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**Teach For America's Long Arc: A Critical Race Theory  
Textual Analysis of Wendy Kopp's Works**

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**Abstract:** We read and analyzed 165,000 words and uncover a series of counter-stories buried within a textual corpus, authored by Teach For America (TFA) founder Wendy Kopp (Kopp, 1989, 2001; Kopp & Farr, 2011), that offers insight into the forms of racism endemic to Teach For America. All three counter-stories align with a critical race theory (CRT) framework. Specifically, we answer the following questions: What evidence of institutional and epistemological racism is exposed by a CRT textual analysis of TFA's founding document and later works by Wendy Kopp? To what extent has TFA appropriated the language of culturally

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relevant pedagogy, while advancing an uninterrogated neoliberal ideology? And, to what extent does TFA's contribution to a "culture of achievement" (Kopp & Farr, 2011) constitute an actual "poverty of culture" (Ladson-Billings, 2006a) that enacts real harms on communities of color?

**Keywords:** critical race theory; textual analysis; neoliberalism; culturally relevant pedagogy

### **El gran arco de *Teach For America*: Un análisis textual de la obra de Wendy Kopp usando la teoría racial crítica**

**Resumen:** Leímos y analizamos 165.000 palabras escritas por Wendy Kopp (Kopp, 1989, 2001; Kopp y Farr, 2011) la fundadora de *Teach For America* (TFA) y descubrimos una serie de contra-historias enterradas dentro de un corpus textual, que ofrecen información sobre formas de racismo endémicas en *Teach For America*. Tres contra-relatos se alinean con el marco de la teoría crítica de la raza (CRT). Específicamente, respondemos a las siguientes preguntas: ¿Qué evidencia de racismo institucional y epistemológico se exponen por un análisis textual CRT del documento fundacional de TFA y obras de Wendy Kopp? ¿Hasta qué punto TFA se ha apropiado del lenguaje de la pedagogía culturalmente relevante, mientras se avanza una ideología neoliberal sin interrogarla? Y, ¿en qué medida la contribución de TFA a una "cultura del logro" (Kopp y Farr, 2011) constituyen un "empobrecimiento cultural" (Ladson-Billings, 2006a), que permite daños reales en comunidades de color?

**Palabras clave:** teoría crítica de la raza; análisis textual; neoliberalismo; pedagogía culturalmente relevante

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**Palavras-chave:** teoria racial crítica; análise textual; neoliberalismo; pedagogia culturalmente relevante

## **Introduction: A Critique in Three Counter-Stories**

Over a period of two years we read and analyzed 165,000 words to uncover a series of stories buried within a textual corpus, authored by Teach For America (TFA) founder Wendy Kopp (Kopp, 1989, 2001; Kopp & Farr, 2011), that offers insight into the forms of racism endemic to Teach For America. We hope the narratives we share here serve as *counter-stories*, which according to Solórzano and Yosso (2002) "can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform" (p. 32). All three counter-stories align with a critical race theory (CRT) framework that evolved in parallel with our research. Our etic, or pre-investigation theoretical foundation, helped us conceptualize and then confirm a pattern of *unconscious racism*

(Lawrence, 1987) within TFA. Specifically, we answer the following question: What evidence of institutional and epistemological racism is exposed by a critical race theory textual analysis of TFA's founding document and later works by Wendy Kopp? This question frames our first counter-story, focused on a group Kopp declares "the best and the brightest" (1989). It is an old tale of utmost importance. Racism is socially constructed, yet it persists covertly in many contexts to accrue advantages disproportionately to whites, despite an overt, public opposition, as if it were a traceless, epistemological disease. As our research reveals, this is a disease for which TFA is not immune.

After examining our initial research question, powerful themes emerged, raising subsequent questions we also address in our analysis: To what extent has TFA appropriated the language of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), while advancing an uninterrogated neoliberal ideology? To what extent does TFA's contribution to a "culture of achievement" (Kopp & Farr, 2011) constitute an actual "poverty of culture" (Ladson-Billings, 2006a) that enacts real harms on communities of color?

Our second and third counter-stories, respectively, draw from these questions to remind us that social constructs are not benign. Institutional racism advances ideologies as harmful, hidden agendas that contradict and undermine publicly-stated aims. Racism also imposes a very real violence that disproportionately cuts short non-white lives and threatens to shatter survivors' psyche (Love, 2014). Furthermore, as we share our counter-stories, their interrelated nature will reveal they are components of a broader civilizational narrative.

Throughout this article, we move from the individual viewpoint, to the institutional, to the epistemological, and back down the scaffold to the individual. Thus we trace the etiological path of the social pandemic, racism, and find as Bell (1987) suggests, that there is not so much a point of origin as a "cyclical experience" that "predates the Constitution by more than one hundred years" (p. xi). Indeed, racism persists despite great efforts to identify and eradicate it, and continues to claim lives each day. In tragic disproportion, these are often the lives of our children of color.

Our work is deeply critical, yet our purpose is not to critique for critique's sake, but to lay bare a pattern of sub-textual racism that prevents Teach For America and earnest proponents, including a vast network of education reform affiliates, from ensuring equity within the communities of color they aim to support. As Freire (2005, p. 74) encourages, we arrive bearing *amor armado!*

## Racism, A Pandemic

In this article, we observe racism embedded deep within the discourses of Teach For America. We define *race* as "a socially constructed category, created to differentiate racial groups, and to show the superiority or dominance of one race over another" with *racism* constituting "a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress" racial groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24). We find it is also useful in this examination to recall the metaphor of racism as a disease. We draw inspiration from scholars who apply metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008; Sipe & Constable, 1996) and imagery (Morgan, 1997; Bolman & Deal, 2011) to great effect. Most importantly, we reconnect the metaphor of racism as a disease to legal scholar Charles Lawrence (1987), who writes:

One's inability to know racial discrimination when one sees it results from a failure to recognize that racism is both a crime and a disease. This failure is compounded by a reluctance to admit that the illness of racism infects almost everyone. Acknowledging and understanding the malignancy are prerequisites to the discovery of an appropriate cure. But the diagnosis is difficult, because our own contamination with the very illness for which a cure is sought impairs our comprehension of the disorder. (p. 321)

Racism, in fact, has long since contributed to a vast health inequity, and can literally be described as a contributing source for disease (Paradies, 2006). The metaphor of racism as a disease helps lend form to abstract conceptualizations of racism that may be regarded as less egregious than more traditionally-understood notions of overt racism. For comparison, it is reasonable to express concern over a persistent, explicit cough, not because the effect is deadly, but due to the potential for an unseen, hard to detect phenomenon, such as lung cancer. In the case of racism, deadly and explicit criminal acts proliferate, yet are persistently treated as independent and isolated events. To many scholars, however, it is clear we face a recurring pandemic. We believe Teach For America has not escaped this pandemic.

To extend our metaphor, TFA may be perceived as a sick patient wholly convinced they are a doctor with a cure. As it continues to scale, TFA risks exposing healthy communities to a virulent strain of unconscious racism. This disease distorts our thinking when we uncritically apply terms like success, failure, achievement, and even culture itself. The sickness preys on the very power of the human mind to generalize trends among vast quantities of data, to distinguish order from the noise, to make sense of the world, and to guide our actions (Cimpian & Salomon, 2014). In short, “we must categorize in order to cope” (Lawrence, 1987, p. 337). However, if our sense-making mechanism, our capacity for generalization is racially biased, then no amount of looking at individual decisions, no amount of listening to individual voices, and no amount of reflecting upon seemingly isolated incidents will reveal the true pattern of the disease. Thus situated, we consider TFA as an organization.

### **Organizational Context**

Teach For America’s meteoric rise is without a doubt one of the most notable developments within the education reform movement. TFA is organized as a national 501(c)3, with offices supporting teachers and alumni in 52 regions across more than 30 states and Washington, D.C. TFA estimates that in the fall of 2013, there were 11,000 “corps members” (CMs) teaching 750,000 students as part of a standard two-year commitment (Our Organization TFA, 2015). According to TFA’s five-year plan, they aspired to increase those numbers to 15,000 corps members teaching 1 million students across 60 geographic regions by 2015 (Business Plan TFA, 2010, p. 3). A recent report notes TFA is now America’s largest source for new teachers, and the largest K-12 recipient of philanthropic contributions, spending \$51,467 per CM in 2014 (Mead, Chuong, & Goodson, 2015, p. 73). For scholars concerned that the education reform movement embodies a neoliberal ideology (Harvey, 2005), the evidence above, which emphasizes corporate-style leadership advancing rapid growth at massive scale, suggests TFA may indeed be leading a neoliberal charge to “aggressively [privatize] public and collective spaces, relationships, and institutions” (De Lissovoy, 2015, p. 49).

However, for the second year in a row, TFA actually failed to meet its ambitious recruitment targets (Rich, 2015). Additionally, there are voices within the academic community expressing renewed concerns about TFA’s impact on the educational landscape. Many of these voices focus on the classroom effectiveness of CMs (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Heilig & Jez, 2010; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002), who from the beginning were drawn from non-education college majors, and typically do not have prior teaching experience. Still, others raise concerns about sending predominantly white, affluent individuals to offer unsolicited service to predominantly non-white schools and communities (Cann, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 1994). Even an increasing diversification of TFA’s corps member population—people of color now constitute “almost half” the total (TFA On The Record, 2015)—does not

constitute an educational panacea. As Ladson-Billings (2005b) notes, “culture match” (p. 231) does not guarantee a solution to student learning and school achievement.

Our article represents a departure from previous studies, as we engage in a new discourse, applying a critical race theory textual analysis of Kopp's corpus (1989, 2001; Kopp & Farr 2011) to identify latent racial biases embedded in the organization. We draw particular guidance from prior work by Popkewitz (1998), Schneider (2014), and Lapayese, Aldana, and Lara (2014), and incorporate evidence relevant to our analysis from these scholarly works where possible.

## Theoretical Framework

We are not alone in applying a critical race theory textual analysis to an educational context (e.g. Heilig, Brown, & Brown, 2012). However, there are multiple ways to approach such a project. The emergent themes we uncovered through our textual analysis of Kopp's works confronted and tested the limitations of our initial theory. To make sense of the multiple layers of meaning present in our data we introduce additional emic concepts (e.g. culturally relevant pedagogy, neoliberal ideology, and poverty of culture), which we address below as we situate our research questions in the relevant literature. After first outlining textual analysis as a methodology, we share our CRT framework in order of relevance to our three counter-stories.

