



Pitzer, H. (2010). "What's Best for Kids" vs. Teacher Unions: How Teach For America Blames Teacher Unions for the Problems of Urban Schools. *Workplace*, 17, 61-74.

**"What's Best for Kids" vs. Teacher Unions:  
How Teach For America Blames Teacher Unions for the Problems of  
Urban Schools**

Heidi Pitzer  
Syracuse University

**Abstract**

This article examines the anti-union discourse that is prevalent within Teach For America (TFA) and explores how the experiences and insights of TFA *outsiders* to urban schools and communities become central in how discussions on urban education are framed. Not only are urban teachers and their unions seen as unknowledgeable and unable to comment on their experiences in urban schools (while TFAers have the monopoly on knowing "what's best for kids"), but teacher unions are actually blamed for the problems of urban schools and seen as the main obstacle to doing "what's best for kids." This article analyzes how TFA corps members and touted TFA alum, Michelle Rhee are able to corral the anti-union sentiment that is always lurking within an individualistic society, and which seems especially conspicuous within this neoliberal moment.

*During their two-year commitments, corps members see firsthand that educational inequity is a problem we can solve and gain a grounded understanding of how to solve it.*  
— Teach For America's website, "Our mission and approach"

*"[Teach For America] really helped me see things from a different perspective, and I'm glad that people—even if they're only in it for two years—have that appreciation for all the things that go on in the education system, and such, because the things that have come out of it and the people that have done things as a result of it are kind of monumental, at this point! If you really look at all the alumni and what they've been doing at this point, there's been a lot of wealth in education I think, and a lot of charter schools that have prospered because of it...a lot of different things."*—interview with "Eryn," a Teach For America alum who currently lives in Manhattan and teaches in a charter school in Harlem. During her TFA tenure, she taught in Brownsville in Brooklyn.

What exactly are these "monumental" solutions, and who are these people that have discovered them? What did they experience "firsthand" that allowed them to gain a "grounded understanding" and an "appreciation" for urban public education in the United

States? How do the experiences of Teach For America (TFA) corps members come to matter, while the experiences and knowledge of teacher unions, teachers already teaching in urban schools, and community members are devalued?

This article examines TFA as a site of neoliberal logic. TFA seeks to “build the movement to eliminate educational inequity” (Teach For America website), in which TFA alumni—who commonly have moved on from teaching to another career, preferably in business, politics or comparable sphere of influence—draw on the firsthand experience they gained while in the corps and use it to influence the “right” kind of educational change. However, although TFA uses the language of equality and social justice, it is part of the “market-driven logic [that] induces the coordination of political policies with the corporate interests” (Ong, 2006, p. 77). Drawing on qualitative interviews with TFA teachers and recruiters, this article both examines the prevalent anti-union discourse and explores how centering the experiences and insights of *outsiders* to urban schools and communities potentially reproduces the precise unequal power relations that TFA aims to end. I suggest that despite TFA’s claim that it knows “what’s best for kids,” TFA does not transform urban education or provide equality-producing measures of any kind. Instead, while the outsider’s “TFA Experience” is used—as part of the project of neoliberalism—to introduce and legitimate TFA alum Michelle Rhee’s “performance” pay, charter schools, and other market-based reforms, TFA functions to discount the experiences and contributions of urban teachers and their unions, and actually makes unions the main scapegoat for the problems of urban schools.

### **Background of Teach For America**

TFA began as the senior thesis project of Princeton undergraduate Wendy Kopp (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Kopp, 2001; Mikuta & Wise, 2008). Concerned about unequal levels of education, Kopp’s idea was to recruit seniors from top universities across the country and enlist them to teach in under-resourced rural and urban schools for a two-year commitment. She wanted to attract college students who were not necessarily interested in education, or who were not interested in the traditional certification route, but who would pause in the pursuit of their careers for two years to teach in hard-to-staff schools (Kopp, 2001). The only preparation TFA recruits receive prior to being placed in a classroom is through a five-week summer institute they attend after graduation. While TFA began twenty years ago with 500 teachers in 6 areas of the U.S., it now has more than 4,000 teachers in 35 regions (Teach For America website). According to one report (Lipka, 2007), TFA had about 19,000 students apply to teach in 2006, from about 400 colleges, and TFA hired only 17 percent of those applicants.

