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## Moments or a Movement? Teacher Resistance to Neoliberal Education Reform

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**ABSTRACT** Public school teachers in the USA are working in an era of intense interference from neoliberal reform policies. Corporate-driven forces are working to dismantle unions, narrow curricula, replace neighborhood schools with charter schools, tie student test scores to teacher evaluations and replace university-prepared career teachers with 'elites' from Teach for America who have five weeks of teacher training and a two-year commitment to teach in 'high need' schools. Nevertheless, teachers across the USA are engaging in social action to combat neoliberal reforms. This article examines instances of teacher action and asks: are these *moments* of teacher resistance or the beginning of a *movement* of teacher resistance to neoliberal school reform?

'Mr Horn, could you please come see me in my office?'

Momentarily transported back in time to my own middle school years, I bravely answered, 'Sure, Mrs Thomas.[1] I'll be down in a minute.'

This was the first time Mrs Thomas, my principal, had called me to her office, but as I nervously weaved my way through the noisy halls of Pioneer Middle School and down the stairs, I was pretty sure why I had been summoned and only wondered why it had taken so long.

About a week before, I had been formally observed by one of my assistant principals, Mrs Vaughn. All teachers at Pioneer were observed regularly by administration, and for language arts and math teachers, observations were in place to closely monitor our compliance with the prescribed America's Choice curricula (America's Choice, n.d.). Two years earlier, Pioneer had failed to make annual yearly progress (AYP) for five consecutive years, and in accordance with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy, and because it was a Title I school, Pioneer had been restructured. Through the restructuring process, a completely new administrative team had been brought in, 65% of the teaching staff was

replaced, and, at a cost of over \$1 million, America's Choice was contracted to provide the language arts and math curricula. The language arts curriculum turned out to be very prescriptive in terms of predesigned units of study, and called for an adherence to the 'workshop model' (America's Choice, n.d.).

Like many teachers in high-poverty schools, I was experiencing a 'narrowing of curriculum' (Crocco & Costigan, 2007) with intense oversight. Mrs Vaughn had observed the first 30 minutes of one of my classes as the students worked with idioms found within canonical poetry and contemporary hip-hop. To Mrs Vaughn and anyone familiar with America's Choice, I was clearly not following the mandated units. As I approached the door to the Principal's office, which in my childhood memories had always represented a portal to some indeterminate doom, I thought this was surely the moment when my 'insubordination' was going to catch up with me and result in an official admonishment. I imagined having to defend the 'radical' content of my teaching, which generally consisted of co-constructing student-led critical inquiry units (Lewison et al., 2008; Wilhelm, 2007).

As I slipped into an uncomfortable chair facing her desk, Mrs Thomas immediately asked me about my knowledge of the 'workshop model' and then told me that Mrs Vaughn had noted that the opening of my lesson was five minutes too long, which, judging by Mrs Thomas's demeanor, was a serious infraction. Perhaps sensing that I did not find it so, Mrs Thomas asked, 'Do you have fidelity to the program? To America's Choice?'

Dumbfounded, I shifted in my seat and stumbled through several variations of 'I will be more mindful of the time', making sure that, while still not affirming fidelity to America's Choice, I didn't say anything that might warrant more observations or oversight. In short, I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible so I could get back to doing exactly what I had been doing. Mrs Thomas listened to my muddled answer and didn't press further.

After returning to my classroom, I began to think more about who gets to decide what is taught in schools, and how teachers come to resist policies that commodify students and deprofessionalize teachers. At the same time that America's Choice was constricting learning at Pioneer and stifling my teaching, other policies were threatening the work of teachers across the USA. And just as I was attempting to mitigate the impact on my students of America's Choice, teachers all over the country were coming together to resist neoliberal education reform.

### **Neoliberal School Reform**

Although public schools in the USA had been experiencing movement towards neoliberal reform efforts over the past few decades, the election of President Obama in 2008 and the subsequent appointment of Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education signaled an intention to accelerate a neoliberal agenda at the federal level (Lipman, 2011). Duncan, the former CEO of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), had previously led the nation's third-largest municipal school

district in expanding publicly funded but privately run charter schools, had contracted for-profit ‘turnaround’ organizations similar to America’s Choice to take over ‘failing’ schools, and had pushed to base merit pay for teachers based on students’ standardized test scores. Now with Duncan at the helm of the US Department of Education, the Obama administration looked to aggressively encourage similar reforms at the federal, state and local levels.