### Textual Analysis

The application of textual analysis in the field of organizational research is well established (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000a, 2000b; Chia, 2000; Hardy, 2001; Marshak & Grant, 2008; O'Connor, 1995). Specifically, we adopt Alvesson and Karreman's (2000b) *Grand-Discourse Approach*, “an assembly of discourses, ordered and presented as an integrated frame” (p. 1133), which can refer to or constitute an organization. This approach aligns with Fairclough's (2001, 2003) assertion that language both represents institutional elements, but also participates in the construction of an institution. We believe our discourse, aimed at encouraging an explicitly anti-racist TFA, must begin by examining foundational texts. For this reason, we start with Kopp's corpus (1989, 2001; Kopp & Farr, 2011). At each key milestone Kopp's texts are informed by, yet also instruct the growth and development of the organization. However, we acknowledge that this source, though substantial and significant, is not exhaustive.

### Critical Race Theory Applied

Critical race theory, an outgrowth of and reaction to critical legal studies, emerged in response to the retrenchment of civil rights beginning in the late 1970s and accelerating under the Reagan administration (Crenshaw, 1988; Tate, 1997). CRT scholars operate under the premise that racism is endemic to American life and contributes to myriad manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993).

Why do we consider it vital to apply CRT in our analysis? Racism is an essential component of American culture, and culture lies at the center of schooling. Kopp (1989) acknowledges that her corps members are most likely to work in “schools in low socioeconomic areas” (p. 2), which implicitly equates to schools predominantly populated by students of color, an association she fails to discuss. As Gay (2010) clarifies, especially for students of color, “culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education” (p. 8). And as Bell (1987) and Lawrence (1987) illuminate, racism as part of our common history “plays a dominant role” (p. 322) in the cultural experience. The racism

we address here is “much more complex than either the conscious conspiracy of a power elite, or the simple delusion of a few ignorant bigots” (p. 330), but operates as an unconscious racism. Bell draws inspiration from Lawrence’s concept of unconscious racism and advances a critical race theory that is sufficiently comprehensive to account for the pervasiveness of multiple layers of racism in America. Today, TFA even describes effective teachers as possessing “an understanding of the systemic challenges of poverty and racism” (TFA And You, 2015). Thus it is non-negotiable; a privileged actor or organization working between power relations in communities of color must consider the possibility that covert racism may be at play in an advantage/disadvantage dichotomy. For our counter-stories, CRT offers the best method for interrogating and exposing covert racism.

**Evidence of latent racism.** Our first counter-story examines the covert, or latent racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998) that extends to both the institutional and epistemological level within Teach For America, and is essential to the reproduction of racial inequity between generations, and within institutions. Evidence of such a latent racial bias is represented by textual tendencies that either advantage a dominant, white group, or disadvantage non-white groups. The key premise here is that language is not neutral, it is political (Fairclough, 2001, 2003; Norton, 2004), and therefore critical to the construction of power between individuals and within institutions. As we observe in our results, Kopp’s “best and the brightest” (1989), a group of predominantly white graduates from highly selective colleges and universities, are characterized by language that advantages. Existing teachers, as well as the students and communities they serve, who are predominantly people of color, are caricatured by language that disadvantages. The following concepts help identify some of the varying forms of textual advantage and disadvantage.

One concept that signals white advantage is *interest convergence*, which can be characterized by evidence that “racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523). The concern here is that inequality cannot be erased, even if gains among minorities are observed, if those groups are only permitted to keep pace with gains by the white majority. We can also determine whose interests are best represented by asking whose voices are included, and whose are excluded. A *structured silence* refers to the exclusion of non-white voices from a text (Fine, 1987; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Diaz-Greenberg, 2003). Additionally, references to non-white groups can focus either on emphasizing positive competencies, or essentializing negative stereotypes.

The concept of *funds of knowledge* (González et al., 1995; González & Moll, 2002; Moll, Amanti, & Neff, 1992) “is based on a simple premise ... that people are competent and have knowledge, and that their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (González & Moll, 2002, p. 625). Acknowledging funds of knowledge requires that we enter conversations concerning students of color with a default position that is positive. By contrast, *deficit thinking* (Delpit, 1995; Valencia, 1997) advances white interests and rejects communities’ funds of knowledge, with emphasis placed on what minority or low-income communities lack, particularly in what Kopp (1989) calls “underserved” or “disadvantaged” spaces. Deficit thinking can also take place when harmful binaries are encoded into neutral language, such as admissions policies for highly selective colleges that clearly favor whites at the expense of African American, Latino/a, Native American, and Asian Pacific Islander communities.

In general, we did not expect to find explicit language demonstrating racial preference, nor did we invest in this search. Disproportionate attention to overt racism may reinforce a false impression that if we eliminate certain discrete, isolated racist incidents, or individuals, then we automatically achieve an anti-racist society. The presence of latent racism problematizes this simplistic scenario. We should not ask “Am I racist?” but rather posit, “What steps have I taken to

uncover my racial bias lately, to ensure that I am not actively perpetuating racism?" This is especially true for racial biases rooted in epistemology, for ways of knowing may seem to be what is just normal. This line of thinking can be especially harmful if defined by homogenous groups rich in privilege and social capital (Yosso, 2005). As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) observe, "racism is often well disguised in the rhetoric of shared "normative" values and "neutral" [...] educational principles and practices" (p. 27). Particularly for members of the dominant (white) racial group, a conscious effort must be undertaken to address issues of race bias, because life experiences may conceal these realities due to an absence of institutional and societal conflict (McIntosh, 1988; Tatum, 1997).

**Interrogating Epistemological Racism.** We draw primarily from Lawrence (1987) and Scheurich and Young (1997) to introduce a framework of analysis that transcends a focus on individuals' actions as either overt or covert forms of racism. As Lawrence states, regarding our shared system of beliefs:

To the extent that this cultural belief system has influenced all of us, we are all racists. At the same time, most of us are unaware of our racism. We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions. (p. 322)

Scheurich and Young (1997) agree, noting the individual actor may be operating unwittingly on behalf of institutional, or even civilizational (epistemological) racism. Specifically, *institutional racism* exists when "institutions or organizations, including educational ones, have standard operating procedures (intended or unintended) that hurt members of one or more races in relation to members of the dominant race" (p. 5). As an example, admissions policies based on GPA and SAT scores may be institutional instruments of racism (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Reardon, Baker, & Klasik, 2012). Yet these tests are also founded on a false premise of academic merit. And the idea that people generally obtain benefits (e.g. income, access to highly selective colleges) due to their presumed merit may be an example of widespread, cultural beliefs that are hard to locate entirely at the institutional level.

*Epistemological racism* represents the broadest assumptions that "construct the nature of our world and our experience of it" (Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 7). In other words, there are various ways of knowing that are often difficult for individuals to negotiate consciously, yet can have the greatest long-term effect in perpetuating (or mitigating) inequality. How do we know for sure that white students, who mostly constitute the membership of highly selective colleges actually possess some distinct quality apart from non-white others? This open-ended question has the power to shape public policy, with significant epistemological, institutional, and individual impacts. What matters most in our research is whether the answer to that and other epistemological dilemmas leads us toward racially biased thinking. If students test poorly, and parents do not possess degrees, jobs, or taxable income, and the tax base of a community is low, is there really nothing of value present? Or do we simply fail to accurately measure, to know with certainty just how much social capital (Yosso, 2005) there can be in a community? These types of epistemological interrogations often invite more questions than answers. We embrace these questions as central to an emerging dialectic.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.** If critical race theory offers a set of tools for investigating pernicious patterns of racial oppression that operate covertly within social systems, then culturally relevant pedagogy is an application of these tools in the specific case of teachers engaging students in schooling contexts. Specifically, culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria (Ladson-Billings, 1995b):

(a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p. 160)

Each of these three criteria is represented strongly by one of our three counter-stories. In our first narrative, we explore how TFA's conceptualization of academic success essentializes racist assumptions about whites and non-whites. In our second counter-story, we identify how TFA explicitly rejects any challenge to the status quo (Kopp, 1989). Even as TFA begins to invoke the language of social justice, civil rights, and change, we illuminate how TFA fails to develop a critical consciousness sufficient to interrogate mutually incompatible ideologies. In our last counter-story, we demonstrate how TFA cannot possibly promote cultural competence in students if they, and education reform partners, repossess students' culture, and locate ownership of culture entirely within top-down systems of schooling.

While TFA eventually introduces "culturally responsive teaching" (Culturally Responsive Teaching TFA, 2015) to their CMs, we encourage use of the term "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 110), which is explicitly anti-assimilationist. Specifically, CRP operates in opposition to a status quo system whose "major function is to transmit dominant culture beliefs, values, myths and ideologies and to induct students into the role that society has determined for them with an unquestioning, uncritical view" (p. 110). In this way, CRP and CRT operate in parallel to resist the assimilation of communities of color into a system of schooling which renders as normative a vast unconscious racism. It is probably not a coincidence then, that in 1995, in collaboration with William Tate (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), Ladson-Billings released two seminal articles on CRT and CRP (1995a), respectively. We are curious, however, to learn more about why TFA, instead of embracing Ladson-Billings' language, adopts a less critically-conscious form. Generally, we find it insightful to highlight the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, who operates as a foil for Kopp on many levels.

**Neoliberal Ideology Unmasked.** We explore in our second counter-story how the main thrust of Kopp's text shows little deviation from a neoliberal ideology that incentivizes protecting systems of racial advantage within status quo America. Many TFA participants may negotiate and navigate this neoliberal ideology unconsciously and without being able to name the corresponding "racist injuries and [...] their origins" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27).

As a recent college graduate in 1989, Kopp convinced billionaire Ross Perot to contribute \$500,000 toward the start of Teach For America (Kopp, 2001, p. 46). Was this a stroke of luck, a demonstration of Kopp's true grit, or was TFA the beneficiary of a growing market ideology permeating American society throughout Reagan's presidency? During the 1980s, this ideology, now referred to as neoliberalism, was winding its way deep into the general consciousness of the American public (Giroux 2009; Harvey, 2005; Lipman 2011). A neoliberal ideology begins with the premise that increased privatization and deregulation, coupled with decreased state intervention and funding of public services best advances human well-being (Harvey, 2005). The theory prioritizes individualism, consumerism, competition, strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Ball, 2007; Burch, 2009; Giroux 2009; Harvey, 2005; Lipman 2011). In this framework, the role of the state is diminished, except to facilitate the formation of new markets (e.g. education, health care) where they previously did not exist, or to enable the expansion and deregulation of existing markets (Harvey, 2005).