From its inception in 1990, TFA has been a controversial educational program, its merits and faults hotly debated by education and policy researchers. Jonathan Schorr, a Yale graduate and one of the first TFA members, wrote an early critique of TFA, sharing his experiences and feelings of unpreparedness: “Giving the least experienced teachers the toughest classes to teach is a stupid combination, even for the most eager of young teachers” (Schorr, 1993, p. 316). He felt the program needed more mentoring and more hands-on experience. Darling-Hammond (1994), however, delivered the first significant critique of TFA in her *Phi Delta Kappan* article, and she remains a critic today (Azimi,

2007).<sup>1</sup> Among her charges against TFA is that it is not *for* the poor students it purports to serve but *for* the teachers themselves, TFA is not a new idea but based on an old and often-repeated “emergency” route, TFA does not adequately prepare its teachers, it leaves it up to poor school districts to support and mentor TFA teachers, it does not provide permanent faculty, and TFA de-professionalizes teaching and sets the bar too low for teachers and students, overall (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

A main concern for Darling-Hammond and other critics is the potential further harm TFA could inflict on students already experiencing a level of education inferior to the kind students experience in the suburbs: “[T]eaching standards in schools that hire uncertified teachers are typically low....This is a country that spends so little on the neediest, and here we are perpetuating a cycle of underprepared teachers. If one takes the lowest possible standard and accepts that as a goal, then Teach for America is great” (Azimi, 2007, pp. 113-114). Much of the current research attempts to consider TFA’s harm or benefit to students, but it does so within the narrow framework of student achievement scores; the value of TFA teachers has been primarily assessed by how well their students perform on math and science tests. Indeed, it can be difficult to talk about the value of TFA or any education policy outside of a student achievement framework because the discourse of standardized testing and the language of accountability have become so institutionalized and legitimized (McNeil, 2000). TFA is publishing its own book, *Teaching As Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap*, due out in February 2010. It promises to distill what corps members have learned over the last 20 years, acting as a “road map for teachers who strive to be highly effective leaders in our nation's classrooms.” It remains to be seen how much students’ test scores will factor into TFA’s evaluation of itself.

### **Neoliberalism**

Outside of a test score framework, however, are questions about how TFA helps to reproduce urban schools and teacher unions as others, or as “neoliberal exception.” By neoliberalism, I mean the set of ideas and policies that make the market paramount. Under neoliberalism, the world is understood in exclusively economic terms, and schooling becomes further tied to producing a competitive economy; the individual is seen as consumer rather than citizen, and public education and other public goods are turned into products or services that individuals need to efficiently and effectively consume—and that teachers need only to deliver.<sup>2</sup> Robertson (2008) reminds us that like liberalism, neoliberalism is usually opposed to collectivism and favors “personal freedom and possessive individualism” (p. 13). But neoliberalism is different from liberalism in that some state involvement is seen as required “...to ensure that Adam Smith’s hidden hand of the market can function. This means that in contrast to liberalism, neoliberalism demands that freedom of the market, the right to free trade, the right to choose and protection of private property be assured by the state” (p. 13). By neoliberal *exception*, I draw on Ong’s (2006) work and mean that neoliberalism is a kind of governing that organizes space and populations in new ways, granting rights to people based not on citizenship but rather on how valuable they are to the economy. Who gets othered and excluded through neoliberal exception is shifting and complex: “...[T]hings that used to be fused together—identity, entitlement, territoriality, and nationality—are being taken

apart and realigned in innovative relationships and spaces by neoliberal technologies and sovereign exceptions” (p. 27).<sup>3</sup>

Within the “singular” space of the nation, an *array* of populations and zones are produced to be used in various ways. Offering up the space of public education as a market is one such differentiated zone. Ong (2006) argues that “...developmental decisions favor the fragmentation of the national space into various noncontiguous zones, and promote the differential regulation of populations who can be connected to or disconnected from global circuits of capital” (p. 77). All national space and populations are in a sense connected to or in relation with global circuits of capital, but they are meant to do different jobs. These diverse spaces are coupled with diverse modes of government that manage the populations in ways that are most in service of global capital, and Ong argues that “there is a mix of disciplinary, regulatory and pastoral technologies” operating. (p. 79).

I see the current devaluation of unions and urban school teachers, and the valuation of outside “leaders” like TFA teachers and managers of newly “reconstituted” quasi-private charter schools, as characteristic of the neoliberal realignment of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy that has a public education system. In such a restructuring, merely being a citizen does not guarantee the right to an education, for example. Nor is there uniform power over all teachers in all geographies; TFA aids in organizing space and populations in service of the global market, blaming and exerting control over some teachers and allowing other individual teachers to intervene as saviors. In centering the experiences of outsiders to urban education, TFA, in conjunction with classist, racist and patriarchal systems, further constructs teachers and students in urban geographies—and teaching as a collective profession, in general—as victims in need of rescue by outside teachers and policies, as well as objects in need of further discipline, surveillance and control.

