

## **Teach for America and the Politics of Progressive Neoliberalism**

**By Randall Lahann & Emilie Mitescu Reagan**

Teach for America (TFA), a non-profit organization designed to recruit recent college graduates to commit two years to teach in understaffed urban and rural schools across the country, has been heralded by private organizations (e.g., 2008 recipient of the Social Capitalist Award) and state agencies (e.g., Duncan, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2004) as a poster child for alternative pathways to teaching. However, at the same time, TFA has also been criticized for its conceptions of teaching and teacher education and for its impact on student learning in urban and rural schools across the country (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Although numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of TFA teachers on student learning (e.g., Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, & Wyckoff, 2007; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Glazerman, Mayer, & Decker, 2006; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Stevens & Dial, 1993; Veltri, 2008), conclusions as to the program's efficacy remain contested (Zeichner & Conklin, 2005).

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Rather than examine the impact of TFA, the purpose of this article is to problematize TFA's intentions by situating its political philosophy in the larger context of neoliberal educational reform. To do so, we analyze TFA's explicit use of the language of business and appropriation of corporate culture in its pursuit of more equitable public education. We find that while TFA builds on some neoliberal assumptions, it simultaneously breaks from others in order to pursue its goals. We argue that this has created a guiding set of assumptions that can be thought of as "progressive neoliberalism."

We identify our research as a critical policy analysis. While firmly grounded in the Foucauldian tradition of critique as the basis for deeper understanding of social institutions, the field of critical policy analysis encompasses a range of approaches, each of which, to some degree, influence the questions asked and the methods employed (Olssen, Codd, & O'Neil, 2004). We agree with Patti Lather's (1992) assertion that the critical perspective in education research should ultimately embrace emancipatory goals. Accordingly, our work is situated in much the same way as that of scholars such as Stephen Ball (2003, 2007) and Michael Apple (2001, 2006) who understand education policy as text and read it through the lenses of democracy, power, and justice. Building from their work, and the research of other critical education scholars, our research agenda is to challenge the dichotomy between progressivism and neoliberalism in teacher education by unpacking and problematizing the political agenda of TFA.

We come to this analysis informed not only by the research and discourse on TFA and neoliberalism, but also by our experience as previous TFA corps members in San Jose, California, from 2000-2002, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from 2003-2005, respectively. As doctoral students at Boston College, we were struck by the political divide between TFA and schools of education that espouse progressive philosophies.<sup>1</sup> In our estimation, despite very real differences in approaches, both groups are working towards the same goal of making public education more equitable. This article does not seek to take sides, nor does it attempt to end debate. Rather, our goal is to clarify discussion and call for a more nuanced examination of the intersecting agendas.

We begin this article with a discussion of neoliberal education reform, focusing in particular on the field of teacher education. Next, we examine the criticisms of neoliberalism as a suitable political philosophy for education. We then investigate the often uneasy alliances among a diverse set of actors, all of whom have agendas that benefit from neoliberal policy to some degree; in particular, we explore a political space that exists for neoliberals who challenge some elements of conservatism and align themselves with progressive goals. We identify this space as "progressive neoliberalism," and chart the concept in terms of five shared assumptions. We examine TFA's policies and practices, classifying it as a progressive neoliberal organization and critiquing it in terms of its potential to further neoliberal policy in public education. Finally, we provide implications for TFA and the field of teacher education.

### **Neoliberalism in Education**

Neoliberal assumptions have implicitly guided many recent national and international education reforms (Apple, 2006; Cuban, 2004; Torres, 2005). However, neoliberalism has been so well-insulated in public discourse that, as Apple (2006) points out, its existence is rarely noted, let alone challenged, outside of academic circles. Instead, as Apple articulates, it occupies a largely uncontested position as “the common sense of an emerging international consensus” (p. 15). Since its rise to prominence in the 1970s, neoliberalism has served as the often invisible and supposedly objective worldview within which social, economic, and political challenges are reduced from complex conceptual issues to technical problems requiring the free play of individual self-interest and the guiding hand of market forces to generate solutions (Harvey, 2005). As British scholar Mark Olssen (1996) notes, however, neoliberalism differs from the absolute commitment to *laissez-faire* public policy of classic liberalism in which individuals are trusted to act efficiently for their own benefit. Rather, neoliberalism calls for state policies that create competitive entrepreneurs as opposed to policies that set them free to act for their own gain and, as a result, society’s benefit. From a neoliberal perspective, then, the state’s responsibility is to pursue the goals of freedom, choice, consumer sovereignty, competition, and individual initiative, by putting into place carefully constructed policies of auditing, accounting, and management (Olssen & Peters, 2005). This conception of state policy is a critical and defining characteristic of neoliberalism: faith in the market process valued over commitment to social outcomes. Although neoliberal policies may achieve their desired results, their fundamental logic and philosophical justification draw not from what they achieve, but from how they propose to achieve it.