Initially, TFA fulfilled this function in the teacher labor market. By utilizing emergency credentialing, TFA CMs bypassed traditional teacher education pathways and provided schools with



a young, highly-educated workforce at bargain rates. These new teachers were less likely to rely on unions or seek long term investments in the profession, nor likely to contribute to corresponding liabilities, such as retirement pensions. Over the last 25 years TFA has grown dramatically in scale, exerting considerable influence over state and federal education policy (Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014). As our analysis of Kopp's seminal works demonstrates, the reforms promoted and supported by the organization increasingly align with a neoliberal ideology that essentializes the rational individual as the primary unit of policy analysis, and celebrates an American meritocracy (Ball, 2007; Burch, 2009; Giroux 2009; Harvey, 2005; Lipman 2011). As our second counter-story demonstrates, this neoliberal ideology at best neglects, and at worse forsakes, an interrogation and resistance to the structural, systemic causes of inequity in public education, and for students of color especially.

**A Poverty of Culture.** Our third counter-story represents the knife-point of a neoliberal ideology that promotes a "culture of achievement" as the definitive means for creating easily reproducible "school cultures" within easily reproducible "high-performing" charter schools (Kopp & Farr, 2011). Kopp and TFA have endeavored in alternate turns to contribute to and benefit from this process of cultural production. As Kretchmar (2014) notes, these groups intertwine to form a robust, mutually-reinforcing social network, ever advancing a privatization agenda. The problem, from a perspective of institutional and epistemological racism, is that the requisite repossession of students' home, heritage, or indigenous cultures invalidates students' potential for developing cultural competency, as there is no space left in a one-size-fits-all structure for students' cultures to take root and thrive. Where a student's culture is actually acknowledged, it serves only "as a vehicle for learning" (TFA unpublished presentation, 2014), by which we mean learning the assimilationist culture of the dominant, white group.

Perhaps because the program of academic success prevalent in affluent, white schools is aligned with students' unacknowledged white culture, privileged teachers do not think that there should be anything other than a superficially-constructed school culture. As Ladson-Billings (2006a) explains, "most members of the dominant society rarely acknowledge themselves as cultural beings. They have no reason to. Culture is that exotic element possessed by 'minorities'" (p. 107). Indeed, for Kopp's (2011) preferred charter schools, the inherent positioning of minority students' culture as oppositional to a white culture of achievement signals the presence of a poverty of culture. As Ladson-Billings elaborates, many teachers tend to "dump all manner of behavior into a catchall they call "culture." Whenever teachers seem not to be able to explain or identify with students, they point to students' culture as the culprit" (p. 105). The attempt by practitioners of a culture of achievement to stamp out this "culprit" engenders real harm for students, and students of color especially. We further describe this harm in our analysis, and draw from Fanon (1967), who offers a historical context for discussing cultural oppression, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007), which names and validates the struggle against cultural repossession and also helps students connect their suffering to a global context.

**On Intersectionality.** While we emphasize a CRT approach for our textual analysis, we also recognize the value of intersectionality (Delgado, 2011) as part of a larger social justice framework, in which a latent system of disadvantage may extend beyond the realm of race. Specifically, Trahan (2011) reminds us that, "people's identity lies at the intersection of race, class, and gender and it is the combination of these constructs that often shapes people's experiences with [...] social structures" (pg. 1). Of course, we do not consider Trahan's an exhaustive list. A benefit of placing CRT in education is that it provides researchers "the ability to examine how multiple forms of oppression can intersect within the lives of People of Color

and how those intersections manifest in our daily experiences to mediate our education” (Pérez Huber, 2010, p. 77). We embrace this ability as a great responsibility, and consider intersections of class and gender at several points throughout the article.

## Methodology

In this research, we analyze 165,000 words in a variety of ways. We focus our inquiry on three texts written by Kopp: her 1989 Princeton senior thesis, which was converted into the early business plan for TFA; a 2001 autobiography, which doubles as a promotional text for the organization; and a 2011 autobiography attributed to Kopp but also co-written by a former corps member and now “Chief Knowledge Officer” for TFA, Steven Farr. Throughout our research we read, and re-read “with ears to hear” (McCarty, 2002, p. xv) each of Kopp’s texts countless times.

We first analyzed Kopp’s 1989 thesis and hand coded key themes with highlighters. Our early analysis yielded a set of emic, or emergent concepts we combined with our etic, or theoretical codes (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990). We then imported soft copies of Kopp’s works into a textual analysis software (QDA Miner 4, 2015; WordStat 7, 2015) and manually coded blocks of text according to their respective groups. These groups included (a) members of TFA, (b) pre-existing educators and school staff, (c) students and families as well as their local community, and (d) the education reform movement. With all the text coded and stored in our software program, we performed numerous statistical analyses to draw out trends from the vast noise.

Specifically, we applied our etic and emic codes to construct a *categorization dictionary* (WordStat 7, 2015) or a set of words against which we can compare the coded sections of text within each document. A categorization dictionary exists as a hierarchy, whereby categories, which operate like folders, can contain either sub-categories, or words. We created sub-categories for certain sets of emic codes, which constitute jargon, or words specific to Kopp’s corpus that we wanted to store and analyze separately. As an example, the phrase “best and the brightest” and variations are included in a sub-category for “TFA Teachers Jargon,” so we can track its use across the textual corpus. In all, our categorization dictionary contains 25 total categories and sub-categories (Table 1). We assigned more than 200 words and phrases to our categorization dictionary. We also applied a preexisting categorization dictionary called the WordStat (2015) Sentiment Dictionary, which allowed us to apply a set of rules to determine the relative positive and negative orientation of a given text. In addition, multidimensional scaling (MDS) maps help us visualize unconscious racism.

Table 1  
*Categorization Dictionary: Categories, and Sub-Categories*

<b>Sociocultural Context</b>	
Race/Ethnicity	
	African American
	White
	Latino/a
	Asian
	Native American
Geography	
	Kopp's Geography Jargon
Economic Class and Poverty	
	Kopp's Poverty Jargon
Community	
Privilege, Power, Oppression	
<b>Educational Context</b>	
Equity Terms	
	Kopp's Equity Jargon
Kopp's Education Jargon	
<b>TFA Context</b>	
TFA Teachers Jargon	
Non-TFA Teachers Jargon	
Ed Reform Jargon	
<b>Gender</b>	
Men	
Women	
Non Binary	

Lastly, over the two years that this study developed (2013-2015) we read as much of the dynamic and growing body of literature around TFA as possible. Though we continually asked ourselves—is there a major text we missed, or have not re-read in a new context?—we believe there are likely critical pieces of the conversation we overlook or under-cite. We accept responsibility for any omissions in the literature.

At the outset of our research, we considered examining the broad issue of pre-service teacher preparation in the context of critical race theory. We narrowed our scope to TFA because a steady recruitment of white graduates from elite universities sent to teach in urban and rural communities of color presented a likely case of cultural incongruence. However, both our scope and theoretical framework expanded in parallel as we conducted our textual analysis. As an example, we did not originally propose a fourth group, focused on businesses, donors, and select elected officials. But that theme persisted, and is compatible with claims of TFA's neoliberal, privatization agenda (Kretchmar, 2014; Lahann & Reagan, 2011). This coalition eventually emerged as the education reform group. Throughout this process, we sustained a focus on establishing a new discourse. Discussing latent racism may be healthy for all parties, even if critical, as it avoids a reductive obsession over a single observable feature (e.g. a fraction of a standard deviation's worth of comparative classroom performance) within a complex organization operating at massive scale.

## Positionality

Our research team consists of one TFA outsider, one network affiliate and one TFA insider. Our network affiliate is a former teacher of students in high poverty and racially segregated schools, one of which is a charter school with direct ties to TFA. This author cannot, therefore, claim to be a disinterested party. Her experience with TFA teachers, alumni, and friends still employed through the organization and its network affiliates, has engendered an appreciation for their commitment to the work of staffing under-resourced schools, even as their ideological foundations remain under-interrogated and subject to racial bias. She sees her work on this project as a means to spur reflection within a highly influential player in education reform. As an educator and researcher committed to social justice, equity, and opportunity, she cannot ignore the current practices of TFA, which leave our communities of color largely voiceless in key decisions affecting their children's lives. She hopes this study helps effect a shift in focus for TFA, and provides an impetus for inclusion of those voices most often left out of discourses in education.

Our insider author previously worked as a seasonal and part-time staff member for TFA, assuming at times significant responsibilities. A primary concern raised independently in conversations by numerous TFA staff, corps members, and alumni, is that this research may have a chilling effect on network partnerships, and future career opportunities. TFA holds a reputation for assertively rebutting any public criticism (Brewer, 2015). Our textual evidence supports the theory that this is due in part to a sustained commitment to brand identity and public relations as an essential asset of the organization.

Our insider author did not set out to place himself in opposition to an organization that, while it may perpetuate unconscious racism, paradoxically contributed to his position as an education researcher and was primarily responsible for his teaching seven years in the Rio Grande Valley. Given the choice to back down in the face of a hypothetical risk of losing unfairly apportioned social capital, or instead "to follow a new trail to the point of knowing" (Nerburn, 1999, p. xvi), he chooses this course of research wholeheartedly.

Our insider author is also a white male, whose income and level of education place him squarely in a position of advantage via privilege. It should be said, therefore, that the anti-racist, (Pollock, 2008) and decolonization (David, 2013) journey he proposes for TFA and its members is one he is already committed to undertaking. Despite having a general awareness of racial inequity in America, only upon confronting a substantial body of data (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004; Orfield, 2002) situated in the context of an explanatory CRT framework (Ladson-Billings, 1998), did he realize the true reach and disruptive force of a latent, racially biased system of advantage.