### **Teach For America Comes “Full Circle” in Michelle Rhee**

TFA wants to help end educational inequities through placing high quality teachers in poor rural and urban schools, “...enlisting our nation's most promising future leaders in the effort” (Teach For America website). But TFA aims to do more than place “promising” teachers in the classroom. Rather, TFA’s ultimate goal is building a “movement” built on the experiences that TFA corps members have during their two-year tenure. TFA alumni are meant to go on to their careers after TFA and influence educational change from these leadership positions, drawing on their experiences from the corps. TFA’s envisioned movement, then, depends on the having of experiences in poor urban and rural schools by those who otherwise would not have such experiences. Indeed, I suggest that TFA can be understood as a sort of experience-making or experience-getting credentialing technology: the story goes that teachers start TFA (presumably) *without* a certain experience, they *acquire* the necessary experience while in TFA, and then they go and *use* said experience after TFA.

Michelle Rhee, chancellor of Washington D.C. schools is one such alum who has put her TFA experience to use. It is important to notice exactly what it is Rhee does in

Washington D.C. and what her views of teacher unions are because she is so often highlighted by TFA and its corps members as a shining example of TFA coming “full circle” through its alumni. Tellingly, in interviews participants often brought up Rhee and unions together. I was discussing low teacher pay with “Leah,” a recruiter for TFA who lives in Manhattan, when she broached the topic of unions, via Rhee. Leah’s understanding of teachers unions as an obstacle to (rather than helping to provide for) higher salaries can be seen in the following exchange:

Leah: Well, and I can see why because teaching isn’t well-respected, it’s not paid well enough... Actually, if you want to write this down, there’s this really interesting woman in D.C. Her name’s Michelle Rhee.

Heidi: Oh! I read about her. She’s superintendent now?

L: She’s, yeah, she’s the chancellor of D.C. schools, and she is trying to de-unionize the school district in D.C.

H: Okay, what does that mean?

L: Teachers’ unions are the oldest unions in the world—in the country, sorry—and they basically... Once you’re tenured, you can’t be fired, unless you do something wrong, basically. So performance—not that it doesn’t matter—but you can’t get fired because of performance. So they want to de-unionize because unionized districts—there’s no incentive to do better because you don’t really get a raise. You get raises as you get older. You don’t get in trouble if your kids aren’t meeting their goals. You’re just kind of like, there. In her district, she wants to make it that if you have significant gains, you get more money, and you get more raises and more benefits. So it weeds out the bad teachers. You can’t fire teachers right now. Like, at all.

H: Wow. So how’s that going, do you know?

L: It’s in the process of being passed, but if you were a D.C. teacher under her new thing, you can make so much money. (She shakes her head.) And finally—I mean it’s sad to say it’s all about money, but it kind of is—people will be like, “Oh wait, maybe I could be a teacher.” You know?

H: That’s interesting. I didn’t know that. I just knew she was a TFA person.

L: She’s like a rabble-rouser. People are like, “Oh, get her out of here.” She’s not like a politician; she’s doing whatever’s good for kids. She’s just firing people because she’s like, “You’re terrible!” People are like, “This is political suicide.” She’s like, “I’m not here to be a politician. I’m here because kids can’t read.” For D.C. being the capitol, schools are so bad.

H: And it’s a huge system, too.

L: Yeah, she closed like twelve schools because they were just unnecessary, overfunded, and not being used correctly. But she's really interesting to read up on.

Leah sees de-unionizing as a completely favorable move, and she sees any opposition to this—the rabble saying “get her out of here”—as merely getting in the way of “whatever’s good for kids.” Firing teachers and closing schools become reform solutions, and individual “bad” urban teachers and their unions are implicitly blamed for inequality in education.

