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Arizona State University  
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**Teach For America: Research on Politics,  
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**Reframing Teach For America: A Conceptual Framework  
for the Next Generation of Scholarship**

*Janelle Scott*



*Tina Trujillo*



*Marialena D. Rivera*

University of California at Berkeley  
United States

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.2419> This article is part of EPAA/AAPE's Special Issue on *Teach For America: Research on Politics, Leadership, Race, and Education Reform*, guest edited by Tina Trujillo and Janelle Scott.

**Abstract:** In this article, we advance a conceptual framework for the study of Teach For America (TFA) as a political and social movement with implicit and explicit ideological and political underpinnings. We argue that the second branch of TFA's mission statement, which maintains that

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TFA's greatest point of influence in public education is not in classrooms, but in its facilitation of entry into leadership positions aimed at reshaping public schooling, can be better understood in terms of the organization's: a) infusion of "policy entrepreneurs" into educational policymaking processes; b) cultivation of powerful networks of elite interests; c) promotion of "corporate" models of managerial leadership; and, d) racial and social class identities of its corps members that facilitate entry into leadership and policy networks. Our framework is informed by the extant research literature on TFA, interview data from more than 150 alumni and corps members, and our observations of TFA's 20th Anniversary Summit in Washington, D.C., as an illustrative case of TFA's messaging and general orientation toward educational reform. We conclude that this framework can help illuminate under-examined political and ideological motivations behind the organization's activities.

**Keywords:** Teach For America, racial inequality, policy entrepreneurs, educational leadership, urban educational reform, power networks

### **Re-analizando Teach for America: Un marco conceptual para la próxima generación de análisis**

**Resumen:** En este artículo, presentamos un marco conceptual para el estudio de *Teach For America* (TFA) como movimiento político y social con fundamentos ideológicos y políticos implícitos y explícitos. Sostenemos que el segundo punto del documento que presenta la misión de TFA, indicando que el espacio de mayor influencia en la educación pública no son las aulas, sino su rol para facilitar la entrada en posiciones de liderazgo destinados a la re-hacer la escuela pública, se debe entender en términos de a) infusión de "emprendedores políticos" en procesos de política educativa; de organización b) desarrollo de redes poderosas con intereses elitistas; c) la promoción de modelos "corporativos" de liderazgo gerencial; y, d) identidades de clase raciales y sociales de los miembros de TFA con mejores posibilidades de entrada en redes políticas y de liderazgo. Nuestro marco conceptual es informado por la literatura existente investigación sobre TFA, datos de entrevistas con 150 alumnos, y nuestras observaciones del 20 Aniversario de TFA y reunión Cumbre en Washington, DC, como un caso ilustrativo de los mensajes de TFA y la orientación general hacia la reforma educativa. Llegamos a la conclusión de que este marco conceptual ilumina aspectos poco estudiados de las motivaciones políticas e ideológicas detrás de las actividades de la organización.

**Palabras clave:** Teach For America; desigualdad racial; emprendedores políticos, liderazgo educativo; reforma educativa urbano; redes de poder

### **Reanalizando Teach for America: Uma base conceitual para a próxima geração de análises**

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, apresentamos uma base teórica e conceitual para o estudo de Teach For America (TFA) como um movimento político e social com bases ideológicas e políticas implícitas e explícitas. Sustentamos que o segundo ponto do documento que apresenta a missão de TFA, indicando que o espaço de maior influência na educação pública não são as salas de aula, mas seu papel para facilitar a entrada a seus membros a posições de liderança destinados a re-fazer da escola pública deve ser entendido em termos de a) infusão de "empreendedores políticos" no processo de organização política de educação; b) desenvolvimento de redes poderosas com interesses elitistas; c) a promoção de modelos de liderança de gestão "corporativa"; e, d) promoção entre membros da TFA de identidades de classe raciais e sociais com melhores chances de entrada em redes políticas e liderança. Nossa base conceitual é informada pela pesquisa bibliográfica sobre TFA, dados de entrevistas com 150 alunos, e as nossas observações do 20º aniversário da TFA e encontro de cúpula em Washington, DC, como um caso ilustrativo das mensagens e orientação geral sobre reforma

educacional. Conclui-se que esta base conceitual ilumina aspectos pouco estudados das motivações políticas e ideológicas por trás das atividades da organização.

**Palavras-chave:** Teach For America; desigualdade racial; empresários políticos; liderança educacional; reforma da educação urbana; redes de poder

## Introduction

As this special issue on the social, political, and policy aspects of Teach For America (TFA) is published, the organization celebrates its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.<sup>1</sup> TFA's alumni now number nearly 42,000. TFA has placed these recent college graduates —just over 4,000 teachers— in 52 regions in 2016. As many researchers and journalists have observed, large numbers of these alumni have gone on to high-profile careers in government, philanthropy, school reform, and TFA and school district leadership. The featured speakers, some 400 at this writing, who largely come from charter school networks and related school reform organizations, will talk about the work of remaking public education at the local, district, state, national, and international level. Acting Secretary of Education, John King; a former charter school leader; and high profile alumni, such as former Tennessee Commissioner of Education Kevin Huffman and Colorado State Senator Mike Johnston, are featured on the program. All of these speakers have one thing in common. They have all advocated for school choice and other market-oriented policies, such as merit pay for teachers, as key policies for realizing educational equity.

In 2011, we attended TFA's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration as participant-observers. We witnessed TFA's leadership and its supporters positioning its corps and alumni, and the organization itself, as levers to remake public education through market-oriented educational reforms like charter schools, private management of schools, and the eradication of teachers unions.<sup>2</sup> Someone

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<sup>1</sup> We issued an open call to generate articles for this issue. We received excellent submissions that underwent rigorous blind peer review. Although Teach For America did not submit any manuscripts for review, a TFA representative requested advance copies of the articles in this issue in order to prepare a response to them. Given the educational research community's ethical standards for the promotion of rigorous, peer-reviewed research, we declined the request to provide pre-publication access in order to promote a scholarly, rather than polemical exchange. Joseph (2014), drawing from internal TFA memos, documented the extensive resources and effort TFA's national office has invested in preemptively countering research it regards as critical, often questioning researchers' methods. As guest editors, we welcome responses from TFA that are grounded in the empirical and conceptual analyses featured in this issue. This special issue of *Education Policy Analysis Archives* (EPAA) explores the multiple effects of TFA on educational leadership, policy and politics, racial representation, and educational reform. The articles within this issue are rich, empirical and theoretical examinations of TFA beyond questions of test scores. The authors' conclusions are nuanced, and do not fall into easy 'pro-' or 'anti-' TFA categorization. While the public debates about TFA's place in public education are important for our democracy, this issue's goal is to consider under examined questions of its impact beyond small effect sizes in either direction on students' standardized assessments. TFA critics have often been termed "haters" by TFA supporters, referencing the tendency to critique based on animus or bias rather than data. To the extent that the authors in this issue offer critique of TFA, their conclusions are grounded in evidence. Moreover, many authors are Teach For America alumni, and as researchers, professors, and alumni, stand to offer scholarly perspectives that are particularly insightful. We thank the reviewers for their thoughtful and thorough reviews of the articles. We thank EPAA editors Audrey Amrein-Beardsley and Gustavo E. Fischman and EPAA's managing editor Stephanie McBride-Schreiner for their patient and careful stewardship of this issue.

<sup>2</sup> We also conducted a study of Teach For America alumni and corps members from 2011-2014. We interviewed a total of 167 interviews: 117 alumni (who taught 1991-2008) and 50 current corps (who taught

unfamiliar with the politics of school reform in the United States might have been confused as she approached the Washington, D.C. convention center at that time, where Teach For America (TFA) was holding its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit. Despite TFA's claims that it is apolitical in its educational advocacy and policy efforts, she would have encountered a celebration marked by a decidedly political perspective. In place of a politically agnostic showcase of teaching and learning to close the so-called "achievement gap," she would have primarily witnessed the promotion of neoliberal, corporate-funded school reform during the two-day meeting. On the sidewalks she would have found chalk etchings advertising the brands of various charter school management organizations (CMOs). Walking inside the vendor hall, she would have seen booths from these same CMOs, online learning companies, and alternative leadership preparation programs, all distributing branded paraphernalia like pencils, notepads, bumper stickers, and water bottles, in hopes of attracting TFA alumni to work in their organizations. She would have noticed backpacks or satchels branded with CMO symbols: KIPP, Uncommon Schools, Achievement First, or YES Prep Public Schools, for example. And she would have heard featured speakers picked largely from the ranks of leading neoliberal school reform advocates: former New York City Schools Chancellor, Joel Klein, former Washington, D.C. Schools Chancellor and founder of Students First, Michelle Rhee (also a TFA alumna), and, of course, TFA's founder, Wendy Kopp. Each of these leaders has championed business-inspired approaches to redressing schooling inequalities, and largely laid the blame for educational inequality at the feet of urban teachers and policy makers who support teachers unions.