## Discussion of the Results

In this discussion, we demonstrate substantial evidence to validate our three counter-stories. The first counter-story is a narrative of latent racism rooted at the institutional level for TFA, represented by racially biased epistemologies manifested in normalized, everyday terminology that appears at first sight to be racially- and politically-neutral. This covert racism is exposed by examining precisely whose interests are prioritized (privileged corps members), whose capacities are degraded (existing teachers), and whose voices are excluded (students, parents, families, and communities of color). As we discover through sentiment analysis and other visualizations, even the words themselves carry disproportionately negative values for teachers and students, as compared to corps members and the emergent (1989-2011) education reform community.

Our second counter-story determines the extent to which a greater agenda of neoliberal privatization is advanced through TFA's work. We uncover an ideological divide that is vast, and represents a number of related dichotomies, which place TFA in opposition to scholars like Ladson-Billings, who advocate for a culturally relevant pedagogy. This ideological divide cannot easily be papered over by sporadic citations, nor wholesale appropriation of the works of scholars of color. Our third counter-story extends the impacts of a neoliberal ideology to consider how students' culture is repossessed by schools that promise a culture of achievement but impose a poverty of culture. We reconnect this cultural repossession to its historical roots and global context. Our results are organized according to their relevance to our counter-stories.

### **The Best and the Brightest**

In her thesis, Kopp (1989) introduces a proposal to recruit “the best and the brightest,” or “a select group of college graduates without undergraduate degrees in education to teach for periods of two years in the United States” (Kopp, 1989, p. 1). Her strong belief that graduates of highly selective universities represent the best and the brightest is reinforced by the fact that she uses this exact term 12 times, and derivations of the term an additional 17 times. If we construct an amalgamated string of unique descriptors Kopp gives for these prospective teachers, they could be described as:

The best and the brightest, most talented individuals, with superior academic achievement; academically outstanding, with high measured academic achievement, possessing a capacity for leadership, idealistic enthusiasm, a willingness to go above and beyond, and who display a commitment to learning, and helping others, and who are deeply committed to teaching but not as a lifelong career, who care the most about children and are looking to become involved in the life of the community.  
(Kopp, 1989)

The concern from a critical race theory perspective is that these glowing, celebratory terms are based largely on a single common factor—these students all attended and graduated from highly selective universities. However, research shows that students of color are systemically excluded from participation in these universities, even when discounting the impact of income (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Carnevale & Rose, 2003; & Reardon, et. al 2012). For Kopp to glorify a group of predominately white members of society, to validate their “possessive investment in whiteness” (Lipsitz, 2006), and then to ascribe that investment as the due reward of merit, is to reproduce a nefarious form of epistemological racism. As we explore, similar elements of unconscious racism persist throughout Kopp's corpus. Textual advantages afforded the prospective corps members stand in contrast to textual disadvantage directed at existing teachers and their students of color.

#### *Interests Converge*

Kopp (1989) invests tremendous energy analyzing the needs of the racially advantaged teachers she will recruit. Specifically, she allocates 32.7% of her entire text to her prospective teachers, a trend that is sustained over time (2001, 2011) with only 6.3% reserved for students and their community context, as demonstrated in figure 1. This disproportionate textual space advantages the interests of generally white, privileged members of TFA. This evidence also signals a significant structured silence.

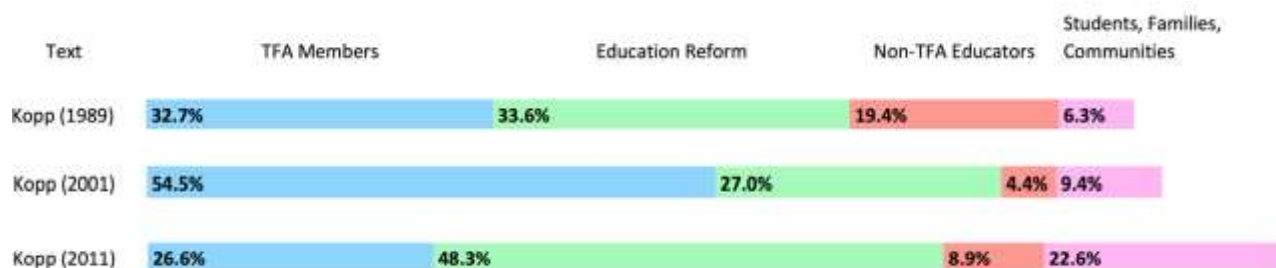


Figure 1. Percent of total word count, by group, across Kopp's corpus

A major theme emerges as Kopp explains why these privileged actors will want to join her corps and what they will gain from it, including personal development, status, and a valuable *credential* (Labaree, 1997; Maier, 2012) which permits admission into a select group. Her message to prospective teachers is far from altruistic. Kopp promotes her “Teacher Corps” experience as one that will “add meaning and direction to an often aimless time of life” (p. 10). These prospective teachers may be aimless because “the brightest students have the greatest number of options” (p. 26) and must be coaxed into systems of poverty, since their participation is by choice, not force. This exemplifies interest convergence as Kopp suggests, without fully articulating her strategy, that she must provide clear incentives for privileged white teachers in order for the (presumptive) benefit of their presence to be enjoyed by communities of color. An unfortunate irony lies in the fact that the proposed benefits are dependent upon the epistemologically-biased association of merit with membership in highly selective colleges. Otherwise, if this racist logic breaks down, the recipient schools are simply being sent privileged college graduates, driven by self-interest, with an inflated sense of their own ability, blind to the racism locked into their everyday thinking about the world.

Kopp continues to articulate incentives, as her high-achievers “risk the stigma of being thought among the least academically able of all college graduates” (1989, p. 27) if they do decide to teach. Here Kopp essentializes a stigma of teachers as “the least academically able” (p. 14), an association we will examine further. To break this stigma for her prospective corps members, Kopp promotes teaching as “a learning experience, as a way to help them decide about the future” (p. 46) but reiterates that they still “may worry about threatening future job opportunities – something that would be of no concern in a program heartily supported by business and government leaders” (p. 46). This latter point may explain in part Kopp’s near exclusive focus on businesses and corporations as partners, in order to boost recruitment and decrease the risk that teaching might send the wrong signal to the future employers of corps members. This represents an alignment of goals, another interest convergence that helps unite the education reform coalition over time. But where is Kopp’s concern for the future employers of the students and families located in high poverty communities? Who really needs the extra consideration, given the advantaged recruits’ robust social capital? Again, as consistent with interrogations of epistemological racism, questions abound. What is clear is that Kopp is deeply invested in exploring the psychology of CMs, at the expense of other stakeholders. Meanwhile, Kopp implies that simply recruiting predominantly white teachers is a victory, because it sends “the clear signal that the nation’s leaders and its brightest young minds care” (p. 46). For these new entrants to the field of teaching, simply showing up should constitute an act of caring.

To help entice her new teachers into the profession, Kopp discusses ways to glamorize poverty. She proposes advertisements that “will seek to sell the experience as something almost glamorous,” and “the Teacher Corps will seek to capitalize on the fact that salaries are low to actually increase the status of the endeavor” (1989, p. 47). As she continues, “the Teacher Corps will

create a level of spirit and mystique which would rival the hype that currently lures so many who have undefined career plans into investment banking” (p. 47). The glamour, spirit, and mystique Kopp aspires to associate with the Teacher Corps (CMs) positions students and communities of color as the other, an exotic spectacle, and casts the two-year act of service as an extended version of poverty tourism (Selinger & Outterson, 2010; Steinbrink, 2012). This unfortunate image is compounded by deficit language directed at the communities of color that will be disproportionately served by Kopp’s CMs.

**A Deficit Perspective.** The praise (and credentials) Kopp (1989) reserves for CMs is contrasted by deficit-laden language she uses to describe existing teachers and the larger education system they would replace. Kopp repeatedly laments the “dilapidated state of our educational system” (p. 1) and states that “teaching is more attractive to students with low measured academic ability and less attractive to those with high measured ability than are other professions” (p. 16). Kopp essentializes non-TFA teachers as having “low measured academic ability” and thus constructs a complete binary of TFA/non-TFA that equates to smart/non-smart. Kopp allows this deficit language to take hold, and does not consider the funds of knowledge that teachers may possess, such as a rich passion to pursue a life’s work bearing witness to the resiliency of young people resisting intergenerational cycles of poverty, which is not quite captured by standardized testing. When Kopp claims that “teachers have traditionally come from among the least academically able of Americans” (p. 14), she uses data to back up her claims, without ever explaining why the data measures teachers’ capacities in precisely this way. She is silent in examining her own epistemology. That silence is a privilege afforded members of the dominant, white group, for whom native epistemologies are aligned to institutional cultures, which in turn align with the methods for determining success. If these layered systems of advantage are operating without error, then silence as a strategy should offer the greatest reward for white actors.

Kopp (1989) does share some ideas about the origin of the “low status” of teachers: The fact that teaching is considered a low status occupation may result from a number of factors. For one thing, teachers generally have relatively low socioeconomic status, and the profession has also long been dominated by females. (p. 26)

Since Kopp does not follow this claim with any discussion, it is hard to comprehend what she means when referring to the connection between the career field being dominated by females, and its correlation as low status. The uncritical association of females with “low status” is deeply troubling. Kopp also claims without discussion that “parents and peers in high socioeconomic brackets influence children to view teaching as a downwardly mobile occupational choice” (Kopp, 1989, p. 27). Kopp’s language, which emphasizes perceived deficits in the existing teacher stock, accompanies a significant structured silence that marginalizes the students, families, and communities which Ladson-Billings, by contrast, makes the heart of her work.

**The Sound of Silence.** As perhaps the most striking example of a structured silence in her thesis, Kopp (1989) dedicates a single paragraph citing statistics on minority rates of graduation as her sole mention of race or culture. Even more intriguing is Kopp’s use of the rhetorical term “geographic shortages” in place of references to race or low socioeconomic status (1989, p. 29). These shortages, which occur “most often in small schools and in rural and inner-city districts, are a result of factors that may never go away—dangerous working conditions, poor location, lack of community and parental support, and scarcity of financial resources” (p. 29). In this line we see the substitution of geography for references to race, ethnicity, and

poverty, which again is positioned as oppositional, or at best unrelated to educational reform, given the intractability of the challenge.

Variants of the term “geographic shortage” combined with the similar “acute shortage” occur 16 times in Kopp’s thesis. That’s more than three times the references combined for African Americans (2 mentions), and Hispanics (3), out of a total of more than 37,000 words in the 1989 text alone. The use of neutral terms to avoid addressing race is consistent with the pattern of unconscious racism observable throughout our investigation.