This discourse of teacher union interests and educational “politics” being in opposition to “what’s good for kids” must be a rather institutionalized discourse for TFA. At a 2008 information session on TFA for potential applicants, the speaker decided to focus on Rhee’s “full circle” impact in Washington D.C., a region where TFA has been placing teachers since its inception, and she too contrasted “what’s good for kids” with politics:

... what’s very cool is that it’s almost come full circle in D.C. because...the chancellor of public schools there—her name is Michelle Rhee—and she was just appointed to chancellor last summer. Um, she’s been in office just a little bit over a year, and she is an alum of Teach for America. She taught elementary school—third grade—in Baltimore for three years in the nineties through the Teach For America program. She’s the youngest chancellor to ever be appointed to office in a major public school system in the country. So, what she’s doing right now in D.C. is essentially saying, “At the end of the day, if the kids in D.C. aren’t actually learning and aren’t being provided excellent schools, I am going to close that school and send them to a school that’s actually effective.” So you can imagine this is probably providing, especially in D.C. where politics is supreme, providing some like *drama*, right? (She smiles.) Because she—there’s a politician in office who’s saying, “I’m going to close schools and fire principals if they’re not doing their job,” and so people are like, “Oh my God, Michelle Rhee is committing political suicide, she is going to be kicked out of office in a year when the mayor is ousted and the new mayor is elected...” and so there’s all this drama surrounding Michelle Rhee because she’s actually ignoring what’s politically popular and doing what’s actually best for kids. And there’s a lot of opinions out there about if what she’s doing is the best way to solve problems, but the thing that’s not debatable is in that year—over a year—achievement of students in D.C. has made leaps and bounds, simply because she closed schools and got rid of principals who weren’t doing their job, and started a national search for school leaders.

Rhee came to TFA, she saw, she acquired the necessary experience, and now as Chancellor of D.C. schools, that TFA experience has helped her to have the necessary authority to know and do “what’s actually best for kids.” Again, what is “politically popular” becomes delegitimized; the “politics” is seen as merely hindering Rhee’s

mission, and any serious discussion or thoughtful opposition to her particular way of accomplishing this mission is stripped of its seriousness, becoming merely “drama.”

We should not underestimate how this credential of experience gets used. At a lecture Rhee gave at Cornell University in October 2009, she demonstrated the degree to which TFA teachers’ experience translates into educational authority for them: “The bottom line of all of this is that it is about the elected official. People come to me all the time and ask, ‘How can we find more people like you to come into the superintendency...?’ People like me are a dime a dozen. You can find any Teach For America graduate who can take this job, and do exactly the same things as I would.” According to the recruiter at the information session, too, simply having a TFAer in place ostensibly means educational progress: “About ten percent of the principals in D.C. right now are Teach For America alums, as well, and so things are sort of starting to shift in favor of doing what’s best for kids.” Not only does the “TFA experience” seem to grant alumni the power to automatically do what is right for kids—and literally get them jobs—but it implicitly makes assumptions about who is *not* capable of experience and knowledge.

This preference for TFA outsiders both relies on and furthers the notion that urban teachers and students cannot comment on their own lives within urban schools. The profession of teachers as a whole is delegitimized, teacher unions become aligned with what’s wrong for kids, and teachers’ voices are erased. Indeed, if the voices of those teachers and students already in poor urban schools were able to be heard in meaningful ways, would we need an intervention like TFA? Would we need a corps of mostly white, middle class college grads to report back to “us,” after a year or two “in the trenches” (Foote, 2008)?

### **Discourses of Individualism**

In her lecture at Cornell University, Rhee said that the problems facing Washington D.C. schools were the same ones facing urban districts across the country: “I distilled those [problems] into two major things: First, a complete and utter lack of accountability. And the second is that they were letting *politics* determine what was happening in the school district, instead of what was right thing for kids.” In describing these two sets of problems, Rhee’s analysis is very individualistic; individual teachers and district employees are blamed for unequal education, and top-down mayoral control is seen as preferable to community dialogue and the messiness of democracy. I have already briefly discussed how “politics” is a dirty word for Rhee and TFA, usually referring to the interests of unions, and usually set up in simple opposition with the best interests of students. In terms of accountability, there were no comments about a D.C. district-wide problem with the system of accountability and evaluation, and there was no context given to employees who were overworked and had too many students. Instead, D.C. teachers and staff were held individually responsible for systemic problems. For instance, Rhee shared a story in which an employee with too large of a caseload made two costly errors for the district, and Rhee told her condescendingly that “... if you believe that this job is too big for you, then you need to go find another job.” In another story, she suggested that classroom teachers leave to teach in another district if they were not up to the challenge of D.C. schools.