Teacher education, in particular, has been a site for neoliberal reform for a number of years. Weiner (2007), for example, suggests four categories of neoliberal teacher education reform: privatization (e.g., the growing number of for-profit teacher preparation and teacher staffing programs); fragmentation of control and oversight of schooling (i.e., hiring and practicum placements in charter schools, non-university based programs for teacher preparation); use of standardized tests to gauge teacher quality; and the weakening of teacher unions as a voice in what constitutes teacher quality. Sleeter (2008) makes similar charges, locating three related neoliberal agendas in teacher education: recasting teacher education as technical support for raising student test scores; defining teacher quality in terms of testable content knowledge; and shrinking university-based, college recommending teacher education programs or bypassing them altogether in favor of non-university based “early entry” programs.

Of particular interest to this article is the increasing proliferation of early entry programs, often identified as “alternate-route” certification or recruitment programs,<sup>2</sup> such as TFA. Nationwide, the number of such programs has been growing since their inception in the early 1980s. Currently all 50 states and the District of Columbia offer some alternative to university-based college recommending

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teacher education programs (hereafter referred to simply as “college recommending”), enrolling over 59,000 teacher candidates in 2006 (Feistritzer, 2007). Both the growing prominence of these programs and the significant public support for them at both the state and federal level (Duncan, 2009; National Governors Association, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2004) reflect neoliberalism’s profound effect on teacher education policy.

Proponents (e.g., Ballou & Podgursky, 1999; Feistritzer, 2007) claim that early entry programs deregulate teacher education, freeing the market to find, train, and place the nation’s teachers, while also expanding the nation’s teaching corps to include a more culturally, racially, and professionally diverse population who would not have entered the profession through college-recommending programs. However, as with other recent educational reforms, early entry programs are hardly a *laissez-faire* approach to teacher education by which schools are free to hire any teachers they choose. Instead, prospective teachers must still pass state licensing examinations that are embedded with presupposed political notions of teacher quality and requisite teacher knowledge (National Research Council, 2001). Indeed, in this respect the course of teacher education neatly matches the route that student education has taken in the past twenty years: in both cases, neoliberal policies have brought market forces to bear on public education, while simultaneously using state-defined knowledge as the currency for competition.

Although neoliberalism is proving an increasingly popular policy model worldwide, it has received significant, often vitriolic academic criticism, especially in its application to public education. We group the criticisms into three rough categories: a reproduction of power critique, a democratic critique, and a social justice critique. Each critique serves more as a specific lens than a unique political position; as such, each critique is complimented and reinforced by the other two. Moreover, at the heart of each critique are the shared assumptions that education is an inherently political process and that neoliberal reforms run contrary to the role education should play in a just, equitable, and democratic society.

With the reproduction of power critique, scholars contend that neoliberalism sustains and promotes capitalism’s exploitive class conflict by reproducing power relations through the accumulation of wealth (McLaren & Farhmandpur, 2001). As such, it represents the hegemonic, politically imposed discourse of the empowered class in western states, which requires the participation of the dominated, on the terms of those in power (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The argument is that class and race disparities will reproduce themselves because the privileged are better equipped to compete over the scarce resources of the best teachers and the best schools, which in turn have a vested interest in competing for the best students (Apple, 2001). The competition, no matter its language or intention, is not a fair one, nor is it well suited for public education, given that the market, like any other competition, necessitates both winners *and* losers (Earley, 2000). Moreover, recent research (Sloan, 2008) has shown that neoliberal values are being replicated in the curricula of America’s public

schools, actively reinforcing the status quo not only through neoliberal education policy, but also through explicit instruction in the values driving it.

Second, the democratic critique argues that neoliberal education policy does not serve the ends of democracy. Although closely related to the reproduction of power critique, the democratic critique sees the disparities resulting from neoliberalism primarily in political terms, rather than economic ones. This critique views the democratic ideal as being fundamentally communal, not an individualistic arena in which actors compete against one another for private gain. Neoliberal policies create environments in which the underprivileged are less able to participate politically (Giroux, 2004), and citizenship itself is redefined in terms of self-interest, as opposed to public need (Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2002). As such, neoliberalism conceives of the school as a space for economic development, instead of political empowerment, thus redefining democracy through the valorization of privately held capital (Apple, 1998; Teeple, 1995). Challenging this corporatized view of education are scholars who critique neoliberalism democratically, advocating an explicitly political education, one in which students are taught to critically engage with governance (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006).

Finally, the social justice critique combines elements of the reproduction of power and democratic critiques, but casts them both in terms of a more essential struggle for equity. The social justice critique charges that the primary role of education is to empower marginalized populations and redress social inequities through democratic education (Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Lahann, Terrell, & Shakman, 2008). Scholars argue that these goals are incompatible with neoliberalism's laissez-faire approach to social injustice as well as its reliance on market forces (e.g., Ahonen, 2002; Earley, 2000). Moreover, since neoliberalism positions the market as an apolitical, objective instrument (Apple, 2006), it lacks the explicitly political focus that a social justice agenda requires of education policy. Furthermore, Cochran-Smith (2003) argues that policies that rely on competition are unlikely to prove successful in education since teaching, which depends on caring relationships to foster students' learning, cannot be reduced to "bottom lines of efficiency and profitability" (p. 374). Drawing on an ethically constructed vision of public education, the social justice critique contends that by ignoring the political and moral dimensions of schooling, neoliberal reforms are ill equipped to address inequities and only serve to reinforce the social relations that produced them in the first place.