In order to make this happen, the Obama administration, on the heels of the ‘Great Recession’, offered financially vulnerable states the opportunity to compete with other financially vulnerable states for \$4.35 billion of federal stimulus money to ‘reform’ their school systems (Lipman, 2011). This new policy, known as the ‘Race to the Top’, privileged states that adopted neoliberal reforms similar to those implemented in the CPS. Like never before, there was a concerted top-down effort to marketize publicly funded schools by making public dollars available to private industry and investors. In a time when austerity measures at the state level were shrinking school systems’ budgets, states were now being forced into competition with one another for money to keep them out of the red. All they had to do was transfer curricular power from teachers and local school boards to CEOs and executive boardrooms (Compton & Weiner, 2008).

In 2014, the grip of this neoliberal school reform on teachers is tightening. Teachers in every state find themselves teaching to for-profit standardized tests, teachers in 45 states must now adhere to new corporate-initiated Common Core State Standards, and teachers in more and more states are having their rights challenged or altered (Milburn, 2014). But teachers everywhere, every day are rebelling. In this article, I examine four recent moments of teacher resistance and ask the question: are these *moments* of teacher resistance or a *movement* of teacher resistance?

### **Chicago Teachers Union Strike**

As previously stated, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the third largest public school district in the USA. CPS is home to more than 600 schools, 400,000 students and 23,000 teachers. During the summer of 2011, Illinois Governor Pat Quinn signed into law legislation that made it harder for teachers’ unions in the state of Illinois to strike. The change in law now prohibited the unions from officially striking over anything except pay and benefits, a technicality that districts could exploit in order to characterize the teachers’ unions as greedy in the court of public opinion.

Despite this law, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) voted overwhelmingly to strike shortly after the start of the 2012 school year. Predictably, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, CPS CEO Jean-Claude Brizard, and most corporate media outlets focused on the CTU’s demand for a salary increase despite the city’s troubling financial situation. Garnering far less attention was the CTU’s call for giving parents a greater voice on an elected CPS school board, making textbooks available for all students on the first day

of school, turning fewer schools into charter schools, and increasing the number of art, music and physical education teachers, among other demands (Cunningham-Cook, 2012).

Figures 1 and 2 present a general timeline of the major events that precipitated the CTU strike, and the outcomes of the strike.

Gov. Quinn signs law making it harder for teachers' unions to strike (June 2011)
CPS Board of Education (BOE) rescinds 4% annual pay raise (June 2011)
CPS/CTU Negotiations begin (1 November 2011)
Mediations begin (1 February 2012)
90% of CTU members vote to strike (11 June 2012)
Labor agreement expires (30 June 2012)
Partial agreement reached (24 July 2012)
100,000+ Track E <sup>a</sup> students return (13 August 2012)
250,000+ Track R <sup>b</sup> students return (4 September 2012)
CTU rejects CPS offer (5 September 2012)
CTU strikes (10 September 2012)
CTU ends strike (18 September 2012)
Classes resume (19 September 2012)

<sup>a</sup>Track E schools start their school year earlier, finish later and have more breaks built into their yearly schedule.

<sup>b</sup>Track R schools follow a more typical school calendar.

Figure 1. CTU strike timeline.

Over 600 additional music, art, PE and other teachers hired
Limits on class size maintained
Textbooks made available on first day of school
Parent voice increased on class-size committees
Racial diversity increased in hiring at CPS
Emphasis on standardized test scores decreased (30% of teacher evaluation instead of 45%)
Funding increased for special education teachers, psychologists, social workers, nurses, classroom assistants and counselors
Longer school day implemented
17.6% increase in teacher salary over 4 years implemented (CTU sought 30%)

Figure 2. CTU strike outcomes.