Rather than invest in teachers, Rhee and TFA hope to improve education by simply moving out the “bad” teachers and moving in TFA—read “good”—teachers. Indeed, Rhee does not see development and support of teachers as part of the profession of teaching, although other scholars have said that professional development is central for quality teaching (see for example, Simmons, 2006). Rather, if it seems a teacher would benefit from development or further training, it is more efficient and effective to ship her out. Rhee told a story about a politician asking her if she thought it possible to professionally develop a teacher who might not be of “high quality.” Rhee responded:

And I said, “Perhaps. But let us not let children languish in their care in the meantime.” I said, “Because my two children attend DCPS schools, and I can tell you that if I showed up for school one day and the principal said, “Welcome to school, here’s Olivia’s teacher, and guess what? She’s not so good. But, we are going to spend this year professionally developing her! To see if she can get better! Well maybe she and her 23 classmates aren’t going to learn how to read, but we think that’s the right thing to do for this adult.” I could never accept that for my kid. No one in this room would ever accept that for your children, but we have scores of kids in this city who do not have the adult advocates in their lives, who can navigate the system and pick the teachers that they want, and that sort of thing, so these kids are literally languishing in these classrooms. Particularly, when you look at the research that says, that for poor minority students, if they have three highly-effective teachers in a row, rather than three ineffective teachers in a row, it can literally change their life trajectory. So say that this particular teacher—I said, “Okay, let’s professionally develop her.” Olivia and her friends won’t learn how to read, they get through second grade, and they have the unfortunate luck of getting another ineffective teacher... Would we be willing to waste 2/3 of these kids’ chance in life, so we can professionally develop two adults?”

In this part of her lecture, Rhee seems to pit “what’s best for kids” against what is best for teachers. According to a *Newsweek* story, too, Rhee “is angry at a system of education that puts ‘the interests of adults’ over the ‘interests of children,’ i.e., a system that values job protection for teachers over their effectiveness in the classroom” (Thomas, Conant, & Wingert, 2008).

But is it really a helpful framework to make education a zero-sum game? To say that professional development is bad for kids? Murphey (2008) notes that when a social class analysis is applied to education, the focus is usually on students and their families, but teachers are not class-less: “That teachers are workers themselves and thus need to be included in the analyses is absent from the student, parent, or community focus of these analyses” (p. 76). Setting up “what’s right for kids” against their teachers’ interests hides how school is a workplace, and erases the histories of teacher exploitation that teacher unions worked to end. This discourse also hides the fact that teachers may also be from working class backgrounds, and are perhaps parents of DCPS students or DCPS graduates themselves. Setting adults and kids in opposition with one another can erase important commonalities between the two along class and race axes of identity.

Rhee's own middle class assumptions need to be addressed. She is concerned about those parents who cannot "navigate the system and pick the teachers that they want." It is a real concern that there are children without advocates in their lives, but handpicking your child's teacher is a middle class and individualistic approach to advocating for students. Earlier in Rhee's speech, when she described how she and Mayor Fenty decided to make all district employees at-will employees, she talked condescendingly about the parents and community members who "paraded" through the 14-hour public hearing, and she did not recognize this as a kind of advocating. She saw the parents' objections as only obstacles to doing right by kids, rather than taking seriously their concerns and seeing them as potential alternative ways to do right by kids.

Seeing as though Rhee's analysis of the problems of urban public schools is rather individualistic, it is not surprising that her proposed solutions are individualistic, as well: "I can also distill the answers down to two things. And I say that they are leadership and high quality teachers." In terms of leadership, she praised Mayor Fenty: "The only reason why we have been able to do everything that we have in Washington D.C. is because of the leadership of Mayor Fenty." She applauded Fenty for not caring about his critics and for threatening to fire anyone who said "no" to Rhee, since this apparently means "standing in the way of progress in the schools." She understands her own role as a leader in a managerial sense and used business-inspired language to describe that all of the firings she did was what "lots of CEOs in turnaround situations do."

Rhee's focus on an individualistic leadership is right in line with TFA's "teaching as leadership" framework, in which it is up to the individual in the classroom to do whatever it takes to help students succeed, no matter the structural forces at play. In its application process, rather than look for candidates that are expressly interested in teaching, TFA seeks those who are highly motivated and have held a traditional leadership position. As one of my undergraduate students who interviewed with TFA shared, TFA was less interested in hearing about her coursework in teaching and curriculum than they were in learning about her role as the president of her sorority. Some TFA teachers also naively see themselves as individual saviors of urban students. While this attitude is problematic in many ways, I would argue that TFA encourages it, with its website's homepage proclaiming to prospective corps members, "Of the 13 million children growing up in poverty, about half will graduate from high school. Those that do graduate will perform on average at an eighth-grade level. *You can change this*" (Teach For America website, emphasis added). In other words, "You, TFA member, can rescue these children."