While TFA may have begun over twenty-five years ago as an alternative teacher preparation and placement program aimed at redressing persistent teacher shortages, the observer of its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit would note that into its second decade, it was tightly aligned with a policy agenda featuring school choice and privatization, with the idea that such market-oriented, competition-driven reforms would create more equitable schooling outcomes. In this article, we offer a conceptual framework of TFA corps members as social and political actors in the remaking of urban schooling systems in the United States and internationally in ways that often emphasize neoliberal, marketized solutions to educational inequality. In this political-economic terrain, public investments, regulatory mechanisms, and efforts to equalize schooling are curtailed while the influence of the private sector is greatly expanded through a reliance on philanthropy, private sector contracting, and the use of incentives in educational policies like value-added teacher evaluation schemes (Harvey, 2005; Scott, 2009, 2011).

This article joins a growing body of scholarship that reframes Teach For America beyond its traditional renderings as an alternative teacher preparation and placement organization or as a community service organization for elite college graduates. We first provide an overview of TFA's organizational evolution, highlighting the ways in which it has advanced a neoliberal approach to reform through its reliance on the private sector to move teacher and educational policies, its emphasis on creating a movement of individual social entrepreneurs, and its tacit acceptance of the diminished role of the state in ensuring resource equity between schools and across schooling systems. Second, we provide an analysis of and schema for the existing empirical and conceptual literature on TFA. Drawing also on observation and interview data, we offer a conceptual framework that conceives of TFA as a neoliberal political and social organization which promotes approaches to redressing inequality that largely ignore structural inequality and racism as contributors to educational inequity.

This framework, which integrates concepts from political science, political sociology, and critical leadership studies, helps position TFA as a major player in education policy making and

reform. In the third section, we demonstrate the utility of this framework for analyzing TFA organizational activities and corps members' understandings of the causes of educational inequality and their role in redressing it. We draw on two data sources: 1) Observations of its national 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit as an illustrative case of how TFA advances policy entrepreneurs' elite networks and managerial leadership models; and, 2) Interviews with nearly 117 TFA alumni. We conclude with a discussion of the possibilities for further theoretical and empirical investigations.

## Teach For America's Evolution

### Organizational Genesis

From its genesis, TFA espoused an ideal to eradicate educational inequality through the energies and efforts of elite college graduates, though the means by which the organization aims to achieve these goals have shifted over the organization's two decades. Wendy Kopp conceived of TFA while an undergraduate at Princeton University, and launched the then fledgling organization in New York City in 1989 with seed money from the Mobil Corporation and donated office space from Union Carbide. In Kopp's original vision, TFA would attract graduates from top colleges to work in understaffed urban and rural school districts for two-year commitments, approximating a domestic Peace Corps. While most corps members would go on to their planned careers after fulfilling their teaching commitment, Kopp imagined that their experience as teachers and their elite college backgrounds would create lifelong and effective advocates for more equitable public education (Kopp, 2001). In 1990, the first 500 TFA corps gathered in Los Angeles for a summer institute preparing them to enter their teaching jobs in select rural and urban school districts. Where Kopp first sought to fill teacher shortages, TFA now claims to be preparing corps members for leadership, and has developed a complex selection process aimed at identifying potential leaders (Foote, 2009). What has remained is a slogan that invokes a moral and social commitment to the nations' most vulnerable students: *One Day All Children Will Have Access to An Excellent Education* (Kopp, 2001).

Kopp and TFA have maintained that teachers who embody particular leadership qualities—perseverance, bold risk taking, and a strict focus on measuring results, to name a few—will be most effective at redressing educational inequality by working both within and outside of public schools. The organization's general theory of action has been that TFA teachers would spend time in classrooms, become committed to supporting access to excellent schooling, and become lifelong advocates of public education regardless of what field they ultimately chose for a profession. Still, the organization is somewhat ambiguous about the requisite classroom-level changes for all children to have access to excellent education, beyond those that will result in achievement gains on TFA-generated diagnostics and state standardized assessments.

Twenty-five years later, TFA has placed more than 42,000 teachers in 52 regions, and has seeded multiple organizations in the United States and abroad. TFA cultivates an active alumni network, maintains robust data on the identities and numbers of alumni in particular sectors, and frequently features especially notable or high-profile alumni on its website and alumni magazine. Alumna Sarah Usdin, for example, founded New Schools for New Orleans after the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding in 2005, which helped to give charter schools prominence in the district, and in 2012 was elected to a seat on the school board. Many of the education leaders TFA highlights are proponents of market-based school reforms, including proponents of alternative teacher evaluation and compensation models, charter school leaders, and advocates of alternative, non-university based leadership and teacher preparation. This is an example

of the implicit messaging by the organization. We found no examples of alumni leading efforts to resist education privatization or market reforms, working for fiscal equity, or working to decrease racial or socioeconomic segregation featured in TFA communications, for instance, nor were any featured at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit.

Those alumni rising to national prominence as “reformers,” or leaders of significant, usually market-oriented educational reforms, tend to not reflect the demographic profiles of the students they teach (Winerip, 2011). Although it is common to encounter popular media accounts of TFA in which corps are described in elite terminologies – bright, talented, generous, ambitious leaders – TFA acknowledges the need to increase diversity of its corps members. Although roughly 20% of the corps until two years ago was African American (10%) or Latino (7%), and only 25% come from low-income backgrounds, 90% of the students in corps members’ classrooms are African American or Latino, and 80% live in high poverty homes. These demographics translate into the *alumni* corps being a predominantly white (roughly 70%), middle- to upper-class coterie (Kopp, 2011a), despite the recent uptick in diversity of the 2014 and 2015 corps. While this demographic gap is similar to the national profile of U.S. teachers, in states like California, Texas, Nevada, and Arizona, for example, where the gap between teachers of color and students of color is considerably larger (Boser, 2014), TFA’s demographic disparities are even more pronounced. In the last couple of years, TFA has moved to diversify its corps, and now boasts two consecutive corps that were heavily comprised of people of color, though in 2014, African Americans still just constituted 18% of the 49% total people of color TFA reported, and Latinos constituted just 13%.

## Philanthropic Ties

The demographics of the corps relate to TFA’s longstanding success at generating revenue to support and scale up the organization. TFA enjoys significant federal, foundation, and corporate funding. Between 2000 and 2008, Suggs and DeMarrais found that of the foundation support for teaching organizations, TFA received more funding than any other recipient; at \$213,444,431, it received more than three times than did its closest competitor. By 2010, TFA had received grants from 13 of the 15 largest K-12 foundations (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014). TFA also benefits from corporate giving, such as the Gap clothing company’s “Give and Get Campaign,” in which shoppers can direct a portion of their purchases to several non-profit organizations, and from significant philanthropic support. Other corporate sponsors have included Visa, Inc., State Farm Insurance, FedEx, J. Crew, Bain and Company, Cisco, and Wachovia, a Wells Fargo Company. The public investment increased substantially in 2010 under the Obama Administration’s Investing in Innovation Fund (I3), from which TFA received \$50 million to scale up its teaching force,<sup>3</sup> in addition to \$11.4 million in AmeriCorps funding. Finally, TFA has benefited from foundation largesse, especially from venture philanthropies such as the Broad Foundation, Gates Foundation, Robertson Foundation, Dell Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation (Scott, 2009). Finally, in 2010, a group of foundations and individual donors awarded TFA \$100 million to create an endowment (Blume, 2011).

Saltman (2010, 2012) has demonstrated the significant philanthropic and corporate support enjoyed by TFA and similar organizations and the ways in which this support has seeded a number of highly contested initiatives. He contends that many of these funders are convinced that key to

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<sup>3</sup> Five organizations run by TFA alumni also received I3 funding, which required awardees to demonstrate their ability to secure supplementary funds from foundations: KIPP, The New Teacher Project, New Schools for New Orleans, IDEA Public Schools, and School of One.

leveraging student performance is the eradication of teachers unions and the adoption of value-added models of assessing and compensating teachers. As an entity that is often associated with support for these types of competition-driven, market-style reforms (Trujillo & Scott, 2014), TFA has enjoyed significant philanthropic largesse from funders whose priorities are ideologically aligned with those of the organization. Such substantial public and private investments have also helped TFA secure its prominence in the current educational reform arena. Despite this status, TFA's official stance toward particular educational reforms is largely silent. There is no official endorsement, for example, in the TFA literature, on reforms that many of its alumni are central in leading and implementing, such as charter schools, value-added teacher evaluation systems, merit pay for teachers, and efforts to dismantle or radically reform teacher labor unions. What is clear is that since TFA's early formation, Kopp has articulated a goal of redressing educational inequality, which in recent years has translated into a diffuse collection of reforms that are broadly aimed at reducing the "racial achievement gap."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Kopp has praised the charterization of public education in New Orleans, which has been led by TFA alumni, and the new schools largely staffed by TFA corps members.

### Political Activity

Indeed, TFA leaders regard the organization as a critical agent in ameliorating educational inequality, and they reason that TFA selects and develops leaders who work across multiple professional, political, and educational terrains to reshape schooling for poor children and children of color. TFA has built an active alumni network, and through its partner organization, Leadership for Educational Equity (LEE),<sup>5</sup> has cultivated programs to support and encourage alumni to run for public office. It has also established relationships with many graduate programs, professional schools, and non-university based alternative programs, thereby creating pipelines for alumni to rapidly enter elite fields and become civic leaders. LEE operates a Policy and Advocacy Summer Fellowship, which places corps in unpaid summer internships in a variety of reform and policy settings, such as the Indiana Department of Education, Stand for Children, Teach Plus, Jobs for the Future, Knowledge Alliance, Illinois Network of Charter Schools, the Citizens Commission on Civil Rights, and The Fordham Institute. The ideological diversity of these placement organizations maps on well to Kopp's assertion that TFA is an apolitical organization. Yet critics of this claim question how the organization can occupy an apolitical space when its project of eradicating educational inequity is so closely tied to altering longstanding political arrangements and increasingly, to electoral politics (Miner, 2010; Veltri, 2010).