Despite the lack of corporate media and legislative support, the CTU, its allies and 66% of parents of CPS students deemed the strike a success. Education historian Diane Ravitch stated that the strike was the first time in the USA when 'teachers have stood up to DFER [Democrats for Education Reform], Stand for Children [and] other anti-union, pro-privatization, anti-teacher groups' (as cited in Cunningham-Cook, 2012). The CTU attributed much of its

success to a shift from *service model unionism* to *social-organizing unionism* (Noonan et al, 2014). This shift encompassed greater community outreach that involved building coalitions with non-profit community-based organizations, as well as being more inclusive of rank-and-file educators. In the wake of the 2012 strike, the CTU has traveled to facilitate town hall meetings with parents and union leaders in major US cities such as Philadelphia, Cleveland, San Francisco, New Orleans and Pittsburgh (Layton, 2012).

### **Teachers Boycotting Tests from Seattle to Chicago**

A centerpiece of the CTU strike concerned the misuse of student test scores in teacher evaluations. While each state administers its own annual standardized tests to students at various grades in various content areas, many school districts choose to purchase additional tests from the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). Like an increasing number of districts across the USA, the Seattle Public Schools (SPS) purchased Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) math and reading tests from NWEA and began administering them to their students three times a year. Data from the tests would be used to assess student learning and teacher effectiveness.

However, on 21 December 2012, teachers at Garfield High School in Seattle voted unanimously to boycott the administration of the MAP tests to their students. In an open letter penned by the collective faculty, the teachers cited nine reasons why they were refusing to subject their students to the tests, including concerns regarding test validity, decreased instructional time, a conflict of interest as the former SPS superintendent was now on the board of NWEA, and the high cost of the tests. In terms of monetary costs, the SPS, a district serving about 47,000 students, had spent \$4 million on the initial contract with NWEA to administer the MAP tests (Scrap the MAP!, n.d.). The high cost of the MAP tests is a concern in other school districts as well. For example, in Michigan, the Ann Arbor Public Schools, a district serving about 17,000 students, spent over \$96,000 for the tests during the 2011-2012 school year, about \$77,000 during the 2012-2013 school year, and approximately \$94,000 for the 2013-2014 school year (Ann Arbor Schools Musings, 2013).

Garfield High teacher Jerry Neufeld-Kaiser stated, 'My personal goal with the MAP test refusal isn't to start a revolution in education. But if we simply substitute another deeply flawed test, we have failed completely. Because the real point of the refusal is to point out that these tests are not ready to use for high-stakes purposes' (as cited in Guisbond, 2013). Millions of public dollars are funneled annually to NWEA to provide these kinds of invalid assessments of student learning and teacher effectiveness. While Mr Neufeld-Kaiser doesn't intend to start a revolution, a National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing has been signed by over 475 organizations and 14,000 individuals challenging the corporate testing juggernaut that does more to serve companies than it does to serve teachers and students (Guisbond, 2013).

In February 2014, teachers at Chicago's Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy and Thomas Drummond Elementary School voted unanimously to boycott the administration of the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). Unlike the MAP tests, the ISAT, along with the other annual state tests across the USA, is required by school districts in part because data from the tests are used to measure compliance with NCLB and Race to the Top policies. In response to the planned boycott by Saucedo teachers, CPS CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett threatened any teachers and administrators who refused to give the ISAT with repercussions. However, Byrd-Bennett did clarify that parents could opt their children out of ISAT testing (Riley, 2014). In March, when CPS students sat the ISAT, a reported majority of Saucedo teachers carried through with the boycott and refused to administer the tests (Riley, 2014).

The ChiIL Mama blog (2014) reported that 2500 parents from 69 CPS schools opted their children out of the ISAT tests in 2014. The teachers at Garfield, Saucedo and Drummond are connecting with parent and community organizations such as More Than a Score, Ice the ISAT and other opt-out groups and leaders to build a coalition of teachers, parents, students and community members to raise awareness of the harmful effects of high-stakes testing.

### **#ResistTFA**

In 1989 Wendy Kopp founded Teach For America (TFA) as a non-profit organization with the stated mission of 'eliminat[ing] educational inequity by enlisting high-achieving recent college graduates and professionals to teach'. Citing a national teacher shortage in schools serving large numbers of students living in poverty, TFA became an alternative route for teachers, through which graduates of 'elite' universities with no teacher education program could become full-time classroom teachers in 'high need' schools upon completion of a six-week summer course after college graduation.