### **Progressive Neoliberalism**

Although neoliberalism is recognized as a conservative ideology, Apple (2001) notes that the assumptions of neoliberalism are also frequently held by educators who consider themselves, and are considered by others, to be progressive. This is an example of the complex web of political agendas driving current education policy, formed by stakeholders who may understand themselves to be members of one group, while

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unknowingly contributing to the goals of another. To this point, Apple (2006) argues that the conservative modernization of education owes its success to the mutually beneficial, but sometimes strained relationship between a diverse set of actors with distinct political beliefs: neoliberalism, neoconservatism (a vision of an idealized past which advocates a return to “traditional” knowledge), authoritarian populism (religious fundamentalism), and managerialism (bringing business norms into the education world, hereafter identified in terms of “business” for consistency).

However, because each agenda occupies a distinct political domain in terms of public policy (form of government, what knowledge is worth knowing, role of religion, form of state interventions), many individual actors can find themselves in absolute agreement with some elements of conservative modernization, while being firmly opposed to others. Even within groups there is room for a variety of mutually exclusive opinions. For example, there are certainly a number of neoconservatives who are also authoritarian populists (e.g., the Traditional Values Coalition [2007] which argues that America’s idealized past is as a Christian state), while other neoconservatives appreciate their mission as a secular one and emphasize the objective importance of the Western canon (Will, 2006). Table 1 provides a definition of these ideologies as we use them in this research.

However there are also organizations that use business technology to pursue

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**Table 1**  
**Definition of Key Terms**

<i>Term</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Neoliberalism	Political ideology which calls for state policies that better enable entrepreneurs to compete in the free market. Policies which promote privatization, deregulation, individual choice, and the reduction of government expenditures are valued over those which increase, or promote the welfare state and government control of social and economic activity.
Neoconservatism	In American education, a secular cultural ideology that advocates a return to “traditional” knowledge and rejects multicultural and post-positivist challenges to curriculum.
Authoritarian Populism	Religious fundamentalism which found a home in conservative ideology during the 20th century. In education, closely tied to neoconservatism, but infused with religious, rather than just cultural beliefs.
Managerialism	Political discourse which imports into bureaucracy the models and thinking of business, in particular the valuing of accountability and efficiency based on quantitative data.
Progressivism	The idea that schooling and teacher education are crucial elements in the making of a more just society.

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goals that are neither neoconservative, nor authoritarian populist. Though neoliberalism preaches adherence to a state-designed and state-enforced market, it leaves open the question about what commodities are valued in public education. The combination of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and current trends in state accountability driven by standards and standardized assessments, which taken together reflect both neoconservative ideology as well as neoliberal thought, certainly propose one set of answers to what commodities are of most worth (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). However, there exists a political space for those with agendas that fall outside of the alliance of conservative modernization. In this space, while there is value in the technology of business and the deregulating principles of neoliberalism, there are also questions about the neoconservative and/or authoritarian populist goals towards which they were applied; the “commodities” of education are not just test scores and knowledge, but equity and justice. This space can be thought of as progressive neoliberalism.

We use the term “progressive neoliberalism” to reflect what we perceive to be the spirit and assumptions of the progressive and social justice tradition combined with business-infused managerial strategies. In doing so, we agree with historian James Fraser (2005) who assesses progressivism’s twenty-first century goals as “foster[ing] student learning and linking that learning to a vibrant democracy in the larger society” (p. 279). Progressivism’s tradition of social change, from Dewey to Counts to modern reformers, is defined by its commitment to educational equity, not by particular characteristics of education reform. Accordingly, elements of managerialism and neoliberalism are not necessarily antithetical to the assumptions of social reconstruction in education and “the idea that schooling and teacher education are crucial elements in the making of a more just society” (Zeichner, 2003, p.507). Rather, when they are combined with a progressive agenda, they represent a new attempt to pursue a century-old purpose: the equitable reform of public education. Fraser (2005) recognizes this potential when he calls for modern progressives to be “as flexible about the institutional arrangements they support” (p.281), which he extends to recognizing the potential of “non-traditional” programs such as TFA.

We agree with the critiques of neoliberalism outlined in this article and argue that neoliberal education reform, despite its rhetoric of equity, falls well short of mission that could be understood as “progressive.” The neutral application of market principles fails to even attempt a mission of economic equality and political voice. However, we believe that progressive neoliberal organizations can embrace much of neoliberalism, while simultaneously violating many of its tenets. Thus, if this is true, an examination of progressive neoliberal organizations requires a careful and nuanced treatment of how neoliberal thought can intersect with a progressive mission.