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<sup>4</sup> Ladson-Billings (2006) and Welner & Carter (2013) have challenged this framing of educational inequality, presenting it in terms of an "opportunity gap" rather than a racial achievement gap. In using the term "achievement gap" here, we aim to summarize the way TFA talks about the challenges in U.S. schooling as primarily an issue of outcomes and not broader, structural inputs.

<sup>5</sup> The mission of Leadership for Educational Equity is to enable TFA corps members and alumni to realize high impact careers in public leadership by: (1) educating LEE members about the policy, advocacy and political landscape in their region and in the nation so they are inspired and ready to participate politically and civically; (2) equipping LEE members with the skills, resources, and experiences to successfully pursue public leadership positions; (3) helping LEE members become highly effective change agents for educational equity once in positions of leadership; and (4) fostering a thriving LEE community in which members support one another in pursuing public leadership and actively engage around political and civic matters.



## TFA's International Expansion

In 2007, TFA expanded internationally through its offshoot Teach For All, a collaborative organization co-founded by Kopp and Brett Wigdortz (Straubhaar & Friedrich, 2015).<sup>6</sup> In 2002, working with business organizations, Wigdortz launched Teach First, a British alternative teacher placement program modeled after TFA. Like TFA, Teach First recruits graduates of top universities for two-year commitments, and frames their work in heroic terms. According to a 2006 evaluation (Hutchings, Maylor, Mendick, Senter & Smart, 2006), Teach First emphasizes the importance of the entrepreneurial, innovative teacher-leader. "Teaching is presented as a challenge, and as an opportunity to benefit those who are disadvantaged. The teacher is constructed almost as a hero, a person struggling with physical as well as emotional challenges."

In 2016, Teach For All's affiliated organizations had a presence in 39 countries. Teach For All works with "social enterprises," or entrepreneurial organizations that aim for social sector change, in each country to build TFA and Teach First-like teaching corps. According to its website, Teach For All's mission is highly aligned with the focus and attributes of TFA and Teach First, and emphasizes entrepreneurial approaches to educational inequalities:

The social enterprises in Teach For All recruit outstanding university graduates and young leaders of a variety of disciplines and career interests to commit two years to teach in high-need areas, providing a critical source of additional teachers who ensure their students have the educational opportunities they deserve, despite socioeconomic factors. With significant training and ongoing support, participants work to succeed with students, in the process gaining a deeper belief that it is possible to ensure educational opportunity for all and a first-hand understanding of how to achieve it. Over time, alumni work as leaders in the classroom, in education more broadly, and across all sectors to effect the fundamental changes necessary to ensure educational opportunity for all. Alumni work to minimize the socioeconomic challenges facing some children, build capacity in schools and school system, and change prevailing beliefs through their examples and advocacy.

In 2013, Kopp stepped down as CEO of TFA in order to helm Teach For All. The increasing global reach of TFA, then, must be considered in light of its sociopolitical influence on education leadership, policy, and advocacy in the education reform advocacy community and across local, state, federal, and international governments through an intricate web of policy networks (Ball, 2012a, 2012b). This article provides a conceptual framework to inform a growing body of research that is unpacking the multiple ways in which TFA, its corps, alumni, spin-off organizations, and advocates are reshaping American public education and education in international contexts.

## Examining the Literature: New Conceptual Insights

Given its ties to prominent foundations, corporations, and policy makers, we conceptualize TFA as a key mediator of neoliberal policy activities for aspiring, current, and alumni corps members, one that is able to exert influence in a highly unequal society. As such, our framing illuminates the ways in which the organization portends to have policy impact far greater than is

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<sup>6</sup> See EPAA's 2015 special issue on TFA's international spin-off, Teach For All, edited by Rolf Straubhaar and Daniel Friedrich at <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/2055>

currently articulated in accounts of the organization. Specifically, our framing conceptualizes TFA not as an alternative teaching credentialing program or community service organization, as conventional accounts have framed it, but as a key agent in the transformation of educational leadership, reform, and policy. We see these policy shaping activities encompassing the leadership of schools, districts, foundations, think tanks, non-profits, and serving as state and system actors. As more alumni move into these roles, through the policy networks carefully cultivated and sustained by TFA, they help to create the policy and fiscal conditions favorable to TFA's stability and growth as well as help to support the career trajectories of fellow alumni.

Critics and supporters of TFA have debated its merits and shortcomings since its inception. While there exists an abundance of literature on TFA in academic journals and mainstream media, we argue that researchers have not as yet fully conceptualized the organization as an international political movement, and as a result, a number of promising theoretical and empirical research directions remain relatively unexplored. TFA is not best understood as an alternative teacher placement and preparation program, nor is it purely a service organization. Rather, it is an organization dedicated to seeding entrepreneurial leaders that, based on our extensive document review, seem to frequently align with the advocacy of marketized reforms, and contributing to the "common sense" about the viability of neoliberal and market educational policies (Kumashiro, 2008).

We drew from an extensive literature review on TFA to generate our conceptual framework. In the next section, we briefly review and organize the research on TFA in order to situate this framework in the literature. We find that across the strands of research, much of the literature focuses on performance or critiques of TFA, and a small, but growing body of empirical research places TFA in a broader political, social, and economic context.

Our literature database includes foundation reports, think tank and advocacy publications, journalistic and polemic narratives, and traditional academic research. We find that TFA-related research falls into four key categories, each representing varying levels of rigor and standards of evidence. The first is a collection of debates about the organization's merits; the second is a range of studies about TFA's effects on student outcomes; the third includes TFA memoirs, qualitative analyses, and journalistic accounts of corps' members experiences in the field; the final group includes a small, emergent set of studies that conceives of TFA corps members as social and political actors.

## **TFA Debates**

Long-standing debates about the value and function of TFA represent two schools of thought. Proponents support corps' placement in hard-to-staff settings where students might otherwise have a series of substitutes, and contend that "little can be learned without hands-on practice" (Schorr, 1993, p. 318). Members of this camp usually reason that university schools of education inadequately prepare new teachers for their first few years teaching (Kopp, 2001), and as a result, conclude that a different model of apprenticeship is needed – one that banks on more training and support of novice teachers while inside the classroom, as well as on the recruitment of more talented teachers from alternative pipelines of higher-performing college graduates (Zeichner & Peña-Sandoval, 2014). A recent example of this rationale that reached policy fruition is reflected in the New York State Regents' accreditation of the Relay School of Education (RSE), a "results-oriented" alternative teacher preparation program started by a network of TFA-affiliated charter schools and that is intended to provide "rigorous, practical, performance-based training that explodes the traditional, course-based paradigm that has been adopted by traditional schools of education over the past century" (RSE website, 2011). RSE confers teaching certificates and Masters

degrees on teachers who demonstrate student achievement gains over two years (Stitzlein & West, 2014).

Supporters of TFA also often cite reports from think tanks like the Abell Foundation or other advocacy groups to argue that a paucity of rigorous evidence exists that links teacher certification to higher student performance (Walsh, 2001, 2002) in order to extrapolate about TFA's potentially positive effect on student outcomes. Others maintain that TFA corps members – picked through a rigorous selection process for harvesting recruits from the top ranks of elite colleges and universities – possess a specific combination of qualities that predispose them toward the type of “transformative” leadership necessary for setting “big” student achievement goals and working “relentlessly” to close the racial achievement gap (Farr, 2010).

On the other hand, critics express concern about placing inexperienced, uncertified teachers in impoverished schools and districts. For instance, Darling-Hammond, one of TFA's most outspoken detractors, argues that TFA's operating paradigm is based on several assumptions that research shows are unwarranted. These include the assumptions that teacher preparation does not work; teacher preparation programs have the least academically able students; little or no teacher preparation is required beyond subject-matter knowledge and general intelligence; and that districts have the will and capacity to train and mentor teachers on their own (1994, 1998, 2002).

These opponents also argue that TFA's two-year model benefits corps members' professional routes more than the students for which it purportedly exists (Miner, 2010). They reason that the organization de-professionalizes teachers through its lack of emphasis on teacher preparation and its close alignment with market-based reforms that resist collective bargaining agreements (Pitzer, 2010). Researchers have also noted that on its website, TFA often presents research findings in ways that minimize the significant methodological limitations of many effectiveness studies while also amplifying findings that present corps members effectiveness as significantly superior (Kovacs & Slate-Young, 2013).

Conceptually, this literature helps parse out the trade-offs associated with TFA, both for students and the teaching profession. Yet it is often characterized by polarizing language that constructs a dichotomy between so-called, pro-market “reformers,” in which TFA is positioned squarely in the middle, and falsely portrayed “anti-reformers” who invest in pro-union, traditional efforts to improve public school systems (Zeichner & Peña-Sandoval, 2014). We find that this dichotomy is both overly simplified and unconstructive. Conceptualizations and studies of TFA that do more than describe the organization's alignment with or against specific reforms are needed to help explain the nuanced structures and processes through which TFA may be shaping the policies, reforms, and politics that are at the heart of these debates.