**Visualizing Unconscious Racism.** Analysis of Kopp’s texts with a sentiment dictionary, a vast, standardized library of positive and negative terms, confirms the presence of deficit thinking applied to the pre-existing education community, and also to the students and communities of color in which these schools are typically situated. In stark contrast, both members of TFA and the education reform community are surrounded by distinctly positive language. To perform our sentiment analysis, we first evaluate Kopp’s entire corpus (1989, 2001; Kopp & Farr, 2011) as a baseline. Then we examine trends that specifically apply to her thesis (figure 2) and subsequent works.

As a point of clarification, the positive or negative number enclosed in parentheses indicates how that group compares against the baseline of Kopp’s entire text. While the overall thesis (1989) contains 68% positive terms, terms occurring in text associated with prospective CMs and TFA staff (TFA Members) outperform this average by 7.3 percentage points, with 75% of terms identified as positive. Language used in context with students, families, and their communities (Students, Community), while rare—only 6.3% of the overall text—is strikingly negative, falling 13.3 points below the baseline at only 54% positive. The net positive/negative divide between TFA members and the student community is the absolute value of negative 13.3 and positive 7.3, or a 20.6% gap.

This compares to an underperformance by 4.5 points for the educational community outside TFA (Non-TFA Educators), which contains only 63% positive terms, and yields a net positive/negative divide with TFA members of 11.8%. Taken as a whole, measuring positive/negative language by group against a common baseline exposes still more essentialized binaries, including TFA/students as equivalent to positive/negative. This is an important discovery, because while we do not rely exclusively on statistical modeling to uncloak textual relations, the consistency with which these tools validate the more traditional methods of textual analysis demonstrate the pervasive presence, and sheer persistence of latent racism.



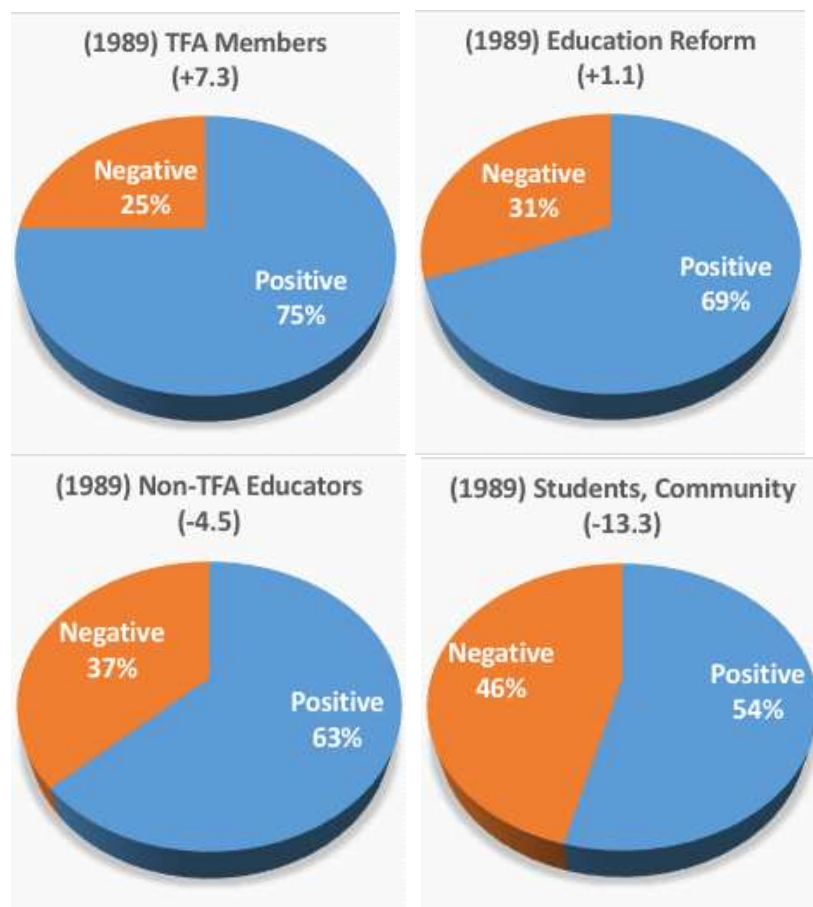
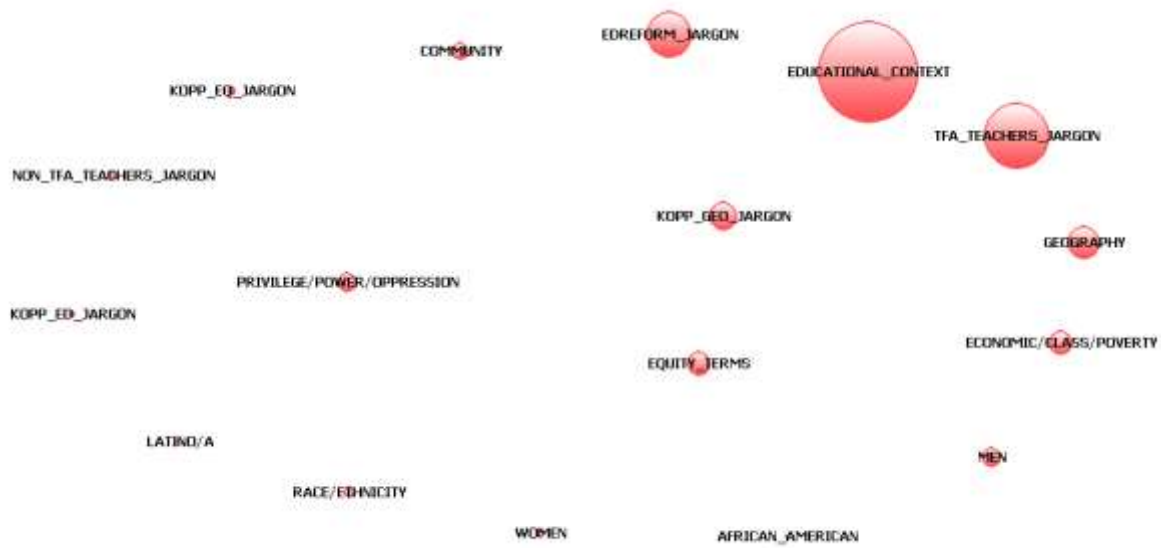


Figure 2: Positive and negative language within text (1989), by key group

How does this latent racism withstand the test of time? While there is still evidence of deficit language directed toward students and teachers, especially in communities of color, the dramatic gap observed in the 1989 thesis (figure 2) is largely corrected for over time. Applying our sentiment analysis for Kopp's 2001 text, we find that the 20.6% divide between positive language in TFA Members as compared to the Students, Community is reduced to a divide of just 1.6%. Additionally, to a lesser extent, but still noteworthy, the gap in positive language between TFA Members and the Non-TFA Educators is reduced from a high of 11.8% in 1989, to just 5.7% in 2001. Trends were similar for the 2011 text.

We find multidimensional scaling maps are also helpful in visualizing covert racism, as well as intersectional bias. Each node (figure 3) represents a category whose size varies by frequency, while "the distances between pairs of items indicate how likely those items are to appear together" (WordStat, 2015, p. 71). Kopp's texts cast across time (1989; Kopp & Farr 2011) are represented in the MDS maps in figure 3.

(1989)



(2011)

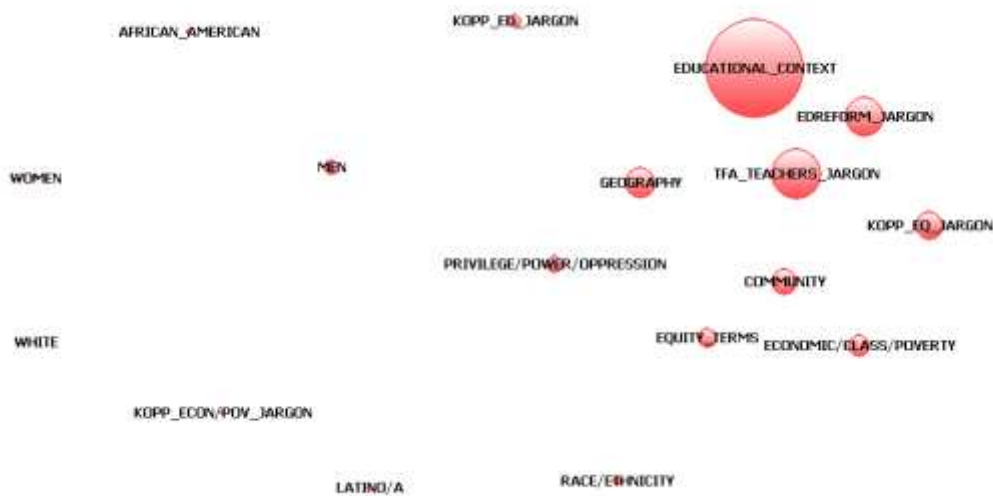


Figure 3: MDS maps showcase association strength between key terms over time

To keep terms concise and adhere to the requirements of the textual analysis software, we utilize underscores and abbreviations in forming technical category names. The default education category (EDUCATIONAL\_CONTEXT) is the largest, most significant node, as this list contains generic language common to educational texts. In one view, this node represents the center of a universe of meaning, and the size and proximity of each other orbital body signals its particular relevance in Kopp’s texts. These nodes reveal a variety of insights, including a consistent proximity between TFA (TFA\_TEACHERS\_JARGON), education reform (EDREFORM\_JARGON), and education overall, which reinforces the notion of a hidden agenda. Kopp’s preference for applying her own equity jargon (KOPP\_EQ\_JARGON), and her use of geography as a proxy for race/ethnicity and poverty (KOPP\_GEO\_JARGON), is demonstrated by these categories’

increasing proximity to the education node in 2011, whereas more transparent terms are farther removed from this hub.

While there is some increasing relevance over time of language around privilege, power, and oppression, specific terms referring to Latino/a and African American communities are marginalized. Whiteness, absent in Kopp's 1989 text, makes an appearance in 2011. But of all racial groups whites are situated as least textually relevant to education. The MDS map also exposes Kopp's preferential language advantaging men over women—striking considering women constitute increasingly more of the teacher workforce. Intersectionality thus sheds light on troubling biases. In all, there is tremendous power within and between the lines of Kopp's corpus.