Accordingly, we define progressive neoliberalism as a shared belief in five assumptions about the nature of public education and education reform: (1) public education, as it is currently constituted, reinforces social inequities by failing to provide an excellent education to all students; (2) public education can benefit

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from deregulating market reforms that reward the most efficient service providers, encourage innovation, and bridge the private and public spheres; (3), public education can benefit from the logic, technology, and strategy of business; (4), the market cannot be trusted to rectify inequity by itself, and instead positive action is required to offset historical disparities; and (5) public education is an arena for social activism in which actors can work both within and against the system for equitable ends.

The first three of these assumptions represent the foundation of neoliberal thought in education; however, it is with the fourth and fifth assumptions that neoliberalism and progressive neoliberalism part ways. As Table 2 shows, both progressives and neoliberals would agree on the first assumption of progressive neoliberalism. However, neoliberals would align themselves with the second and third assumptions, while progressives would align themselves with the fourth and fifth.

We offer NCLB, a recent apex of neoliberal reform, as an example to show the distinctions between neoliberalism and progressive neoliberalism. NCLB justifies itself in terms of educational equity (the first assumption of progressive neoliberalism), while its logic is ultimately a faith in market efficiency regulated by choice, and sanctions (following the second assumption), and informed by carefully managed data (in agreement with the third assumption). However, the last two assumptions establish progressive neoliberalism as a form of educational thought that differs significantly from neoliberalism. Neoliberalism trusts managed systems of accountability, competition, and punishment as self-fulfilling solutions, paying no

**Table 2**  
**Progressive Neoliberalism**

<i>Progressive Neoliberal Assumption</i>	<i>Progressivism</i>	<i>Neoliberalism</i>
1. Public education reinforces social inequities by failing to provide an excellent education to all students.	×	×
2. Public education benefits from deregulating market reforms that reward the most efficient service providers, encourage innovation, and bridge the private and public spheres.		×
3. Public education benefits from the logic, technology, and strategy of business.		×
4. The market cannot be trusted to rectify educational inequity by itself.	×	
5. Public education is an arena for social activism in which actors can work both within and against the system.	×	

mind to the historical inequities that demand their own reproduction in such a neutral and passive attempt at social reconstruction. NCLB does not attempt to redress the social forces responsible for the achievement gap, but trusts an evenly implemented policy of accountability to remove them (breaking from the fourth assumption of progressive neoliberalism). Finally, NCLB, like all neoliberal policy, reduces education policy to a technical activity of fine-tuning data collection and market forces; the most fundamental and inequitable elements of the system that the fifth assumption of progressive neoliberalism would challenge, remain unquestioned.

Despite whatever flaws it may have in its execution, progressive neoliberalism demands an active commitment to the politically and economically equitable outcomes of education. Progressive neoliberalism recognizes social inequities and calls for reform that actively targets their elimination, rather than trusting that they will be implicitly purged through evenly enforced policy. Progressive neoliberalism aims to empower marginalized populations, not just in terms of academic achievement, but with political and economic voice. We argue that TFA falls within this political space of progressive neoliberalism, as an organization that subscribes to and benefits from both neoliberalism and business philosophy, but consciously directs their implementation towards ends that challenge educational inequity and the systems that produce it. Though its application, results, and long-term effects remain contested, TFA employs neoliberal strategy in pursuit of progressive goals.

### **Research Method**

Our research method was to examine TFA from a critical perspective for evidence of the political values that have driven its agenda, in order to better locate it in and against the field of progressive teacher education. Our data sources included the current growth and business plan (known as the “2010 growth plan”); publicity and marketing brochures to potential applicants and funders, the 2007 annual report (Teach for America, 2008), the Teach for America website ([www.teachforamerica.org](http://www.teachforamerica.org)), and an interview with Melissa Golden, Vice President of Marketing for Teach for America, and Page Neubert, Director of Growth Strategy and Development.<sup>3</sup>

Our framework of progressive neoliberalism, as discussed above, was born out of an initial analysis in which we wanted the data to speak for itself. At this early stage, we searched our data for all evidence of a theory of education reform, looking specifically for any data related to equality, justice, or fairness. Next, we attempted to unpack from within this data a number of core principles that seemed to underlie, or explain the theory of education reform we were reading. These early principles formed the first outlines of what we would come to identify as progressive neoliberalism. Then, from these principles, we looked back at our data for anything that did not “fit”: outliers that we used to refine our developing framework within the context of the literature on neoliberal education reform. Finally, with the framework set, we reanalyzed and coded our data as they applied to the assump-

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tions of progressive neoliberalism. Although we consider it a thorough review of TFA's public literature, our aim is not to provide a summative view of how TFA operates, or the success with which it has been met, but to locate and unpack its assumptions about the nature of teaching, education, and equity.

We recognize that this framework is not an all-encompassing map of either neoliberalism or progressivism. Rather it embodies what we identify as progressive neoliberalism. As such, there are elements of both ideologies which are absent from our analysis, not because they are any less defining of their respective philosophies, but because they are absent from the political philosophy of TFA, an organization that draws on aspects of both ideologies. Indeed, at the heart of our analysis is the supposition that TFA's theory of education reform both conflicts with and subscribes to elements of both progressivism and neoliberalism.