Rhee said that while she agrees with the critics that say we cannot put all of the blame for urban education on teachers' shoulders, she said that at the end of the day, high quality teachers are our best bet for solving educational problems:

There are a variety of factors that have led us to where we are today, and there are a variety of things that are going to help us get out of this situation, but what I am saying is that a factor that I believe has the number one impact on kids and their achievement levels is the quality of the teacher that they have in front of them every single day in the classroom.

I do not disagree with Rhee that having quality teachers is important. But how does TFA come to have the monopoly on what makes a good teacher (and on “what’s best for kids”), and how do unions come to be associated with non-quality teachers? Rhee’s vision of a “high quality” teacher ends up being rather narrow—teachers either have what it takes or not from the start, since Rhee sees professional development as a waste of time, and high quality teachers should be young and without a family, in order to give teaching their all.

Rhee told a story about Mr. Murphy that paints a picture of her idea of what makes a high quality teacher. Rhee said she was meeting with a group of high school students who had requested a meeting with her via e-mail, and the students had a long list of concerns. Out of all of their requests or issues, if she could tackle only one, she said that the students really just wanted better teachers:

“By the time you graduate, if there’s one thing that I can do, that you think would have the biggest impact, on the quality of education you’re getting, what would that one thing be?” And the kids uniformly said, “Just bring us more great teachers. If you bring us more great teachers, then *all* the other stuff on this list doesn’t even matter.” I thought, “This is fascinating. Kids aren’t asking for McDonalds in the cafeteria, they’re not asking to be let off half day on Fridays—they’re asking for more great teachers.” So this kid said, “Bring us more great teachers like Mr. Murphy.” And he goes on, and he’s talking about this teacher and he’s like, “This guy is amazing. He sets up camp at the McDonalds down the street, every day, and he tutors us in pre-calculus. And if you’re hungry, he buys you a hamburger, but the bottom line is that he doesn’t let you leave until you’ve learned the material.” He’s like, “If we had more teachers like that, we’re set.” So I thought, this is interesting. So I, you know, let the kids disperse and I figured I’d go find this guy. So, I went looking around, looking all day, going through the building, and finally I walk into this room. I see his nametag, so I know it’s him. And here’s this kid who is about 22 or 23 years old, Teach For America corps member. He looks like he’s aged about seventeen years in seventeen months, right. He has chalk dust in his hair, he has some stains on his shirt... So I go up to him and say, “Hey, you know, the kids absolutely love you, are you going to stay? You know, past your Teach For America commitment, are you going to stay?” And he said, “I don’t know.” And I said, “Why not?” And he said, “Because the people here hate me.” He said, “You know, they keep telling me, ‘Stop coming to school early, stop staying so late, don’t do the McDonald’s thing, it’s not in our contract, you know, you’re making us look bad, stop doing all that stuff.’ So I’m trying to do the right thing and a lot of people here don’t want me to do those things.” He said, “I just don’t know if I can continue to do this job and do it well when I just don’t have the support that I need.”

That’s the *very* kind of teacher we want to keep in our system. And the *kids* recognize it very quickly, and at the end of the day they said that nothing else mattered if you bring us more people like him.<sup>4</sup>

In this section of her talk, Rhee portrays Mr. Murphy as the do-whatever-it-takes, high quality teacher, willing to stay late for tutoring and willing to become haggard, aging “seventeen years in seventeen months.” However, Mr. Murphy does not consider quitting because he is getting burned out but because the other teachers do not like him; he lacks *support*. The blame is put on the other individual teachers—“the people here”—without a structural analysis about the little flexibility and power that teachers have. Instead, the contract and the teachers and the unions become the bad guys. There is a neoliberal redefinition of “support” from this perspective. If Mr. Murphy cannot continue teaching simply because of the other teachers, then support becomes very affordable! Support is not compensation or adequate time and means to teach kids in school, but it becomes simply a pat on the back for doing *outside* of school what could, potentially, be done in school.