### An Ideological Binary: Kopp/Ladson-Billings

In 1989, while Kopp was recruiting “the best and the brightest” Ladson-Billings embarked on a very different, scholarly mission within education. Ladson-Billings (1994) was deeply concerned with America's schools, specifically the “downward spiral” (p. xv) faced by African Americans. Unlike Kopp, Ladson-Billings assumed ownership over her epistemology, forswore objectivity, and blended a way of knowing, through memory and lived experience, with an ethnographic study that captured a distinct model of excellent teaching. Excellence in Ladson-Billings' case was determined not through the measure of teachers' GPA or SAT scores, but by surveying parents, students, and principals to discover which teachers most positively influenced an African American community. This method demonstrates investment in communities' funds of knowledge. While Ladson-Billings (1994, 2001, 2009) and Kopp each articulate concerns regarding education, the ideological divide compounded over their careers is vast and arguably irreconcilable. Figure 4 provides a conceptual map of this ideological divide.

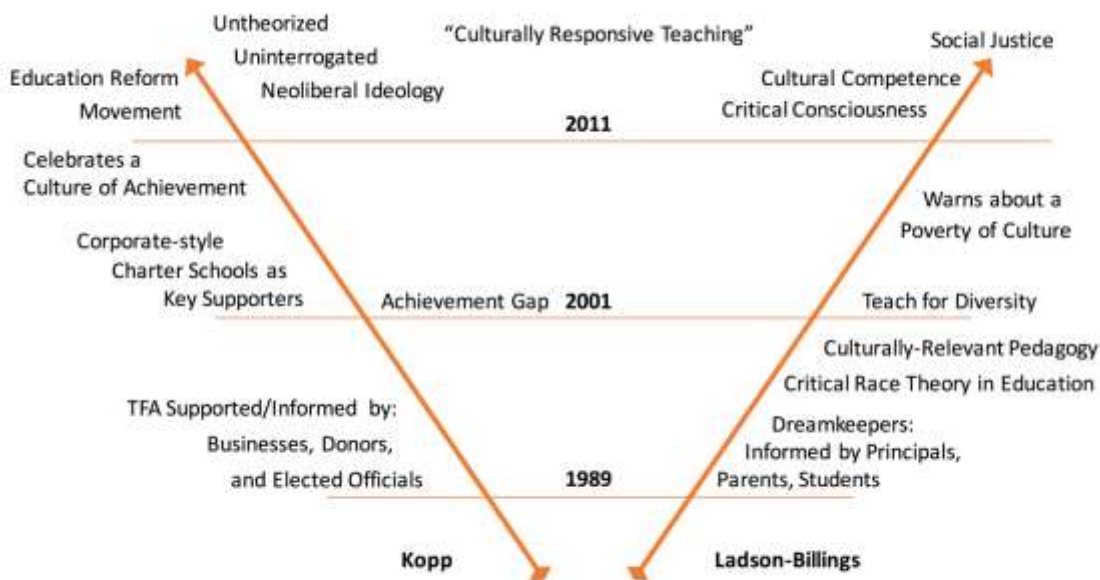


Figure 4: A conceptual map of a Kopp/Ladson-Billings ideological binary

There is evidence of a potential arc toward a socially-just pedagogy for TFA in figure 4, traced through the contested term “achievement gap” (Kopp, 2001; Ladson-Billings 2006b) which

arrives after TFA's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and approaching "culturally responsive teaching" after TFA's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. While these conceptual detours toward justice are notable, we should also note how individual actors, who operate under a broad TFA umbrella, may scatter throughout the entire dialectic frame. Indeed, when Lampayese et al. (2014) recruit scholars of color operating within a social justice paradigm for their research, these advocates "for racial equity [...] knowledgeable in issues surrounding race and power" (p. 13) present a powerful counter-story amplified by an insider's keen awareness of the cultural beliefs of TFA.

The ideological incongruence above (figure 4) doesn't stop TFA from invoking Ladson-Billings' work, however (Lampayese et al., 2014, p. 16; Schneider, 2014, p. 434). As consistent with an under-interrogation, the citations are often taken out of a rich context and applied as an oversimplification that is reductivist, converting a lifetime's scholarship into a few bullet points. In one instance, a TFA presentation shared with "Summer Institute" staff reduces academic achievement to skill development, and clarifies that "it's not about making [students] feel good" (TFA unpublished presentation, 2014). TFA's general emphasis on testing data implies marginal improvements on minimum-standards tests are sufficient evidence of this form of academic achievement. A note on cultural competence in the slideshow encourages students to maintain "some cultural integrity as well as academic excellence" implying the two operate along a binary, and are not mutually compatible. Teachers are also encouraged to "utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning" which if learning is reduced to skill building, means uncritically appropriating culture in service to the status quo. A note on critical consciousness does call for students to critique "social norms," yet in context this does not seem to imply the act of resistance against an assimilationist schooling agenda Ladson-Billings intends.

Setting Ladson-Billings' name juxtaposed to these reductivist bullet points assumes a credibility that is not earned, and demonstrates a lack of respect for the spirit of the scholarship. In fact, this "defensive citation of scholars of color" (Thompson, 2003, p. 13) may be designed to prove that TFA's staff "really do get it [...] [and] have earned the right to speak with authority" (p. 13) on issues of race and racism. For this reason, we locate TFA's conceptualization of culturally responsive teaching between ideological poles (figure 4), and apply quote marks to signal how it is inconsistent with pre-existing social justice pedagogies of the same name.

As Thompson (2003) writes, "we" white reformers:

Who take up the texts (and lives and projects) of people of color for progressive purposes risk exploiting them for our own insufficiently examined ends. [...] When White scholars strategically quote material by scholars of color to "support an already-conceived idea," we colonize the work of the Other to enrich our writing and enhance our authority. (p. 11)

A very real danger exists when individuals within an institution communicate using inspiring rhetoric appropriated from scholars of color, as this may mask an institutional racism represented by a rigid and unchanging set of structures and systems, whose formative period long pre-dates the invocation of the new rhetoric. The appropriated rhetoric acts to preserve institutional racism. Additionally, institutional racism may operate as a mirror that reflects but also reproduces a deeper civilizational and epistemological racism. Thus we seek evidence to examine whether the long arc for Kopp and TFA is truly turned toward an anti-assimilationist culturally relevant pedagogy, or else in keeping with a neoliberal orientation.

**Nothing to Change Here.** *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) represents for many scholars an outbreak of deficit-based thinking that served as a catalyst for the proliferation of 1980s neoliberalism. Kopp cites heavily from this report in

her thesis (1989). Despite dire predictions for a “dilapidated” education system, which Kopp insists “threatens the operation of the democratic system [and] threatens the operation of government” (p. 6) she makes clear her unwavering commitment to avoid calls for social change. Her plan for a teacher corps “would not be to develop innovative ways of training or to prepare individuals to change the system” (p. 2). From the start Kopp reifies the status quo.

Kopp takes pains to distance her organization from Lyndon B. Johnson’s similarly named National Teacher Corps (NTC), which aspired to achieve systemic change. Kopp’s Teacher Corps “is different in that its primary goal is to address teacher shortages rather than poverty problems” (1989, p. 2). Her teachers’ are asked only “to do the best possible job during the two years they would be teaching” (p. 2). Of concern is Kopp’s tendency to position education reform and anti-poverty efforts as oppositional, a trend that persists over time. This language is concerning: Kopp briefly contemplates the challenges poverty imposes on cultural communities, yet in keeping with a neoliberal/social justice, Reagan/LBJ binary coupling, she turns away from a line of thinking that could have dramatically altered TFA’s organizational trajectory.

Kopp continues to contrast her corps members from LBJ’s. Her teachers, she insists, will not devote attention to the “critical differences between teaching low-income students and teaching middle-class students” nor provide “special training which would make them uniquely able to teach in low socioeconomic areas” (p. 75). What LBJ’s corps did to link “concerns about multicultural education, community involvement, and schools’ reforms with teacher training methodologies” (p. 77) does not apply to Kopp’s corps. As Kopp reemphasizes, “because the Teacher Corps would not seek to bring about change, it would avoid many of the problems which [LBJ’s] NTC encountered” (p. 88). Kopp’s aversion to embrace LBJ’s program and its “problems” during the Reagan era may have steered her away from almost any mention of race, class, or poverty, or a call for social change in the face of a system of vast inequity. This represents a profound structured silence sustained over the entirety of Kopp’s corpus.

Kopp (1989) only indirectly acknowledges the likelihood her teachers will be placed in low-income, communities of color. As she explains:

Benefits of the [Teacher Corps] effort would accrue to the general population of students, although it is probable that they would accrue disproportionately to schools in low socioeconomic areas since they are most likely to be experiencing teacher shortages. (p. 2)

It is important to consider to what extent an initial aversion to address sociocultural contexts, in the face of almost certain engagement in communities of color, and the corresponding structured silence, slowed the evolution of Teach For America as an organization, and hobbled its capability for recruiting, training, and promoting culturally responsive teachers. We also consider how a hidden neoliberal ideology nurtures this aversion to meaningful discourse around race, poverty, class, and even the students themselves.

**An Emergent Education Reform Movement.** Unlike Ladson-Billings (1994), Kopp (1989) does not talk to teachers, students, family members, or local community members of color in her thesis. However, she does give a lot of attention to business leaders and policy makers. Perhaps it is because she expected to have “a board of directors comprised of prominent business and government leaders and celebrities” (p. 110) and to derive “all of the [financial] support from corporations and foundations” (p. 109). Or perhaps because these groups were simply the most accessible and familiar to Kopp? Alternatively, it may be because of a compatible ideology, which allowed Kopp and TFA to feel as if they were launching an independent venture, when in fact they were advancing a covert neoliberal agenda.

As our textual analysis reveals, Kopp's neoliberal focus is definitely sustained, but within the context of the emerging education reform movement. If we examine the proportion of text allocated to the education reform community in 1989, we see that it actually exceeds that of the TFA Members, by 33.6% compared to 32.7%, respectively (figure 1). This is striking considering the thesis is literally a plan to create a Teacher Corps. Additionally, this emphasis on the education reform community increases even more dramatically in 2011.