#### **TFA as a Progressive Neoliberal Organization**

As we have conceptualized here, first, progressive neoliberalism assumes that social inequities are reinforced through a public education system that has failed to meet the learning needs of its all students, what TFA calls "Our Nation's Greatest Injustice." TFA argues that, "prevailing ideology hasn't led to [the] necessary policies and investments" to adequately reform the current educational system (Teach for America, 2010a). For TFA to meet its vision that "one day all children will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education" (Teach for America, 2010b), the organization seeks to "build the movement to eliminate educational inequity" by recruiting "outstanding recent college graduates [who] teach for at least two years in urban and rural public schools" and continue to fight educational inequity beyond their two-year commitment through "strong leadership all levels of the school system and every professional sector" (Teach for America, 2010c). TFA's "theory of change" is based on the belief that "all children have the same potential to achieve." However, "children in low-income communities often contend with inadequate health care, nutrition, and/or housing, and often lack access to high-quality pre-schools" (Teach for America, 2010a). Therefore it is up to TFA to select teachers who "go above and beyond traditional expectations to lead their students to significant academic achievement, despite the challenges of poverty and the limited capacity of the school system." (Teach for America, 2010c).

Following this theory, TFA believes that teachers alone cannot solve these socioeconomic challenges. Rather, TFA seeks to "build a massive force of leaders who have the perspective and conviction that comes from teaching successfully in low-income communities" (Teach for America, 2010c). It is through "the combined efforts of our corps members and alumni, and by working alongside members of the communities that [it] serve[s]" that TFA will achieve its vision (Teach for America, 2010d). Central to this vision is TFA's understanding that the organization is effective, and corps members and alumni can contribute to solving this issue in the

short and long term (M. Golden, personal communication, March 6, 2007). TFA recognizes that state action alone is insufficient to challenge and correct the inequities inherent in the current system, and that it should function as a mechanism to help address these inequities. As a result, TFA seeks out those who are willing to work “above and beyond” both in and out of the classroom. Fundamental to achieving its vision is the belief that alumni should continue to fight for educational equity, from positions in all sectors of both the public and private spheres, long after their time in the program has ended.

Second, progressive neoliberalism assumes that public education benefits from deregulation, market reforms, and collaboration between the public and private sectors. As a public-private organization, approximately 70 percent of TFA’s 2007 \$75 million annual operating revenue was funded through support from private individuals, corporations, and foundations in the communities in which TFA corps members teach (Teach for America, 2008). As of the 2007 fiscal year, local and national sponsors included Amgen, Goldman Sachs, the Lehman Brothers Foundation, the Wachovia Corporation, the Broad Foundation, Doris and Donald Fisher (Chairman and CEO of GAP, Inc.), and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (Teach for America, 2008). Many of these private sponsors seek to improve public education specifically through marketization and privatization. The Broad Foundation’s mission, for example, is to transform “urban K-12 public education through better governance, management, labor relations, and competition” (Broad Foundation, 2010). Currently, executives from major private corporations such as First Manhattan Consulting Group, Coach Inc., Kraft Foods, McKinsey & Company, and Sony Corporation sit on TFA’s board of directors (Teach for America, 2010e). Public funders include AmeriCorps, the Department of Education, and the state and school district partners in which TFA corps members are placed (Teach for America, 2008).

More fundamentally, TFA supports the deregulation of teacher education by its very existence. At the heart of its philosophy is the belief that there are a significant number of potential teachers who have the capacity to make a difference in the classroom but have not entered the teaching profession through traditional college-recommending teacher education programs.<sup>4</sup> Fundamentally, TFA operates under the premise that public education is better served by providing teachers with choice of pathways to teaching, allowing “additional high-quality teachers” from all majors and career interests to “lead their students to significant academic achievement” (Teach For America, 2010c). Furthermore, as “lifelong leaders” (Teach For America, 2010f), TFA alumni are celebrated for their commitment to educational choice through the founding of charter schools such as the KIPP schools. TFA subscribes to the belief that not only does public education benefit from deregulating market reforms and collaboration between the private and public sectors, but that they are essential to its reform.

Third, progressive neoliberalism assumes that business technology, logic, and strategy are useful means for facilitating reform in public education. TFA uses the

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language of business and an “outcomes-based” approach to market itself and to operate successfully as an organization. TFA refers to itself as a “brand” (Golden, 2007; Teach for America, 2008) both inside and outside of the organization and describes its growth in terms of operating capacity and revenue (Lipka, 2007). In its 2007 Annual Report (Teach for America, 2008), TFA looks to “grow in scale” (p. 5) and magnitude to expand revenue and increase the number of corps members across the country. Not only are “growth,” “expansion,” and increased “wealth” considered essential, but these goals are also described and pursued through the language of business that permeates TFA’s discourse around funding and organizational structure.