The currently ubiquitous educational discourse of needing “high quality teachers,” instituted by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), does not attend to the structural reasons why poor children and children of color are left behind. Instead, it makes teachers and unions convenient scapegoats, blaming them for the unequal levels of education. Focusing so eagerly on teachers as responsible for the problems of public schools is a misplacement of criticism in at least four ways. First, it detaches teachers from their occupational hierarchy in which they are often already in positions of little power and are subject to teach according to pre-established curricula and practices. Second, it erases the real reasons behind the “savage inequalities” in schools, namely systemic racism and the class divisions upon which capitalism depends, and instead creates the fiction that teachers’ supposed lack of motivation or skills causes the problems that plague our schools. Third, the discourse of needing better-qualified teachers fails to take into account the reasons why many people are not attracted to the profession, including low pay, long hours, low levels of respect, and unprofessional environments in which there is little opportunity for collaboration with colleagues, to name a few. The recurring discourse around teacher shortages and the need for “high quality teachers” is misleading. Darling-Hammond (2004) points out that the nation has more than enough qualified and certified teachers: “There are actually at least three or four times as many credentialed teachers in the United States as there are jobs, and many states and districts have surpluses” (28). Despite this, “about thirty states still allow the hiring of untrained teachers who do not meet their certification standards in low-income and high minority schools, and the most highly educated teachers are typically hired by wealthier schools” (27). And fourth, the simplistic, resounding call for better teachers masks how some teachers are set up as better than others. Not only do teachers from racialized urban communities and their unions experience harsher disciplinary controls than their suburban and TFA counterparts, they are blamed for the unequal education their students receive, masking the ways that a division of students—and teachers—into those allowed to get ahead and those who are “left behind” is in service of the global economy and necessary for capitalism.

Despite this misplaced blame, the discourse of needing high quality teachers is powerful. Rhee is able to tap into this discourse, as well as the real concerns that parents and others have about the problems in urban schools, that results in a strong anti-union mentality. It

is not that TFA created this mentality, but Rhee and other TFA members are able to corral the anti-union sentiment that is always lurking in an individualistic society, and which seems especially available within this neoliberal moment.

### **Conclusion**

TFA may have good intentions, but rather than end educational inequities, it and other business-inspired reform models so prevalent under neoliberalism aid in maintaining two sets of populations and spaces that are regulated in different, unequal ways: the poor, urban public school and its “bad” unionized teachers, seen as unable to manage themselves and thus, in need of discipline, versus the motivated teacher-managers—often white and middle class—who are trained for the private sphere, “freed” from the constraints of bureaucracy to work under more “flexible” conditions. Under this arrangement, so often race and class privilege remains intact.

TFA may also use appealing democratic language, praising “equality” and calling for “movements.” But Compton and Weiner (2008) warn that part of the power of neoliberalism is the ease with which it can incorporate and redefine what we even mean by democratic goals “Rebutting the ‘private good, public bad’ propaganda is complicated by neoliberal’s hijacking of ideals and terms borrowed from those who have spent their lives campaigning for education for all and opportunities for the poor and oppressed” (pp. 5-6). We need to look underneath this language and examine the *effects* of these discourses. Through TFA’s racialized, pathologized expectations of urban students, teachers, and their unions, its deployment of underprepared teachers to urban schools, and its teachers-as-manager approach to teaching, TFA reproduces urban public schools as neoliberal exception. Simultaneously, TFA actually benefits individual TFA teachers in their personal career tracks. In being allowed to “do good” in urban schools, they profit from the organization of urban schools as spaces of exception, often receiving a substantial pat on the back along the way: “T.F.A. has partnerships with investment banks and consulting firms, Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan among them. Some even offer deferrals and signing advances for those who do T.F.A. first” (Azimi, 2007, p. 114). Indeed, not only do the TFA teachers benefit from entering urban zones of indistinction, but in so doing they reproduce the organization of space and peoples needed to sustain global capitalist markets.

How can unions respond to and work within the ever-shifting neoliberal re-organizing of populations and space? According to Murphey (2008), “...[T]eachers, led by their organizations, have already recognized the dangers to themselves and public education if these trends [of privatization] continue” (p. 78). Indeed, a main reason the market-based merit pay scheme has not taking hold as of yet in public schools has been due to union opposition (Ballou, 2001). Unions have also opposed Rhee and TFA more directly. In addition to the Washington Teachers’ Union and the AFT protesting Rhee’s teacher layoffs alongside Washington D.C. students (“Teacher layoffs,” 2009), the Boston Teachers Union has fought TFA teachers coming into Boston schools, believing they are taking the jobs of qualified teachers who have been fired because of budget issues (Vaznis, 2009). In Detroit where TFA’s program had gone dormant, union leaders have worked to block its return, with their president Keith Johnson calling TFA teachers

“educational mercenaries.” Johnson is quoted as saying, “We don’t feel people can ride in on their white horses and for two years share the virtue of their knowledge as a pit stop on their way to becoming corporate executives” (Vaznis, 2009). As we continue to recognize our place(s) and purpose(s) within the global economy as educators, we need to question arrangements and discourses that privilege individual business leaders over teachers and unions; that applaud firing teachers and mock democratic debate; and that pit what is “best for kids” against what is best for their teachers.