Kopp sees damning statistics regarding minority student achievement, establishes them as a foundation for her organizational structure, and moves with haste to solve the social ills as diagnosed. By contrast, Ladson-Billings (1994) courageously rejects a mode of deficit-thinking, and instead emphasizes the assets demonstrated in successful classrooms, specifically of African American students. It's important to remember that while TFA now aspires to see growth in the direction of social justice, and Kopp may have personally seen a transition in her capacity for cultural understanding, Ladson-Billings drew from the original CRT literature and her lived experience to begin a journey toward social justice from the start. What's quite intriguing is that at the same time that Kopp was publishing her promotional, organizational autobiography (2001), Ladson-Billings (2001) produced a volume in which she focused on a program in Chicago called TFD, or Teach For Diversity. We presume no relation, though we are curious to learn if Ladson-Billings had intention behind her acronym.

**Time For A Change, Or Mere Rhetoric?** In Kopp's 2001 promotional autobiography, she describes a very different purpose for her fully formed Teacher Corps than that expressed in her original thesis. The word change makes a debut, as Kopp credits TFA with mobilizing "some of the most passionate, dedicated members of [her] generation to change the fact that where a child is born in the United States largely determines his or her chances in life" (p. xi). While there is still some implied reference to the "region" as a source of inequality as opposed to discussing realities of race or culture, Kopp does refer to the struggle for equity as "a civil rights issue" (pg. xii). She also refers to herself at Princeton as a "naïve" college senior with one big idea (pg. xiii), but fails to address the possibility that this state of naiveté might have led her to incorporate institutional or epistemological racial biases into her big idea.

As an example, Kopp defines the problem with education as "a skill gap" whereby if "students were going to have the same chance in life as children born in more privileged circumstances, they would need to gain the same academic skills as these more privileged students" (p. 161). However, this emphasis on the acquisition of skills, as a discrete form of accumulated currency, creates the false impression that once acquired, skills as currency can be exchanged equivalently across what must be assumed (in the absence of any clarification) to be a meritorious, otherwise high-functioning society. Kopp does not consider that perhaps students' skills have been systemically devalued, in what amounts to a deflationary currency, where despite hard work and intrinsic success, students academic purchasing power pales in comparison to privileged peers. So while the language of change emerges, there does not appear to be an attempt to investigate or acknowledge racist assumptions located in the institution, or the surrounding societal and epistemological context.

Kopp and Farr's 2011 reboot, "A Chance To Make History," constructs a similar narrative that again refers to geography over race and culture. However, there is the introduction of the "achievement gap" which was not referenced in 2001, or 1989. The term is utilized 27 times. African Americans, by contrast, are referenced in only 7 places, typically citing statistics that define an achievement gap with whites. Latinos (or Hispanics) are referenced in 5 places in a similar fashion. In this context, language around an achievement gap strikes the right notes of concern for students

of color, but enables a silencing of discourse around specific racial groups Kopp's teachers endeavor to empower.

Even a section that addresses the emergence of a dual recruitment, a shotgun marriage of highly selective college graduates as well as minority students drawn from "many more schools," (2011, p. 157) does not articulate the exact nature of these schools, which presumably are HBCUs and HSIs, nor what shifts, if any, have been made to the selection and admissions model to account for a transition away from traditionally elite, predominantly white universities. And all 58 references to "culture" (2011) refer to the creation of class and school cultures. Additional harms considered from this application of culture are examined in our third counter-story.

Even students' voices are appropriated over time, in service to the education reform movement as neoliberal agents. A structured silence is sustained, as students still constitute very little of the textual focus in Kopp's 2001 book. Students, their families, and communities of color contribute to only 8.6% of the text, as compared to 50.3% of the text for their TFA teachers, alumni, and staff (figure 1). This represents an attention multiplier of more than 5x. It is worth considering that the 2001 text is positioned as autobiographical, yet the structured silence is only marginally affected even after removing all of the text that centers on Kopp herself, outside of the larger TFA context. Suddenly, in 2011, it seems students gain a more prominent position in the text, with 22.3% of text centered on their experiences.

However, this strategy was achieved largely by discussing students in the context of TFA and the education reform coalition. Students largely serve as case studies exhibiting the "amazing" (Kopp, 2011) success of various TFA alumni and Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). In this way, students are effectively co-opted, and their voice is still silenced, as voices only hold value when promoting the impact of CMs, and in service to CMOs who rely on CM's impact to attract funders and ultimately persist in a competitive neoliberal marketplace. In fact, it is precisely the growing attention afforded the education reform community which highlights a new center of focus, which far surpasses even that of the TFA context.

**Education Reform, A Textual Monopoly.** While the centrality of the education reform group to TFA's mission was an emergent property of the 1989 text, by 2011 that community came to attain a monopoly over Kopp's attention. Fully 47.8% of the 2011 text centers on the education reform coalition; this compares to only 26.3% of the text focused on the TFA Members (figure 1). This means that the "chance to make history" (2011) probably has less to do with TFA than with the larger education reform movement. Specifically, a number of TFA Alumni are featured in testimonials alongside their respective CMO. The sheer frequency of references to this small handful of Kopp's exemplar institutions resembles a promotional piece of marketing, as opposed to an evaluative text of what works in education.

No system represents this effect more than the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), currently led by CEO Richard Barth, Kopp's husband. KIPP is mentioned 93 times in the 2011 text, with founders Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin accruing an additional 42 references (table 2).

Table 2  
*CMOs and founders frequently referenced in 2011 text*

CMO	FOUNDER(S)	REFERENCES
KIPP		93
	DAVE LEVIN	27
	MIKE FEINBERG	15
YES PREP		25
	CHRIS BARBIC	32
ACHIEVEMENT FIRST		15

The shift in textual presence signals a prioritization of the education reform group above the interests of TFA as an organization, or any of the individual members of the coalition. The increasingly interconnected nature of this community is explored in Kretchmar et al. (2014), and connected to the privatization agenda in Kretchmar (2014). Additionally, this increasingly privatized coalition of neoliberal agents work collaboratively to fuel the growth of a poverty of culture, masquerading as a culture of achievement, as further described below.

### Poverty of Culture, A New Pandemic

In our final counter-story we find real harms enacted upon our children of color, whose culture is forcibly repossessed by schools. As an example, Kopp (2011) frames Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the African American community in New Orleans, as a blessing in disguise. This unprecedented opportunity facilitates a dramatic spread of a poverty of culture, a disease masked by the neutral terminology Kopp and others promote: a culture of achievement.

Ladson-Billings writes of a “poverty of culture” (2006a) which amounts to teachers ascribing culture as the culprit for poor behavior. Here the term race is conveniently but perniciously omitted. What transpires in a section of Kopp and Farr (2011) called “A Culture of Achievement” (p. 60), however, eclipses Ladson-Billings’ sample acts of cultural impoverishment (2006a), and extends into a realm of real cultural damage.

What we first noticed was that we could not include the word “culture” on our code list, because it had effectively been co-opted by Kopp and TFA, as applied in the artificial sense of a classroom or school culture. Instead we placed it in a sub-category for educational jargon. However, more than a nuisance, this was a warning sign of a shock to come. There were other signs, such as terms stating that culture must be “built, not discovered” (p. 61). And then it hit us full force as we read these words:

We’ve been really purposeful—very thoughtful about mapping out the structures, policies, and procedures that generate the school culture [...] At every moment, we asked ourselves, what about this moment of the day is or is not fostering college readiness in our students? [...] What kind of clothes are they putting on? Jeans? A uniform? Every question we put through the filter of college readiness. [...] We literally left no stone unturned. [...] We really wanted to simplify school structures and organizations so it demystified for kids what school is about. (Kopp & Farr, 2011, pp. 63-64)

The members of the education reform community represented here do not consider, or make any reference to, students’ home, heritage, or indigenous culture. Yet they are very comfortable scripting



each moment of a student's life. In other words, they place enthusiastic emphasis on constructing culture and overlook what may necessarily be destroyed in order to make way for new construction.

In a similar example drawn from one charter network Kopp and Farr (2011) praise, a "culture rubric" shared with school staff documents 91 distinct "culture systems" with behaviors arranged on a scale from unsatisfactory to exceptional (CMO unpublished staff document, 2015). Exceptional "before school" behavior, according to the rubric, includes the expectation that 100% of students should be "seated against the wall with their backpacks in their lap," while exceptional Middle School transitions require that students remain "in a single, silent (with mouths closed) straight line." Apparently it is not enough that students demonstrate a literal structured silence; they cannot even risk opening their mouths. As is evident, a successful culture of achievement may actually function as a prescriptive repossession of students' culture, including regulation of student bodies (Morris, 2005). In addition, this particular "culture of achievement" looks nothing like the school cultures for predominantly white, affluent students (Golan, 2015, p. 105), and so it is really a *de facto* 'culture of achievement—for students of color—as prescribed by whites'.

According to David (2013) and Fanon (1967), this sounds alarmingly close to a colonizer "imposing its culture on the colonized, disintegrating the indigenous culture, and reconstituting the culture of the oppressed according to the preferences of the colonizer" (David, 2013, p. 54). This is a grave concern. If there is a cultural incongruence between students and their teachers, or administrators, students should not be positioned as having a dichotomous, wrong culture. Furthermore, students' native or home culture should not be corrected and replaced homogenously—as schools' policies are typically applied—by a definitively, right culture, even if it bears the beneficent label of a "college readiness" culture (Kopp & Farr, 2011, p. 65).

This approach corresponds, at a cultural level, to a program of code-replacement as opposed to code-switching (Auer, 2013; Wheeler, 2008). It is also a discredit to the notion of students' lived experience as valid. Why undo their home, or native culture if it represents a rich fund of knowledge and reflects students' core competencies? While a conversation along these lines may sound counterproductive to some results-oriented culture builders, if we step outside the urgency of rapid assimilation into a model of excellence as portrayed by the dominant (white) culture, egged on by neoliberal free-market agents, several legitimate questions may be posed.

Charter schools and the education reform alliance often carry a banner of choice. However, in order to differentiate the "product" they are offering, they frame the contrast between programs in stark terms, by habitually devaluing the preexisting schooling structures. In New Orleans, where neighborhood schools may have been repositories for community culture, institutions which previously forged common and unifying identities have all been destroyed, and many students have no choice over their education. And it is precisely when choice ceases to exist that eradication of culture can actually be declared an act of aggression. Even the United Nations has taken this into account in their Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2015). It states that "indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture" (UNDRIP, p. 5).