As part of its “growth plan,” TFA hopes to be the top employer of recent college graduates in the nation by 2010 (Sellers, 2006). In an interview with *Fortune* magazine, Wendy Kopp, founder and CEO of TFA, explains that “size gives [TFA] the leverage to have a tangible impact on school systems” (Kopp, cited in Sellers, 2006, p.89). Further, Kopp makes an even more explicit link between TFA and the corporate world, “[TFA] teachers are operating just as effective leaders in the business world do. They set a vision that most people think is crazy. They convince the kids why it’s important to accomplish the goal. And they are totally relentless” (p. 89). Moreover, TFA relies on the assumption that a quantifiable metric can be attached to most goals in the organization, believing that “whatever you can measure is more concrete” (M. Golden, personal communication, March 6, 2007). The “Significant Gains” initiative, for example, one of TFA’s four “organizational priorities,” challenges each TFA corps member with the task of moving their students up one and half years in reading and math in one year’s time using a defined metric to mark their achievement.<sup>5</sup> TFA’s use of the language, logic, and strategy of business is not just a ubiquitous marketing tactic; instead it defines the way in which the organization conceives its purpose and place in educational reform.

These first three assumptions of progressive neoliberalism, as outlined here, align directly with the assumptions guiding neoliberal education reform. However, the fourth and fifth assumptions reflect more progressive notions of equitable education. Although they do not encompass all the nuances of progressivism, we believe that they reflect its commitment to proactive social change that recognizes the effects of historical inequity. All of these assumptions, and the policies that draw upon them, however, should not be considered impervious to critique. After applying the assumptions of progressive neoliberalism to TFA, we question whether these assumptions, in practice, can truly effect change.

We conceptualize the fourth assumption of progressive neoliberalism as the belief that educational reform requires positive, direct action to offset historical inequities. TFA recruits what it believes to be the some of the most promising teacher candidates in the country. Rather than working with the market to assign these prospective teachers to the most highly sought after schools, TFA places them only in those urban and rural schools and districts that have a demonstrated need

for exceptional teachers. Although the presumption of excellent teaching should be questioned, the commitment to working against market forces cannot: TFA actively and consciously disrupts the forces of supply and demand to direct what it perceives to be quality teaching to the students who need it most. The placing of what it considers to be “our nation’s most promising future leaders” in districts that have the most trouble attracting the best teachers represents a progressive neoliberal commitment to rectifying a flawed system plagued by historical inequities. As a progressive neoliberal organization, TFA goes beyond the neoliberal role of simply honing a neutral system to better, marketized efficiency. Rather, it readjusts the flow of the market to address inequality resulting from the system.

Neoliberalism, as the critiques have shown, reinforces power structures by distributing resources to the highest bidder. However, as a progressive neoliberal organization, TFA intends to challenge that orthodoxy on its own terms by using business principles to benefit those groups who are the least well equipped for competition. Value is placed not on the process (market principles), but on the outcomes themselves (equitable education). Such a stance stands in stark contrast to neoliberal education policy such as NCLB, which aims to create a competitive environment, and then leave market principles to produce the results. Instead, TFA seeks to function as a form of market correction: the organization’s agenda is not to create or advocate for better systems of supply and demand, but to build a national movement to address systemic inequities in resource distribution which prevent those principles from operating fairly. Moreover, TFA’s progressive neoliberalism also challenges the traditional neoliberal understanding of self-interest by asking corps members to “commit” two years to teaching in urban and rural schools. This language runs contrary to the principles of neoliberalism in which individuals compete selfishly for their own good, while society benefits from their efforts.

Finally, progressive neoliberalism assumes that public education is an arena for social activism in which educators work for equity in public education. Zeichner (2006) allows for this possibility, arguing that though the deregulation and social justice agendas in teacher education have identified different priorities and policies, their agendas are not mutually exclusive. TFA’s “policies” are characterized by their neoliberal and business qualities. However, their priorities and agenda remain firmly focused on equity and activism. For example, TFA’s charge to potential recruits defines itself by the problems against which its corps members will work: “Only 1 in 10 students growing up in poverty will graduate from college. Together we can change this” (Teach for America, 2010a). This is achieved through the “significant gains” initiative in concert with the TFA core values including disciplined thought, respect and humility, and integrity. While working within the system, TFA corps members are actively encouraged to ultimately work against a system that promulgates inequalities. TFA corps members and alumni “show that students in low-income communities can achieve at high levels” (Teach for America, 2010c). TFA’s mission is thus framed not by its business strategy or market-based assump-

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tions, but in terms of its vision to improve the educational opportunity of historically marginalized populations. Furthermore, this goal is not a series of individual charges, but a task with each corps member accepts as their role in “building massive force of leaders” (Teach for America, 2010c) to end educational inequity. In fact, Kopp (cited in Fairbanks, 2010) recently identified TFA’s “core mission” to produce “more leaders who believe educational inequity is a solvable problem, who have a deep understanding of the causes and solutions, and who are taking steps to address it in fundamental and lasting ways.” TFA’s primary conception of itself is not as a teacher-training organization, nor a non-university-based early entry recruitment program, but rather as a “movement” against a pressing and untenable social problem.