## **TFA Effectiveness Studies**

Student achievement on standardized assessments is the most prominent issue in educational policy and discourse, and under a neoliberal state, reformers and funders require performance-based accountability systems to demonstrate and reward growth (Apple, 2007). In addition, as Burch (2009) has found, the creation of student and school data systems, data analysis firms, and testing expansion is a key growth area for private sector contractors in public schooling. And policy makers have increasingly demanded that reformers demonstrate “what works” in schooling in order to be eligible for public investments (Trujillo & Renée, 2014). As such, quantitatively demonstrating corps members' impact on student achievement is vital to TFA's ability to secure funding and establish district partnerships. It is also of interest to a number of researchers. Thus, we found that the largest category of TFA literature concerns the effects that TFA teachers have on student performance. Overall, these studies represent a broad range of methodological rigor and standards for evidence.

As Vasquez-Heilig & Jez (2010, 2014) have demonstrated with two comprehensive meta-analyses of TFA effectiveness studies, the aggregate of their findings is consistently mixed, with small effects in either direction of student performance. In what follows, we explore the characteristics of the most seminal TFA effectiveness studies to date.

In one of the more methodologically robust studies of TFA impact, Decker, Mayer, and Glazerman (2004) compared the outcomes of randomly assigned students taught by TFA teachers with the outcomes of students taught by non-TFA, or control, teachers in the same schools and at the same grades. They found that average math scores were significantly higher (3 percentile points) among TFA students than among control students on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (an effect size of roughly .15 standard deviation, or one month of teaching). TFA math scores were slightly higher when restricting the control group to include only novice teachers (.26 standard deviation). The researchers found no significant TFA impact on average reading scores, and it is unclear what accounts for the difference in content outcomes.

Laczko-Kerr and Berliner's (2002) ex-post facto archival analysis of Arizona's emergency, temporary, and provisionally certified teachers found that students of certified teachers performed significantly better on the Stanford Nine Achievement Test (SAT 9) in reading, math, and language arts, than students of non-certified teachers, a subset of which included Teach For America teachers (by approximately three-four months grade equivalent scale scores). Through multiple analyses of variance and t-tests, the researchers demonstrated that the performance of TFA teachers' students "is indistinguishable from that of students taught by other under-certified teachers" (p. 41).

Two studies of New York City Public School teacher and student data, including a subset of TFA teacher data, have been conducted. In the first study, Boyd, Lankford, Grossman, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2005) used value added models to find that students of TFA teachers performed as well as traditional-route teachers in mathematics and less well in English Language Arts. Yet in a different analysis of the same dataset, Kane, Rockoff, and Staiger (2008) found, above all, that teachers' certification status had extremely small effects on students' test outcomes (TFA and non-TFA alike), and that more variation existed within various groups of teachers than between groups.

Xu, Hannaway, and Taylor (2008) conducted a study for The Urban Institute that used a student fixed-effects model to account for the nonrandom assignment of students to teachers in their longitudinal analysis of North Carolina's End-of-Course high school test scores. They found that students of TFA teachers performed better than students of non-TFA teachers by about one-tenth of a standard deviation, even when holding constant experience and licensing status.

Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque (2001) conducted a non-peer reviewed study for the Center for Research in Education Outcomes (CREDO). Using both general and fixed effects regression models, they found that students of TFA teachers in the Houston Independent School District outperformed students of other non-TFA teachers on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), but the effect sizes varied by grade and subject and the differences were "generally not statistically significant" (p. xii). This research has been criticized for its comparison of all TFA teachers to other new teachers who did not participate in TFA and all other teachers in the district, without controlling for certification status.

Partly in response to the CREDO study, Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, and Heilig (2005) conducted multiple longitudinal analyses of Houston students' test scores (using Ordinary Least Squares Regression and Hierarchical Linear Modeling) on the TAAS, the Spanish-language Aprenda, and the Stanford Nine Achievement Test (SAT 9). They found that when compared with certified teachers, students of TFA recruits did worse, on average, although when TFA teachers became certified after two or three years, their students performed as well or better than those of other certified teachers.

In a non-peer reviewed study funded by the Broad Foundation – a major financial contributor to TFA – Nadareishvili (2008) used a “covariate adjustment methodology” and a “gain score” approach to measure the impact of TFA-taught students compared to non-TFA-taught students. He found that the latter outperformed the control group in a series of analyses (2.8-4.1 scaled score points on the California Standards Test). However, the small sample size, ambiguous selection criteria, and lack of clarity about what variables the author controlled for, as well as the study’s lack of impartiality, undercut the validity of the findings.

In another non-peer reviewed analysis, a doctoral student asked whether the personality traits that TFA measures during admissions, and uses to select corps members, predict students’ test scores in New York City (Dobbie, 2011). Findings suggested that a one standard deviation increase in an index that averages scores on all eight of TFA’s measured traits is associated with a 0.15 standard deviation increase in math scores. The gain was tied to higher scores on traits like leadership, achievement, and perseverance. Other measured traits, including critical thinking ability, organizational ability, motivational ability, and respect for others, were not significantly related to test results. However, the representativeness of the study’s sample was limited to corps members placed in traditional public schools, not charters (to which TFA assigns a large number of teachers). The validity and reliability of TFA’s measured traits was also not addressed.

Aside from their varying levels of methodological rigor, perhaps the most obvious conclusion to be drawn from these studies is that evidence of TFA’s impact on test scores is mixed. Another interpretation might be that, even if TFA recruits affect student performance in statistically significant ways, these effect sizes are consistently small in either direction – a pattern that seems at odds with supporters’ and critics’ strong advocacy for and against TFA. These patterns suggest that alternative examinations of TFA’s impact could broaden our understanding of other possible areas in which corps members may be making a difference.

Specifically, these “effectiveness” studies narrowly frame TFA’s impact in terms of test scores. By conceptualizing “success” according to test results, they preclude other considerations of TFA’s potential impacts both inside of classrooms and within the wider educational system. Given the program’s strong advocacy in favor of alumni assuming leadership positions within education and broader public policy arenas, research on TFA “impact” that goes beyond studies of test scores can round out our understanding of the fuller effects of TFA – on policy, reform, and even on the leadership positions themselves into which alumni settle.

## **TFA Narratives**

First-person narratives, qualitative, and journalistic analyses of corps members’ teaching experiences comprise the third area of literature on TFA. This literature presents a wide-ranging perspective on the successes and limitations of the organization, and is much more explicit about the multiple reasons that corps elect to teach under TFA’s auspices. One of the earliest contributions to this line of work includes Sentilles’ (2005) memoir, *Taught by America*, in which she confesses her desire to sign up because “TFA was something I wanted to be able to say I had done, not something I actually wanted to do” (p. XIII); her mounting disenchantment with TFA as a white, middle class outsider teaching in Compton, California; and her emotional processes of self-discovery that helped hone her personal identity and career trajectory.

Others have documented the cultural challenges associated with TFA teachers, the majority of whom are middle class and white, teaching students in poor, racially marginalized, and immigrant communities (Veltri, 2008, 2010). These accounts highlight the tensions corps members experience when attempting to mediate district and state policy, community norms and values, and TFA’s

“corporate” organizational ethos – all of which contrasted and pulled the novice teachers in different directions.

Foote (2009) authored a journalistic account of four TFA teachers in their first-year teaching in a historically struggling high school. She details the corps members’ challenges negotiating the culture of their school, the realities of teaching in an under-resourced school with high rates of teacher and administrator turnover, and the calculations behind their choices to fulfill their two-year commitment or leave early. Interspersed throughout the narratives are descriptions of the organization’s history and its founders’ original aims. The narrative captures not just the daily challenges that are part and parcel of the TFA experience, but the organization’s increasing drive toward scientific measures of “good” teaching and the program staff’s efforts to select and evaluate teachers based on a quantitative algorithm that links specific teacher traits with student test scores.

Most recently, scholars have begun analyzing counter-narratives, or first-person accounts of dissenting corps members’ views that have traditionally been relegated to the sidelines of the discourse on TFA. In this newest collection of literature, editors and authors have compiled in-depth depictions of TFA alumni’s interpretations of and insights into their experiences in the corps. Brewer and DeMarrais (2015), for example, edited a volume that highlighted 20 TFA alumni’s reflections on the challenges and opportunities they encountered as corps members, many of which contradict the organization’s claims about its effects on teaching, learning, and the ultimate goals of reducing educational inequality. Similarly, Matsui (2015) authored a book in which she presents an in-depth analysis of interview and survey data to capture the complex experiences and struggles of corps members’ time inside the classroom and beyond. Other analyses have interrogated the assumptions implicit in TFA’s “Academic Impact Model” to conclude that the organization’s ethos of hyper-teacher-accountability leads to rapid burnout and disillusionment among corps members (Brewer, 2014). These latest sources contribute more nuanced perspectives on TFA recruits’ inner lives by examining traditionally silenced or marginalized perspectives on the organization, its culture, and its impacts on corps members themselves.