It should come as no surprise, however, that Kopp frames Hurricane Katrina as a fortuitous occurrence that hastens the rise of the education reform community there, accelerating plans long conceived and patiently awaiting an opportune policy window (Kopp & Farr, 2011, pp. 81-82). Ultimately Kopp and Farr echo Arne Duncan's claim that Hurricane Katrina was "the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans" (Anderson, 2010), because it facilitated the creation of "a new system that is dramatically different from the one washed away by Katrina" (Kopp & Farr, 2011, p. 84). This celebration of harm realizes the shock policy associated with neoliberal Milton Friedman (1982), who claimed that "only a crisis—real or perceived—produces real change" (p. xi). In this way, the sudden sweep of neoliberal policies across New Orleans,

policies which exemplify a poverty of culture, is a microcosm of the larger movement which has been persistently unfolding since the alarmist release of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983. It is important to remember, however, that the harms are not just ideological, or theoretical, but affect actual students in spaces of real crisis. Kopp thus enacts harm when she appropriates the term “culture,” not as a set of shared beliefs internalized by members of diverse, place-based communities, but rather as an artificial construct imposed by schools as part of a program of assimilation, masquerading under a neoliberal banner of “academic achievement” (Kopp & Farr, 2011, p. 62).

### Summary of Conclusions

In the spring of 1989, Wendy Kopp latched onto a simple notion with a feverish determination: If we send the “best and the brightest” college graduates from the “most selective universities” into the lowest performing schools, we can effect a national sea change in teacher quality, reversing the tendency for teachers to be recruited from “the lowest rungs of academic achievement” and combating the decline of our “dilapidated school system.” Kopp establishes her core thesis when she asserts “academically able persons are most likely to be effective teachers” (1989, p. 17). Kopp assumes then that the “best and brightest” (1989) found at elite universities, who presumably attend by virtue of merit, are most likely to be effective teachers. However, research based on three longitudinal studies of high school graduates found “Black and Hispanic students are dramatically underrepresented in the most selective colleges, even after controlling for family income” (Reardon, et. al, 2012, pg. 2).

If Kopp does not ever challenge a presumption of merit, if she foregoes even mention of change in her initial analysis, then at some level she must presume that the low levels of minority application, acceptance, enrollment, and graduation from these elite universities is due to their not being academically able. Yet smartness as Kopp defines it is ultimately a cultural construction (Hatt, 2012). Uncovering evidence of unconscious racism in the construction of smartness is essential to TFA reconciling the contrasts between its mutually restrictive goals of unrelenting growth at scale, which amplifies the accumulation of white advantage, and acknowledging the consequences of endemic racism, as described by Ladson-Billings and others. TFA may yet attempt to serve both aims by continuing to recruit the culturally-determinative “best and the brightest” from racially biased elite universities, while simply opening new pathways to participation for students of color at (most likely) HBCUs and HSIs, presumably according to an adjusted set of criteria.

The textual evidence, however, suggests that serving the interests of privileged partners first, and only extending benefits to students and communities of color where their interests overlap, is a strong organizational priority. In all, evidence of an organizational arc toward justice may be exaggerated by a set of metrics, such as the percentage of corps members of color, that are ultimately insufficient. Consider how a pre-service teacher preparation program rooted in epistemological racism may create a strong incentive in these corps members of color to ascribe truth and validity to a set of racist assumptions. TFA’s highly selective admissions policies, in effect, provide several layers of screening which may admit corps members of color only after confirming they are comfortable, or unconsciously willing to participate in a program rooted in racist assumptions. Screening questions aimed at culture fit (TFA And You, 2015) may be an implicit test of this nature. This risks enacting a program of internalized oppression as the price of admission into the TFA program. Increasing or decreasing the percentage of corps members of color does not inherently affect the design of this system.

## Whither the Long Arc?

On the steps of the state capitol in Montgomery, Alabama in 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed antebellum abolitionist Theodore Parker, in declaring “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice” (Raushenbush, 2013). There emerges gradually in Kopp’s texts a theme of justice, and Popkewitz (1998) sees similar evidence early on, in curricular resources and individual interviews of TFA staff and corps members. By 2013, thousands of TFA corps members were introduced to a notion of “culturally responsive teaching” which increasingly places culture at the center of the educational program. It is concerning, however, that culturally responsive concepts accessible as early as 1981 (Cazden & Leggett, 1981; Mohatt & Erickson, 1981) do not emerge in Kopp’s corpus, nor do they appear in related studies (Lapayese et al., 2014; Popkewitz, 1998; Schneider, 2014).

Why did it take more than 22 years for CRP literature to find its way into TFA’s lexicon? More importantly, to what extent did a neoliberal ideology which essentializes a dominant, white cultural frame of reference thrive in the interim? And, to what extent are these two ideologies mutually exclusive? This dialectic generally helps “highlight the importance of deep-seated tensions and contradictions in relations based on opposing but interdependent forces that produce conflict and change” (Collinson, 2014, p. 41). How TFA addresses these tensions and contradictions will help determine whether the organization follows a long arc toward justice, or replicates a popular public relations message by appropriating the works of scholars of color.

As we ask questions and amplify discourses regarding racial biases, we hope to encourage TFA to reevaluate its approach from the ground up, by which we mean to reexamine epistemological foundations. This is particularly opportune given the relatively recent departure of Kopp as CEO, and her replacement by Elisa Villanueva-Beard, a former (TFA) teacher of color from a low-socioeconomic region. Matt Kramer, who stepped down as Co-CEO last year, joined Villanueva-Beard for an initial period of transition. By exposing unconscious racism, we hope our counter-stories ultimately offer “powerful means for people to establish bridges across [...] race, culture, gender, and social class [...], penetrate barriers to understanding, and create feelings of kindredness” (Gay, 2010, p.3).

One example of an encouraging, racially conscious case-study Kopp highlights is that of intentionally diverse charters, which recognize (intuitively or explicitly) the concept of social capital, which is exchanged laterally between pluralistic student communities, where high and low income student populations are integrated (Kopp & Farr, 2011, p. 173). Further emphasizing similar elements of TFA’s alumni and broader community of supporters who operate on a radically-different ideological trajectory would be one way of legitimizing critical discourses within the organization in a public context.

To some extent, members of TFA do engage in discourses on racism through an official blog (Top Stories TFA, 2016). A search of all content for the word “racism” yields 25 relevant posts dating back to 2012. One post reveals a more faithful representation of Ladson-Billings work (TFA And Culturally Responsive Teaching, 2014), and another highlights a pilot “Summer Institute” program that promotes “a curriculum built on leading work in the field of critical race theory with an increased focus on systemic racism and how race, class, and privilege impact corps members as teachers” (Edushyster TFA, 2014). However, the current layout of the blog makes it difficult to review content beyond the first approximately 50 posts, curated and predominately written by TFA staff. These rare, racially-conscious posts represent structured silences as much as budding discourses, however, given how difficult they are to find.

Consider as a stronger example the promotion of Steve Zimmer, a 1992 Los Angeles TFA CM who taught for 17 years before being elected to the Los Angeles Unified School District Board

of Education (TFA Editorial Team, 2015). Notably, Zimmer was championed by the LAUSD teachers' union. In 2013, however, Zimmer faced a tough reelection campaign that made national headlines due in part to \$3 million in outside funding pumped into the race by the education reform organization StudentsFirst, headed by another 1992 TFA CM, Michelle Rhee (TFA Editorial Team, 2015). In TFA's alumni magazine, *One Day*, editor Ting Yu played a proverbial Thucydides and gave each side space to articulate their position before they faced off in a fierce political battle. It was among the most unvarnished, yet publicly accessible ideological discourses we have seen from TFA to date. Today Zimmer is president of a divided board, including a charter founder and a new slate of neoliberal agents hoping to enact their agenda in the City of Angels. As a critique, even the Zimmer discourse did not address race directly, and one could argue TFA operated as a fight-promoter who was the one sure winner, as either Zimmer or Rhee would deliver a political coup that TFA could take credit for.

Tragically, racism previously attacked in open court in overt legal form has now gone underground. It is covert, and pervasive. And it is not as simple to identify as a racial slur. Racism is not even located at the level of the individual actor, but embedded in our dynamic institutions, growing as they grow, fueling the fires of racial harm with a sinister mask of racial neutrality. Seemingly innocuous institutional constructs, such as admissions policies, hiring procedures, and performance reviews carry the poison of pervasive racism. In fact, the very ways of knowing are subject to racial bias. It is so self-centered, this epistemological racism, and so effective at avoiding a self-critical mirror, that it does not even know it is white. Or at least its privileged proponents claim so very convincingly.

We do not believe, however, that privileged, white voices ought to be disparaged, forgotten, nor neglected. We benefit from the cultivation of authentic allies in the struggle for greater cultural relevance in education, but these aspirational allies must commit to a non-linear, continual practice of self-interrogation as a primer for a “decolonization journey” (David, 2013), an active, “everyday” campaign to pursue anti-racism (Pollock, 2008), and a commitment to face the “man [woman, or person] in the mirror” (Zulu, 2010).

We invite members of Teach For America, and affiliated education reform partners, who feel confronted and challenged, or validated and encouraged by this academic work to accept and express visceral emotions, but not to let these emotions dissuade them from responding, be it from the head, hands, or heart (Sipos, Battisti, & Grimm, 2008). Thompson (2003) warns of the negative consequences associated with letting these emotions override an explicitly-stated preference for racial equality, especially for white actors:

Although we can acknowledge white racism as a generic fact, it is hard to acknowledge as a fact about ourselves. We want to feel like, and to be, good people. And we want to be *seen* as good people. (p. 8)

In effect, placing these concerns at the fore of our thinking is a means of keeping “whiteness at the center of anti-racism” (p. 8), which is an attempt to appropriate, not assist the inter-generational struggle for racial equity. As then TFA Co-CEO Matt Kramer wrote in 2014, “it is our shared responsibility as white people to find a way to have these difficult conversations with other white people” (Kramer, 2014).

Let us engage in this discourse in earnest and embrace the discomfort. Our students cannot wait. For them this is not an academic pursuit only; it is their life—*their world*. As the saying goes, *cada cabeza es un mundo*. We must endeavor, therefore, to approach with a profound respect and appreciation, each new world we encounter.

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