Based on our examination into the policies and practices of TFA, we characterize the organization as an example of what we term progressive neoliberalism: embracing neoliberalism’s focus on deregulation, business strategies, and the managerial culture of accountability, but working to fight inequity and to reform the systems which produced it. Apple (2006) identified an alliance of conservative modernization comprised of neoconservatism, neoliberalism, authoritarian populism, and managerialism. Though each of these philosophies is distinct, there exist both overlapping and independent political areas: actors who may be neoconservative but not neoliberal, neoliberal but not authoritarian populist. Apple notes these complicated relationships, pointing to groups such as the Black Alliance for Educational Options that embrace neoliberal reform, yet have a profound interest in educational equity (p. 110-115). We argue that with its progressive goals, neoliberal assumptions, and business strategy, TFA is similarly situated.

Further evidence of progressive neoliberalism’s philosophical distinction from neoliberalism can be found by examining TFA through the three critiques of neoliberalism described earlier. Although we do not suggest that progressive neoliberalism, nor TFA, is impervious to these critiques, we argue that TFA’s organizational goals and philosophical underpinnings represent a more explicit and active commitment to each of these three critiques than those of neoliberalism. Neoliberal policy conceptualizes the market as a self-regulating and objective distributor of resources: audited competition and strict accountability that will improve the quality of education for all. Under such assumptions, inequity is solved as a byproduct of neutral policy that holds all schools to the same standards.

Taken together, these critiques charge that the competition created by neoliberal policies is anything but fair—historical inequities reproduce themselves because marginalized groups lack the resources to overcome their dominated positions. Moreover, the critics find that neoliberal policies do not even attempt to redress injustices, focusing instead on the paradoxical missions of creating systems of fair competition within inherently unjust societies. In contrast, TFA recognizes this systemic injustice and attempts to challenge hegemony by using business practices to specifically improve the political and economic positions of the disempowered. Progressive neoliberals work within and against the unjust system to reform the

system itself, actively pursuing those goals for which neoliberalism is critiqued for ignoring, if not subverting.

### **Questions and Critique**

Through our analysis of TFA and the politics of progressive neoliberalism, we find a number of implications for the future of TFA. First, we are concerned that TFA and other progressive neoliberal organizations may rely too strongly on the first three assumptions of progressive neoliberalism and not focus enough on the fourth and fifth assumptions. When considering partnerships between conservative groups and organizations with social justice agendas, Apple (2006) questions whether such alliances might, in the long term, do more harm than good (p. 112). Similarly, we are concerned about the potential effects of TFA's use of business norms to serve the goals of public education, as well as their alliance with political actors who advocate for a more traditional version of neoliberalism. Though TFA has appropriated the language and technology of business while seeking to attain goals of equitable education, we fear that this represents yet another step towards breaking down the increasingly slim barrier between the corporate and educational worlds. Business technology can be applied for public gain, but business itself is fundamentally about profit for the winners, and about loss for everyone else. TFA may believe that it works towards equitable ends, but if it plays a role in inviting an increased business presence into public education and teacher education, in the final analysis TFA risks doing more harm than good.

Furthermore, we believe that it is appropriate to question whether TFA can truly operate as a corrective agent to the market, given that corps members only receive five weeks of pre-service teacher preparation before entering the classroom as full time teachers. With limited preparation, to what extent can they truly offset historical inequities in the classroom in their first two years of teaching? As noted earlier, the answers to these questions remain contested (Zeichner & Conklin, 2005) and open to debate. Moreover, after two years, TFA teachers consistently leave the schools in which they are placed, those schools that are in most need of teachers who are willing to commit to a career of making a difference in the classroom. As TFA points out, however, 63% of the 17,000 TFA alumni remain in education (defined broadly in terms teaching, administration, education policy, graduate study in education, etc.) after their two-year commitment is over, and 49% of the alumni in education are classroom teachers (Teach for America, 2010g). In addition, TFA argues that those teachers who leave the classroom are more committed to effecting systemic change outside education due to their experience as TFA teachers (M. Golden, personal communication, March 6, 2007). Although TFA argues that the process is working as intended, we believe that its effects, particularly in terms of pre-service preparation and teacher turnover, remain worthy of critique and further research.

In much the same way, TFA's progressive neoliberalism has a necessary alliance

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with traditionally neoliberal policies, which encourage the deregulation of teacher education and the acquiescence to state created conceptions of teacher quality and teacher learning. Indeed, TFA does not challenge these notions, so much as build from them. Yet in the process of taking these political suppositions and applying them for equitable ends, TFA tacitly endorses them in their entirety, encouraging continued deregulation of teacher education and implicitly suggesting that state goals for education and teacher education need not be problematized. Though TFA itself may play a positive role in improving public education, what of the other pathways to teaching? As Zeichner and Conklin (2005) note, there remains great variability within non-college recommending and early entry programs, and they should not be considered one in the same. To neoliberal proponents of the deregulation of teacher education, TFA may serve not as an argument for a progressive agenda, but as evidence for bringing market forces to bear on teacher education. Within this competitive environment, for-profit teacher education programs with no explicit focus on educational equity are already flourishing (e.g., Weiner, 2007; Zeichner, 2006). Such a trend does not seem in the best interest of teacher education, and TFA, as a much-heralded example of non-university based teacher education, would seem to play a passive role in encouraging it.