One contribution of this collection of literature is its more textured portrayal of TFA’s impacts. In contrast to the previous TFA “effectiveness” studies, this writing tends to capture the subtle effects that TFA teachers’ activist orientation and the organization’s mission-driven paradigm may have on students’ engagement with the educational system. While this writing consistently underscores the inherent complexities of dispatching neophyte educators to cope with classroom-level manifestations of historical and institutional inequities, it also offers several rich accounts of TFA teachers’ strong emotional engagement with their students, their relational approach to teaching, and their willingness to initiate novel classroom- and school-level improvement projects. At the same time, these accounts also reveal the ways in which TFA may perpetuate systemic inequities by assigning short-term, minimally prepared, culturally mismatched teachers to the nation’s neediest schools. This work brings to light the less examined, though potentially powerful qualitative effects of TFA’s model, guiding paradigm, and organizational values.

These three streams of inquiry – the debates, effectiveness studies, and narratives – comprise the bulk of the literature on TFA. However, they do not shed sufficient light from our perspective on why so many corps members have embraced particular educational policy or reform agendas, or how they have made sense of their experiences and opportunities vis-à-vis TFA. Consequently, we conclude that the literature on TFA’s broader civic or political effects beyond test scores; the processes and structures through which TFA may impact educational reform, policy, or leadership; and the relationship between TFA’s organizational values and ideologies and alumni career trajectories is still rather thin.

## TFA as Social and Political Actors

TFA is largely imagined as an organization in which its members' primary identities are teachers (and, to a lesser extent, volunteers). At the same time, TFA states that it is a non-partisan, apolitical organization; LEE and other alumni offshoots also claim to be agnostic about alumni policy routes. Yet a 2010 article authored by corps member Alex Diamond questioned this apolitical stance; he maintained that because TFA offers itself as a solution to inequality, its actions are inherently political. Thus, even within corps member-TFA communications, there appears to be ambiguity about the social and political standpoints of corps members and TFA leadership. This ambiguity extends to the final set of literature we review. While a treatment of corps members and alumni as social and political actors was relatively absent across the first three sets of literature, a growing number of studies are emerging that represent exceptions to this trend. Many of these conceptual and empirical pieces have been published in a 2013 double special issue of *Critical Studies in Education* and in the *Journal of Educational Policy*.

An early small, peer-reviewed study that drew on qualitative interviews with TFA corps members and recruiters to investigate the organization's discourse around collective bargaining to introduce and legitimate particular types of reforms (Pitzer, 2010). This analysis identified patterns in which TFA staff regularly employed neo-liberal, anti-union language when framing the problems of urban schools for corps members, and speculated about the implications of this discourse for corps members' ideological positions on urban school reform and the most appropriate remedies for educational inequalities.

In another study, Kretchmar (2014) conducted critical life histories, or in-depth analyses of a small sample of TFA alumni interviews, to understand how corps members internalized some of the organization's messages about the promise of privatization efforts in educational reform, namely, those related to the promotion of charter schools.

Others have also critically examined how philanthropists have generated support for TFA-related narratives about the discourse on corporate-funded school reform by misusing evidence that is of a dubious quality. This work represented one of the earliest attempts to unpack the democratic tensions that arise when corporate-funded think tanks and advocacy groups generate "spontaneous consent for pro-corporate educational reform" (Kovacs & Christie, 2008, p. 2).

A TFA-sanctioned, peer-reviewed analysis by McAdam & Brandt (2009) presented the results of a quasi-experimental study that used large-scale survey data to identify the degree to which participation in TFA had a transformative effect on alumni's civic attitudes and participation. The authors found that alumni reported being less engaged and more disenchanted around issues of educational equity and social justice than those who did not participate in TFA. These researchers also found that corps members tended to leave the classroom to work for TFA itself, or in TFA-like organizations, but their survey data were not able to explain why such relatively low civic engagement existed among alumni. TFA's research office and Kopp herself disputed the methodological reliability and findings of the study.

A study by Higgins and colleagues that examined the degree to which TFA alumni became the type of transformative change agents envisioned by the organization (Higgins, Hess, Weiner, & Robison, 2011). As a part of a larger survey of organizations that successfully "spawned" educational entrepreneurs, Higgins et al. found that TFAers comprise the largest share of founders and top management team members in nationally prominent educational entrepreneur organizations. Similarly, Sondel, Kretchmar & Ferrare (2014) utilized social network analysis to show the linkages among TFA corps members and alumni, the national charter school movement, and the growth of charter schools in New Orleans.

Another study compared the educational beliefs, political idealism, and racial attitudes of corps members accepted into TFA with those not accepted (Fryer & Dobbie, 2011). Among other things, the researchers found that membership in TFA was associated with higher levels of self-reported racial tolerance, interest in working in education, and beliefs that achievement gaps can be ameliorated by within-school factors. In an ethnographic study of 25 TFA teachers, Straubhaar & Gottfried (2014) found that they perceived themselves as being competitive, high-performing leaders, and committed to ending educational inequality. However, these participants viewed their time teaching in urban schools as an interim period before pursuing other more “high prestige” careers.

Finally, an archival study critically examined the evolution of TFA’s summer training institute by considering the political motivations that have underpinned the ways in which the organization framed its own identity in response to policy pressures (Schneider, 2013).

While each of these studies contributes a more expansive view of TFA corps members, few distinguish the specific mechanisms and processes (aside from language and, in a few exceptions, relationships and funding arrangements) through which TFA may influence its alumni’s civic and entrepreneurial engagement. Perhaps more importantly, relatively absent from empirical study is how corps members – aspiring, current, and alumni—make meaning of TFA’s influence and the opportunities it confers. Likewise, many of these studies were not designed in ways that could yield firm conclusions about the manner in which the organization may inculcate specific values and ideological orientations that dispose alumni toward particular types of educational reform, policy, or leadership. While these studies help conceive of TFA corps members more broadly than the share of TFA research – as political and social actors nested within an active, elite policy network – they offer little in terms of our understandings of how and why these patterns emerge.

## Conceptual Framework

Our framework joins literatures from political science, political sociology, and critical leadership studies to extend the research on TFA and civic engagement in public education and public policy. Based on our document and literature review, observations at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit, and insights from our ongoing study of TFA current, prospective, and alumni corps members, we find that there is still a need for a framework that adequately maps the organizations’ activities, ideological stances, and dispositions to traditional sites of educational expertise and influence. Thus, we argue that the second branch of TFA’s mission statement, which maintains that TFA’s greatest point of influence in public education is not in classrooms, but in its facilitation of entry into leadership positions aimed at reshaping public schooling, can be better understood in terms of the organization’s: a) infusion of “policy entrepreneurs” into educational policymaking processes; b) cultivation of powerful networks of elite interests, c) promotion of “corporate” models of managerial leadership; and, d) racial and social class identities of its corps members that facilitate entry into leadership and policy networks while muting conversation on the role of racism in perpetuating structural inequalities. We display the framework’s components in Figure 1, and then discuss each of them.



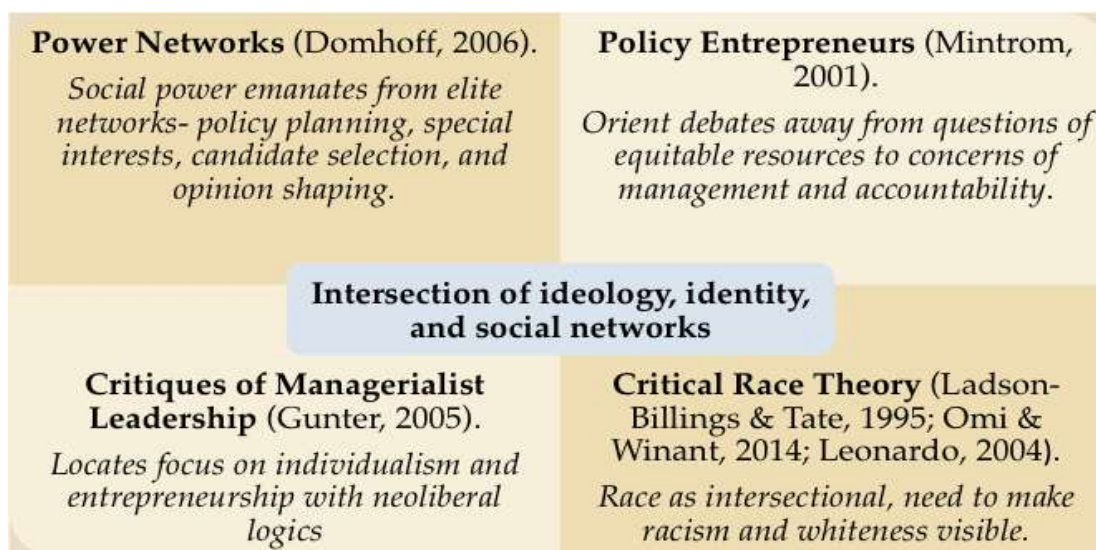


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

**Policy entrepreneurs.** First, we engage the notion of policy entrepreneurs, most recently advanced by Mintrom in his study of school choice (2001). The concept of policy entrepreneurs is a powerful heuristic because it helps to explain how policy can be made from outside what has been commonly understood as the formal policy process, which generally takes place in federal and state legislatures or local governmental structures. In contrast, policy entrepreneurs are able to impact policy from outside the public sphere using a range of advocacy approaches. According to Roberts & King (1991), “Public entrepreneurship” is the process of introducing innovation—the generation, translation, and implementation of new ideas—into the public sector,” and policy entrepreneurs are those who, “from outside the formal positions of government, introduce, translate, and help implement new ideas into public practice.” In the context of public education, Mintrom argues that policy entrepreneurs “have oriented debates over public education away from questions of resources and their equitable distribution and toward questions of government management and accountability” (2001, p. 2).