## References

- Apple, M. (2006). *Educating the “right” way: Markets, standards, God, and inequality*. New York: Routledge.
- Azimi, N. (2007, September 30). Why teach for America. *The New York Times Magazine*. 111-114.
- Ballou, D. (2001). Pay for performance in public and private schools. *Economics of Education Review*, 20, 51-61.
- Compton, M., & Weiner, L. (2008). *The global assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1994). Who will speak for the children? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(1). Retrieved April 8, 2008, from MasterFILE Select database. 1-21.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2004). From “separate but equal” to “No Child Left Behind”: The collision of new standards and old inequalities. In *Many Children Left Behind*, eds. D. Meier and G. Wood, 3-32. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Dillon, S. (2008, December 13). Uncertainty on Obama education plans. *The New York Times*. Retrieved September 13, 2010 from [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/us/politics/14educ.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/us/politics/14educ.html?_r=2)
- Foote, D. (2008). *Relentless pursuit: A year in the trenches with Teach for America*. New York: Knopf.
- Kopp, W. (2001). *One day, all children...: The unlikely triumph of Teach for America and what I learned along the way*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Lipka, S. (2007, June 22). Elite company. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(42), p. A31.
- McNeil, L. M. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.
- Mikuta, J., & Wise, A. (2008). Teachers for America: Catalysts for change or untrained temporaries? *Education Next*, 8(2), 52-60.
- Murphey, K. (2008). Teachers and their unions: Why social class “counts”. In M. Compton and L. Weiner (Eds.) *The global assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ong, A. (2006). *Neoliberalism as exception*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Robertson, S. (2008) “Remaking the world”: Neoliberalism and the transformation of education and teachers’ labor. In M. Compton and L. Weiner (Eds.) *The global assault on teaching, teachers, and their unions*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Saltman, Kenneth. (2009). The rise of venture philanthropy and the ongoing neoliberal assault on public education: The case of the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation. *Workplace*, 16, 53-72.

- Schorr, J. (1993). Class action: What Clinton's national service program could learn from "Teach for America." *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(4), 315-318.
- Simmons, J. (2006). *Breaking through: Transforming Urban School Districts*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Teach for America. Retrieved September 13, 2010 from <http://www.teachforamerica.org/>
- Teacher layoffs in Washington, D.C., spark huge protest. (2009, October 8) AFT website. Retrieved September 13, 2010 from <http://archive.aft.org/news/2009/wtu-rally.htm>
- Thomas, E., Conant E. & Wingert, P. (2008, August 23). An unlikely gambler: By firing bad teachers and paying good ones six-figure salaries, Michelle Rhee just might save D.C.'s schools. *Newsweek*. Retrieved September 13, 2010 from <http://www.newsweek.com/id/154901/page/1>
- Vaznis, J. (2009, April 3). Hub teachers reject public service corps. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved September 13, 2010 from [http://www.boston.com/news/education/k\\_12/articles/2009/04/03/hub\\_teachers\\_reject\\_public\\_service\\_corps/?page=2](http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2009/04/03/hub_teachers_reject_public_service_corps/?page=2)
- Welsch, A., Suiters, K., & Collins, P. (2009, October 5). After teachers fired, students fire back. *NBC Washington*. Retrieved September 13, 2010 from <http://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local-beat/Teachers-Fired-Students-Fire-Back-63515307.html>

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Linda Darling-Hammond was in the running against Arne Duncan to become President Obama's Secretary of Education. Darling-Hammond is critical of Teach For America and usually supportive of unions (and unions have been credited with helping to elect Obama), while Secretary Duncan has been interested in doing away with teacher tenure. For a discussion on this, see for example, Dillon (2008).

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of neoliberalism and education see, for example, Apple (2006) and Saltman (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Ong (2006) writes specifically about Singapore, for example, and the ways in which traditional citizens and low-skilled migrant workers are governed through disciplining techniques, while "talented foreigners" are afforded benefits and "pastoral" care. She also discusses other neoliberal exceptions within China and Malaysia.

<sup>4</sup> During her lecture at Cornell University, Rhee stressed how she listens to kids and that kids know best what they need. Ironically, on the very day of the lecture, DCPS students marched on Rhee's office, protesting the firings of teachers and school councilors. See Welsch, Suiters, and Collins (2009). In the following days, students, along with the Washington Teachers' Union, organized a larger protest. See "Teacher Layoffs" (2009).