Moreover, by accepting state imposed conceptions of teacher quality and student achievement without critique or challenge, TFA necessarily fuels the neoliberal idea that public education should compete on the terms of the state. In fact, not only does TFA accept these definitions in the form of neoconservative state standards, but it has built its own accountability and success metrics around them. Though TFA pursues an agenda of systemic reform, this reform does not appear to include questioning the fundamental neoliberal assumption that the state should decide which knowledge is deemed worth knowing. In this regard, then, TFA, even as a progressive neoliberal organization, still aligns itself with elements of conservative modernization. Doing so might serve to further this conservative agenda, and, ironically, ingrain much of the accompanying inequitable policy with which TFA's progressive agenda takes issue.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Despite the significant differences between progressives and progressive neoliberals, we believe there is much that each can learn from the other. First, we believe that progressive neoliberal organizations, such as TFA, could further emphasize educational outcomes that are not well-suited for having metrics assigned to them; although some indicators of "success" may be more difficult to measure, that does not mean they are any less worthy. Moreover, we believe that TFA and other progressive neoliberal organizations could profit from adopting a culture of critique and inquiry, so prominent within many progressive schools of education, that ask: Who determines what knowledge is worth knowing? How do we construct

notions of equity and fairness? And what are the fundamental goals of education in a democratic society? These recommendations emphasize the fourth and fifth assumptions of progressive neoliberalism, working within and against the system for equitable ends.

However, we also recommend that progressive teacher education programs strive to, as Apple (2006) puts it “ground the discourse of critical pedagogy in the concrete struggles of multiple and identifiable groups” (p. 83). TFA has been a “successful” organization, in part, because of its ability to articulate the tragedy of educational inequity in a manner that is accessible to the public, largely through its use of statistics and example. We also propose that the managerial aspects of TFA, including the organizational imperative to reflect and improve upon previous practice through rigorous accountability, can be used by progressive teacher education programs to reflect on and improve their own programs. A culture of evidence-based decision-making can positively effect change in and out of progressive teacher education.

Early entry teacher preparation programs are neither an isolated, nor a passing fad. Moreover, the neoliberal thought responsible for their inception and continued expansion seems similarly entrenched. Yet there exists political space for progressive neoliberal organizations, such as TFA, to value both the tools of business and the mission of equitable public education. Though these two lines of thought may seem, or even prove, to be incongruous, they remain very real, and in the case of TFA are being actively translated into the policies and practices of teacher education. Cochran-Smith (2003) notes that most teachers, including those in TFA, enter the profession because of their commitment to “caring,” “learning,” and “changing the world.” The high stakes of educational inequity make it critical that this common ground be recognized and built upon, and that progressive neoliberalism be distinguished from traditional neoliberalism, understood as a form of political thought with a different, perhaps troubling, means, but which ultimately strives towards a familiar and equitable end.

## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> As Zeichner (2006) points out, nearly every school of education makes some claim to “social justice,” and these claims often represent distinctly different understandings of the term.

<sup>2</sup> The term “alternate-route” is itself problematic, as it encompasses a large and diverse number of programs that vary significantly in their design, structure, and agenda (Zeichner & Conklin, 2005). “Alternate-route” is commonly used to describe both state certification

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programs, as well as “recruitment programs” like TFA (Feistritz, 2005). We do not propose that these programs are in any way homogeneous.

<sup>3</sup> Reading TFA as text is, however, not without issue. Since much of the organization’s materials are designed for specific audiences and are limited by the space requirements of their specific formats (i.e., brochures for recruits, reports to alumni and funders) there is a risk that any given document is not fully representative of its political beliefs. However, the way in which an organization positions itself to any given population is in itself telling, and, given the wide range and availability of TFA materials, it is unlikely that a significant political sentiment remains unexpressed in some format. Accordingly, we treat the breadth of TFA’s public materials as each expressing the same politics in different forms and spaces, defined by the particular purposes of each document. In our analysis of the data we collected, we found neither obvious contradiction, nor ambiguity in TFA’s organizational philosophy. Furthermore, we recognize that the ways in which the TFA policy is enacted probably varies across the different regions of the country.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, however, that the line between “alternate-route” and “traditional” programs is growing ever slimmer (Wallace & Jacobs, 2007). Indeed, most TFA corps members complete some form of teacher education program through university partnerships during their two year commitment. Yet these partnerships are not themselves routes into teaching, but professional development and licensure requirements after corps members have already been placed in the classroom.

<sup>5</sup> TFA uses state standardized assessments and other external assessments (e.g., TerraNova) to measure student learning. In addition, TFA relies on external studies to measure the organization’s impact on student learning (Teach for America, 2010h)

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