**Power networks.** Next, we employ Domhoff’s notion of power networks, occupied by the elite, through which policy and social change often emanates. Domhoff identifies four power networks: The policy-planning process, made up of foundations, think tanks, and policy discussion groups, formulates the general interests of the corporate community. The special-interests process concerns elite interests of wealthy families, corporations, and business sectors. Here, lobbyists, lawyers, and trade associations play important roles. The candidate-selection process works to elect candidates who support the elite agenda. The opinion-shaping process tries to influence public attitudes while also inserting some issues and keeping others off the public agenda. “Taken together, the people and organizations that operate in these four networks constitute the political-action arm of the corporate community and upper class” (p. 16).

This notion of a power elite aligns with the original mission of TFA, which was to attract graduates of elite schools (who have traditionally come from elite families) to teaching. Domhoff’s approach helps to explain why TFA’s advocacy for particular educational strategies may be effective, and why organizations with less elite members (such as community-based and civil rights organizations), struggle for influence. Moreover, the notion of a power elite can help to

contextualize the efforts TFA makes to maintain organizational loyalty and identification among its alumni, as well as to explain, at least in part, TFA's efforts to cultivate alumni who will enter policy making and advocate for particular policy agendas from within government. Indeed, TFA's website currently explains that its model is to "Enlist, Develop, and Mobilize" its corps members to work as a network to remake public education:

Corps members don't just teach their students, they learn from them. At the end of two years, they use those lessons to choose their path forward. Many stay in the classroom. Others move into politics, school leadership, nonprofit work, advocacy, and more. All of their paths matter because together they form a network—connecting, expanding, and strengthening the movement to give all kids access to a great education (Teach For America, "Our Mission").

The mechanisms through which the movement operates tends to celebrate managerial leadership forms that embrace market models of schooling.

**Managerial Leadership Models.** Next, we draw on Gunter's (1997) critiques of managerial models of leadership in which she contests the corporate conceptions of leadership represented in the discourse and literature on educational reform and leadership. Gunter interrogates conceptions of educational leadership, like those advanced by TFA, which promote highly charismatic, directive, technical models for leading schools, districts, and reform efforts that do not account for the political and social contexts in which schools are embedded. This thesis may help to explain how TFA's promotion of entrepreneurial leaders who engage in innovative, results-based solutions to narrowing the racial achievement gap – typically efforts that reside outside of the traditional public school system – may advance rather individualist conceptions of leadership. That is, entrepreneurial leadership models like TFA's, in their assumption that individuals' sheer perseverance and talent can engineer creative mechanisms for improving educational outcomes, may divert attention away from systemic educational inequities like disparities in funding and other resources, or the racial and socioeconomic isolation of whole school systems. In the U.S. context, this work is reinforced by literature that critically analyzes the neoliberal education leadership models that are promoted by today's venture philanthropists (Saltman, 2010). The result of these leadership models can be school reforms that are framed as reliant on individual cases of innovation, rather than on broader, systemic shifts in social, political, or institutional structures and policies.

Gunter (2005) also contends that contemporary conceptions of educational leadership are incomplete because they lack explicit pedagogical aims. In their stead, they privilege managerial aims related to efficiency and strategic planning, ambitious outcome setting, and effective performance – all qualities that TFA cultivates in its corps members and alumni (Trujillo & Scott, 2014). Absent from these views of educational leadership are values about civic democratic participation, relationships, or social justice. In focusing solely on what can be measured easily and quantified, these leadership models focus educators, policymakers, and the general public narrowly on these specific outcomes, even when they were initially intended to be a proxy for much broader learning. Such views of educational leadership can sometimes unintentionally translate into a reductive model of schooling, one that is narrowly centered on measurable results and test-based curricula and that eschews humanistic questions about teacher-student relationships, intellectual rigor, or students' social and political consciousness.

These concepts comprise a framework for understanding TFA's existence at the nexus of three forms of civic engagement to remake public education— policy entrepreneurs, power elites, and managerial school leaders. The framework also helps to illuminate TFA's efforts to distinguish the organization and its corps members as educational policy innovators and experts on ameliorating

inequality, often through market-based educational mechanisms like charter schools, value added evaluations and compensation of teachers, and the scaling back of bargaining rights for teachers in the name of serving students more equitably.

As policy makers continue to disinvest in their K-12 and higher public education systems—especially those serving concentrations of children of color and children living in poverty, TFA, and its corps and alumni, as well as other entrepreneurial organizations—many of whom have their origins with TFA—are positioned to perform the activities left unattended by the neoliberal state (Lipman, 2011; Saltman, 2010, 2012). Without these alterations in the central state, organizations like TFA would be unable to flourish. For example, in New Orleans, policy entrepreneurs were well positioned to redesign the schooling system after Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding wiped out much of the city's infrastructure. Emergency legislation created a hybridized schooling system in which most of the schools were charter schools and in which TFA corps members constituted a significant concentration of the teaching force in the aftermath of the mass termination of the city's teachers (Buras, et. al., 2010; Saltman, 2007). Similar patterns of school closures, turnarounds, and charter school expansion across New York City, Chicago, Detroit, and many urban centers have paved the way for TFA corps and alumni to assume teaching and leadership positions even as certified teachers are being laid off or unable to secure employment in urban schooling systems (White, in this special issue; Trujillo, forthcoming).

**Critical Race Theory.** Insights from critical race theory comprise the final component of our framework for understanding Teach For America's influence on public education policy. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that in educational policy discourse, discussions of race are often decoupled from analysis of racism. As a result, race, when taken up in educational policy analysis, tends to be treated as a static variable, decoupled from context and unaffected by disproportionate allocations of power. Race has not been taken up sufficiently in education policy analysis, they write, leaving the possibility of theorizing race and its relationship to educational inequality lacking. For Omi and Winant (2014), race is a social and economic construct; they argue that race is formed and re-formed in different eras, locations, and situations, and that in an age of neoliberalism, race needs to be theorized in relation to the market logics that permeate American society. For them, race as a moving mosaic of identity, power, culture, and social cleavages and boundaries, and racial formation is the sociohistorical process by which groups are made and remade, and by which material advantages and disadvantages are meted through social policies. Leonardo (2004) argues that the ample writing about 'white privilege' -- the material and tacit advantages accrued to those who are identified by their racial identity—has enriched understandings of inequality, but alone, is insufficient. He writes, "The study of white privilege begins to take on an image of domination without agents. It obfuscates the historical process of domination in exchange for a state of dominance in medias res" (p. 138). In addition, Leonardo argues that we must understand the formal processes and structures by which whites maintain advantage—beyond a kind of passive white privilege. Leonardo explains: "The discourse on privilege comes with the unfortunate consequence of masking history, obfuscating agents of domination, and removing the actions that make it clear who is doing what to whom. Instead of emphasizing the process of appropriation, the discourse of privilege centers the discussion on the advantages that whites receive. It mistakes the symptoms for causes. Racial advantages can be explained through a more primary history of exclusions and ideological practices" (p. 138).

Indeed, we observed the ways in which TFA provided messages to its predominantly white alumni and corps members about their roles as policy entrepreneurs, the ways in which it provides access to elite financial and organization networks, and the promotion of managerial approaches to schooling at its landmark 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit. In the next section, we demonstrate the utility of

our proposed framework for analyzing TFA activities and messages. We examine the TFA Summit and our interviews with corps members to construct an illustrative case of these largely white and upper middle class policy entrepreneurs' elite networks and managerial leadership models. We also consider TFA's role in mediating these ideologies around market reforms and opportunities to lead in educational policy and practice.

### **Policy Entrepreneurs in Action: Interviews with TFA Alumni and Observations at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit**

As we have noted, from its inception, critics worried about the extent to which TFA would de-professionalize teaching, undermine teachers unions, and place inexperienced teachers with some of the most educationally needy students. Advocates argued that energetic and bright graduates of elite universities could greatly help fill persistent teaching shortages in many urban and rural school districts. As the organization matured, much of the ensuing research on TFA has aimed to determine TFA corps members' effects on student test performance in order to prove TFA corps effectiveness in comparison to teachers educated through traditional—typically university based—preparation programs. In addition, critics questioned the overall philosophy of the organization, in particular the notion that elite college graduates, who were not only predominantly white, but who also came from economic privilege, were the answer to more equitable and rigorous schools. Moreover, these early critics questioned the ways in which TFA, through its itinerant teacher corps, would disrupt teachers' collective bargaining efforts and further constrain the professionalization of teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Lawton, 1991). With the rise of social media, blogs, and alternative journalism, and the widespread influence of TFA in educational policy making, the philosophical orientations of TFA have received greater scrutiny and generated lively debate, with a critical two-part series aired on the internet radio station Education Radio, and on National Public Radio's "*Tell Me More*" broadcast (2011).

