the horizons in those communities.

If teacher preparation programs support their teacher candidates in developing a fusion of horizons, they necessarily encourage the adoption of teacher identities outside of the oppressive helper or manager. Even though TFA may be part of the white savior industrial complex that creates oppressive helpers and managers, the reflective identity work in its training prepares its recruits to experience a fusion of horizons with their students. This fusion of horizons may result in protesting the methods of TFA and embracing the student and community goals for education. If reflective identity work can have this effect on TFA-trained teachers, then what more can this work paired with understanding of horizons produce? When educators are open to alternative goals for their students’ learning, they more fully recognize their students’ humanity and can encourage student empowerment beyond the demands of success in a racist, capitalist market.

²⁸ Linda Darling-Hammond, “Educating a Profession for Equitable Practice,” in *Learning to Teach for Social Justice*, eds. Linda Darling-Hammond, Jennifer French, & Silvia Paloma Garcia-Lopez (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 201-212.

²⁹ Dreyfus and Taylor, “Fusing Horizons,” 110.