In addition, the dominance of high-stakes, test-based accountability in educational reform more broadly has interacted with, and been embraced by TFA leaders as a primary mechanism for dismantling educational inequality. For example, TFA founder Wendy Kopp asserts the centrality of increasing testing outcomes as a means for redressing educational equity, most recently in *A Chance to Make History: What Works and What Doesn't in Providing an Excellent Education to All* (2011b). The book positions TFA corps members as frontline soldiers in the war to close the racial achievement gap. But Kopp and other TFA leaders also articulate that the organization's greatest potential impact extends far beyond classroom-level effects. It rests with TFA alumni, who they argue go on to affect public education through leadership, policy, and social entrepreneurship. Perhaps nowhere was this broader, long-term vision for systemic change more palpable than at TFA's 20th Anniversary Summit, held in 2011. Beginning in 2011, we also began a study of Teach For America alumni and current corps members. Data sources included 117 interviews with alumni who participated in the program between 1991 and 2012, and whose placements represented twenty-five regions across the country.

In our interviews, alumni recalled the ways in which TFA frames the roots of inequality as stemming from the managerial shortcomings of public bureaucracies. Likewise, our findings illustrate how TFA alumni embrace technocratic, market-oriented responses to these problems, in place of more systemic public investments designed to interrupt historical and political inequities. Last, this study reveals how closely alumni's career trajectories map onto their notions about educational inequality; most who remain in education do so in privatized settings that de-center the roles of teachers and communities of color in deliberating about and controlling local schools. We

saw many of these ideas communicated and witnessed alumni and policy makers' calls to put them into action or expand their reach at the 2011 Anniversary Summit.

The Summit was by any measure a milestone and spectacle. Over 10,000 participants attended the Washington, D.C. event to commemorate the organization's accomplishments. In conjunction with the event, Kopp released her latest book. Favorable news coverage appeared in national outlets like *Newsweek*. The dénouement was a Saturday afternoon plenary event where participants gathered in a massive convention center room for an event that featured speeches from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, a taped address from President Obama, and musical performances from singer John Legend backed by a children's orchestra from the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), a charter school franchise founded and operated by TFA alumni. Speeches were interspersed with musical selections from Legend and the orchestra. Each testimonial and musical selection connected TFA with social change and civic engagement, from Legend's song, "Shine," featured in the controversial 2010 documentary *Waiting for Superman*, to the remake of Teddy Pendergrass' classic call to social action in "Wake Up," the line, "*Wake up all you teachers, time to teach a new way. Maybe then they'll listen to what you have to say,*" garnering raucous applause and cheers from an enthusiastic, energetic audience composed primarily of an elite power network – current and alumni corps members.

Earlier in the day, Legend sat on a discussion panel that included a prominent policy entrepreneur, Whitney Tilson, a hedge fund manager, founding TFA employee, and founder of the political action committee, Democrats for Education Reform, a group that supports de-regulatory, incentivist educational reforms. The session's theme was "*Changing the Prevailing Ideology,*" during which most panelists argued that one of the most pressing problems in public education was teachers unions' protection of mediocre teachers. These panelists, all of whom would be classified policy entrepreneurs, encouraged the packed ballroom of TFA teachers and alumni to return home and help dismantle the teachers unions in order to change the teaching force with those who would hold higher expectations for children of color and children living in poverty. During a concurrent session, panelists explained how to assume school district and school system leadership by bypassing traditional preparation and certification routes—another defining characteristic of policy entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, in another session, social entrepreneurs competed in timed presentations for seed money to launch their projects in front of a panel of judges, with attendees voting electronically for their favored projects.

Between and during sessions, TFA corps and alumni could peruse the vendor hall, in which education reform and advocacy groups, and a number of charter management organizations (CMOs) recruited them to work in and become leaders in their organizations, enticing browsers with colorful brochures—many of which featured photographs of black and brown children, branded souvenirs such as buttons, pencils, notebooks, and even candy, and evocative banners over their booths, such as "Education=Freedom". While counter voices were featured at the Summit—including American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and Congressman John Lewis— the relative proportion of them to presenters advocating marketized and entrepreneurial approaches to schooling was much smaller.

The crescendo of the Summit's closing plenary was an array of TFA alumni who gave emotional testimonies about their accomplishments beyond their teaching stints. Each returned to the plenary theme: *What Role Will You Play?* Among the activities of the featured speakers were founding and operating charter schools, running for public office, passing legislation that ties teacher compensation to value added measures, advocating for teacher personnel policies based on performance rather than seniority, and working in school district leadership. These testimonies not only communicated the social entrepreneurship of the speakers, but the way TFA alumni seem to gravitate toward particular forms of civic engagement in educational reform. Despite TFA's claim to

be an apolitical organization, multiple panels reinforced political understandings about the causes of and solutions to educational inequality in terms of market and private sector approaches to schooling, and the types of managerial leaders needed to enact those approaches.

An opening panel, for example, featured prominent managerial leaders of organizations who exemplified the notion of elite power networks; these were leaders whose organizations share similar funders, and some panelists even served as board members or advisors to each other's organizations. Speakers included former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein (and current Executive Vice President with Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation), former Washington, D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee (and current founder of StudentsFirst), Harlem Children's Zone founder Jeffrey Canada, the KIPP co-founder, David Levin, Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent, John Deasy, and Chairman of America Achieves as well as co-founder of New Leaders for New Schools, Jon Schnur. While many progressive reformers and civil rights activists have questioned many of the reform initiatives promoted by the panelists, they were not represented on the panel. Instead, the panelists presented their work as being neatly aligned with a social justice agenda.

Events like the Summit provide a rich opportunity to unpack the relationship between discursive assertions about "what works" in eradicating educational inequality with the resulting policy initiatives advanced by TFA and affiliated reformers. Researchers have largely under-theorized the civic engagement and reform activities of TFA and its corps and alumni, and as a result, neglected important empirical directions that could help to bring more analytic understandings of TFA as a social and political force. In addition, data from our multi-year study of TFA prospective, current, and alumni have shown us that this population has understood their career pathways, causes of and solutions for educational inequality, and roles of entrepreneurial, managerial leaders primarily through the messages TFA has sent to them (Scott, 2008; Trujillo & Scott, 2014).

In our three-year study of TFA alumni and current teachers, we heard these ideas expressed from the majority of our respondents. All of our respondents agreed that educational inequality existed, but they preferred managerial and entrepreneurial responses to it: They preferred reforms that would scale back unions, expand charters, utilize technology to "disrupt systems," and increase teacher and principal effectiveness through better test-based accountability and merit pay. When we asked them to name education leaders who they admired, their favored leaders included Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, and the KIPP founders. Second to these high profile leaders, alumni usually named their own TFA friends and colleagues, most of whom founded charter schools and market-oriented educational advocacy organizations. Following them, alumni named major charter management organizations and formal government officials known for supporting charter schools, merit pay, and other corporate-style reforms. Only a few participants named non TFA-affiliated public school leaders. We heard comparatively, very little discussion of specific pedagogical strategies, funding, professional development, or desegregation/detracking. These preferences align with the managerialist leaders favored by neoliberal policy makers. In addition, alumni tended to see themselves as the solution insofar as they utilized the networks cultivated by TFA to become reform leaders or policy entrepreneurs early in their careers. As one corps member observed,

*So the idea is to consolidate programs, put kids in better programs, save some money and open up more charters, and afford those charters. I think there is a lot of opportunity for young people like myself in the works. It's going to open up so many doors for us to really get involved in educational leadership. There's going to be tons of opportunity here.*

Consistent with many participants' beliefs about the most promising routes to improving public education, the majority was employed in privatized educational settings, including entrepreneurial organizations outside of the public school system and private charter schools. A majority of our



respondents also capitalized on TFA networks such as Leadership for Educational Equity to gain entrée into positions of leadership in these organizations relatively early in their careers. Many of the schools in which alumni worked or led followed a back to basics, “no excuses” model—pairing high expectations with strict discipline. Several favorably compared their teaching experiences to those of corps members placed in traditional settings. They noted that their time in the corps was more pleasant and less challenging than their peers in public school – comments which suggested that TFA’s shift toward placing a third of its recruits in private charter schools may be at odds with its original mission to place its members in the neediest settings. Their reflections may also allude to another factor in creating such receptivity to working not in the mainstream public school system, but in private settings on the fringe of the systems that many recruits may have initially aimed to improve. A small number of alumni worked in public educational settings such as a teachers’ union or public school. The rest worked outside the field of education or were currently pursuing graduate degrees. One-third of our respondents had worked or was working for TFA.

We did hear dissenting views from our respondents. These tended to emanate more from alumni of color who questioned the dominance of managerial approaches to educational reform and the lack of people of color in leadership positions. For example, one alum reflected, “It’s worse than it was when I started TFA. The testing aspect of things just got out of control... [Testing’s] still kind of a specter in the air and people talk about it and I see my kids in college struggling. My kids from KIPP are a little better off but they don’t know how to think... Now kids go to college and they’re like, where are my smart options to answer the question? What do you mean I have to write an essay? Education has turned into multiple choice, minimum expectations, and it makes me nervous.” Recent alumni-led movements are challenging TFA’s participation in market reforms and its role in displacing veteran teachers (See, for example, #resistTFA; #TFA25FactCheck; and the Truth For America project, co-sponsored by the Network for Public Education<sup>7</sup>).

In our interviews, issues of ideology, identity, and power networks intersected. Dissenters were disengaged from the organization. Alumni working in education were immersed in market-oriented networks. This tight network was more dominant, however, with NCLB & RttT era teachers. For the most part, these networks are aligned with neoliberal policy agendas for public education. TFA and its affiliate organizations are central in this reform network of providing career pathways for alumni. In tension is the ambivalence many Americans have over the degree to which race maps onto inequality and the certainty that others hold that racism—and related, intersectional issues such as gender and socioeconomic status, for example—are the fundamental organizing mechanisms in U.S. Society. Many white corps members lack understanding of the historical and structural roots of school district struggles, and despite their talents, intelligence, and energy, are relatively inept in matters of race, preferring to use the language and strategies of the market to explain inequality. Many alumni stand to de-center teachers and community leaders of color in the communities they aim to serve. Popular accounts of TFA alumni locate leadership qualities as innate and overlook the networks and ideological commitments that help to pave the way to school, system, and political leadership and influence. TFA alumni critical of market-oriented reforms do not enjoy the same leadership pathways, though recently TFA has begun to highlight the work of its alumni in traditional public school settings and work to increase corps diversity.

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<sup>7</sup> Vasquez-Heilig (N.D.). <http://cloakinginequity.com/2016/01/16/creative-truth-for-america-video-project/#prettyPhoto>.

## Discussion and Implications for the Next Generation of TFA Research

As the TFA model continues to expand in the U.S. and internationally, we are witnessing heightened political advocacy. For example, in 2012, TFA joined with 31 school reform and advocacy organizations to advocate for the implementation of federal regulatory mechanisms to evaluate and hold teacher education programs accountable for the performance of their graduates. While educational researchers identify the limitations in value-added assessments of teacher performance (See, for example, Rothstein, 2010), TFA and its allies encouraged the U.S. Secretary of Education to move ahead. This represents the kind of policy advocacy undertaken by TFA that researchers need to interrogate. Among the questions this advocacy raises is one fundamentally concerned with the role of an influential private organization shaping public policies from which it stands to directly benefit, despite research evidence indicating that the policies it advocates have negative or limited effects for the populations served by TFA corps.

Through this and related advocacy efforts, such as its support of a Congressional definition of “highly qualified teacher” to include those in alternative preparation programs, TFA communicates to its corps the kind of policy and reform it believes are necessary to close the achievement gap. These examples demonstrate not only the fundamentally political aspects of the organization, but also TFA’s emphasis on market-based interventions that rely on elite policy entrepreneurs to enact its vision in formal policy making.

There are a number of promising research directions to which our proposed conceptual framework leads. The relationship between TFA and similar reform organizations to the state through funding, lobbying, state and local elections, and assessment has as yet, not been fully explored. In addition, researchers could examine more closely the relationship between discursive practices and implicit ideological orientations of TFA, as well as its aspiring, current, and alumni corps members. Our research and framework can also inform theories on race and whiteness in educational policy. When we talk about race, the intersectional experience of whiteness is often under-theorized and under-examined empirically; instead, race is invoked in the context of students or parents of color. In addition, as more alumni become more vocal in questioning the policy directions of TFA, so grows the opportunity to examine TFA’s organizational responses to such critiques. In the case of Teach For All, researchers can explore how different political and economic contexts across countries inform the elements that characterize the resulting alternative teacher preparation programs, and the extent to which such programs receive critique and resistance. Another research area to which our conceptual framework extends includes investigations of official system actors and their reasons for adopting, expanding, or rejecting TFA-like teacher placement models. Finally, researchers can also explore the degree to which the adoption of TFA or Teach For All relates to the related public investments in schooling and the effect on the teaching profession more broadly.

In an era in which nearly four decades of neoliberal social policies and tax policies favoring multi-national corporations and the wealthy have resulted in historic inequalities on nearly every social indicator, Teach For America and Teach For All advocate for entrepreneurial teacher-leaders to utilize their elite backgrounds to educate students out of poverty. It is clear from our review of the literature and observations that there lacks a companion critique of the social policies that in many ways keep students and families in economic stress. For example, the most recent TFA alumni magazine, *One Day*, provides a timeline of the organization’s first 25 years.<sup>8</sup> The timeline begins

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<sup>8</sup> See Kennedy, T. (2016). Teach For America, the First 25 Years: An interactive timeline. *One Day Magazine*. Retrieved on January 31, 2016 from: <https://www.teachforamerica.org/one-day-magazine/first-25-years>.



educational history in 1983—the year that President Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation At Risk*, the report that warned—based on virtually no data analysis—that America’s schools were festering in a “rising tide of mediocrity” and that called for a strict focus on measuring educational outcomes (in place of focusing on government-sponsored financial investments in public schools). Yet TFA’s timeline completely neglected to include any discussion of the educational policies that placed urban and rural students and their families on unequal footing in the first place. In conjunction with our review of the literature, our framework for examining TFA helps to illuminate the ways in which the organization is helping to redefine what the public good is in education, and through which reforms, advocacy activities, and policies it can best be achieved.

This framework also contributes to the broader literature on urban school reform in that it helps to position studies of TFA and similar reform organizations as catalysts for particular forms of civic engagement. It helps scholars operationalize the major tenets of neoliberal ideology as they frame studies of educational organizations amid the contemporary, market-oriented policy context. And it helps re-conceptualize such organizations as gateways to leadership, policy, and advocacy for particular groups. Finally, our framework expands the rapidly growing field of research on Teach For America by focusing on impacts beyond test scores. Instead, our reframing calls attention to questions about how TFA animates policy elites and advances corporate, managerial models for leadership and school reform, as well as how it kindles particular ideological and political values among corps members and alumni who endeavor to become policy entrepreneurs. The advancement of particular visions of educational equity and civic engagement under growing, historically unprecedented economic inequality requires theoretical and empirical work aimed at understanding the complex dynamics of TFA’s influence on public education in the United States, and through its spin off organizations, its increasing influence on global education.

### About the Special Issue

The seven articles that comprise this issue ask important questions about TFA and its place in American public education. The first article, by Scott, Trujillo, and Rivera, reframes TFA as a political and social movement to remake public education, and offers a conceptual framework to examine it as such going forward. The second article, by Blumenreich and Rogers, employs oral histories to understand the persistence of TFA’s notion that it recruits “the best and the brightest” as a construct driving corps members’ approach to teaching and school reform. The third article, by Barnes, Valenzuela, and Germain, employs critical race theory and juxtaposes Wendy Kopp’s philosophy with current TFA approaches to culturally relevant pedagogy. In the fourth article Brewer, Kretchmar, Sondel, Ishmael and Manfra examine TFA’s contracts with school districts. They find that despite TFA’s claims that it does not seek preferential treatment for corps members in personnel matters, many contracts stipulate such treatment. The next article, by White, examines the paradoxical relationship between TFA placement of teachers in urban school districts and the decline of veteran teachers of color. The following piece, by Mungal, documents the reach of TFA into other educational reform organizations, such as the Relay Graduate School of Education. The final article, by Jacobsen, White, and Reckhow, examines the political activity of TFA alumni as they enter into electoral and other political domains.

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## About the Authors

### **Janelle Scott** (Guest Co-Editor of this Issue)

University of California, Berkeley

[jtscott@berkeley.edu](mailto:jtscott@berkeley.edu)

Janelle Scott is a Chancellor's Associate Professor at the University of California, Berkeley, in the Graduate School of Education, Goldman School of Public Policy, and African American Studies Department. She earned a Ph.D. in Education Policy from the University of California at Los Angeles' Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of California at Berkeley. Before earning her doctorate, she worked as an elementary school teacher in Oakland, California. Scott's research investigates the politics of elite and community based advocacy, the politics of research utilization, and how market-based educational reforms such as school choice and privatization affect democratic accountability and equity within schools and school districts. She is currently working on a William T. Grant funded study of the politics of research utilization and intermediary organizations in Los Angeles and New York City with Christopher Lubienski and Elizabeth DeBray.

### **Tina Trujillo** (Guest Co-Editor of this Issue)

University of California, Berkeley

[trujillo@berkeley.edu](mailto:trujillo@berkeley.edu)

Tina Trujillo is an Associate Professor at the University of California, Berkeley in the Graduate School of Education, and the Faculty Director of UC Berkeley's Principal Leadership Institute. She earned her Ph.D. in Education from UCLA and her M.A. in Education from the University of Colorado, Boulder. She is a former urban public school teacher, school reform consultant, and educational evaluator. She uses tools from political science and critical policy studies to study the political dimensions of urban educational reform, the instructional and democratic consequences of high-stakes testing and accountability policies for students of color and English Learners, and trends in urban educational leadership. Her work is published in a range of journals, including *American Educational Research Journal*, *Teachers College Record*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, and *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

### **Marialena D. Rivera**

University of California, Berkeley

[marialena@berkeley.edu](mailto:marialena@berkeley.edu)

Marialena D. Rivera is a doctoral candidate at the University of California Berkeley's Graduate School of Education in the Policy, Organization, Measurement and Evaluation program, and a 2016 Intercultural Development Research Association, José A. Cárdenas School Finance Fellow. Her research focuses on the politics of education policy, privatization, and school finance. Her dissertation research explores school district debt financing and the politics of privatization.

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