TFA attracted college graduates eager to 'give back', to experience a new city for a couple of years and/or to pad their application to graduate school. Developing career teachers was never an intention of TFA. School districts combating high teacher turnover rates and long-term substitutes teaching in place of full-time teachers were eager to partner with an organization that would supply them with a steady flow of teachers, even ones without certification and little training. TFA claimed not only that its recruitment and development of 'elite' students from 'elite' universities would go beyond simply easing a teacher shortage in hard-to-staff schools, but also that its teachers and the training they received were superior to those coming from traditional university-based teacher education programs.

Despite research that challenged the TFA claim that its teachers outperform traditionally trained teachers (e.g. Darling-Hammond et al, 2005; Kane et al, 2008), TFA steadily grew from placing 500 teachers during its first year, to receiving 48,000 applications and placing 5800 teachers in 2012.

Garfield High teacher Jerry Neufeld-Kaiser might not be interested in starting a revolution, but TFA is. Its website reads, 'Teach For America corps members and alumni are helping lead an educational revolution in low-income communities across the country.' This is no doubt the case, considering its ties to corporate and neoliberal entities.

TFA's assets exceed \$350 million, and it receives multimillion-dollar donations from the likes of Goldman Sachs, Wells Fargo, the Walton Family Foundation (Wal-Mart), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Eli Broad Foundation. Its strong corporate connections and its intention to challenge the educational status quo make TFA a powerful force for neoliberal reform. Wendy Kopp is married to Richard Barth, who is the CEO of the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), which is the largest network of charter schools in the USA (Sommer, 2014).

Just as TFA has created an alternative to university-based teacher preparation programs, so charter schools have created an alternative to traditional public schools. It is no surprise, then, that a great many TFA corps members are placed in charter schools, which typically are not unionized, and that many TFA alumni go on to run charter schools across the country. While the original intent of TFA was ostensibly to staff hard-to-fill positions in traditional public schools, in more recent years TFA has become a de facto placement agency for urban charter schools (EduShyster, 2013). A recent example of the TFA/charter alliance comes from Chicago. Right before the start of the 2013-2014 school year, CPS announced it would close 49 unionized, traditional, neighborhood public schools and lay off 850 teachers and staff, claiming the schools were 'underutilized'. CPS then proceeded to hire 350 TFA corps members to fill the void. Earlier that year, the Chicago TFA office held a Board of Directors meeting in which it projected 52 new charter schools opening in the next five years. TFA Chicago's executive director, Josh Anderson, happens to be married to a graduate of TFA who happens to be the chief of staff for the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), which works closely with CPS's application process for opening new charters in the city (EduShyster, 2013).

As TFA continues to evolve into a union-busting teacher training organization for corporate charter schools, a new and increasingly vocal clamor of criticism is starting to be heard. At the Free Minds/Free People education conference in Chicago in July 2013, a group of TFA alumni and corps members created a summit called 'Organizing Resistance Against Teach for America and its Role in Privatization' with the expressed mission of challenging TFA's centrality in the corporate-backed, market-driven, testing-oriented movement in urban education (Cersonsky, 2013). Additionally, during 2013, former TFA corps members took to social media and the Internet to share their critical perspective of the organization (Katie Osgood, 2013; Gary Rubinstein, 2013; Matt Barnum, 2013; Catherine Michna, 2013).

Grassroots organizing, coupled with policy decisions at the local and state levels, is starting to chip away at TFA's influence. In May 2013, Minnesota

governor Mark Dayton vetoed \$1.5 million in funding for TFA. A few weeks later, the state's Board of Teaching voted to deny TFA a group-based licensing variance, thus creating an extra hurdle for corps members to jump before they could teach in the state of Minnesota (Cersonsky, 2013). And in December 2013, a newly elected school board in Pittsburgh, PA voted to cancel the district's new contract with TFA. This anti-TFA momentum has continued to gain speed in 2014 with the creation of Students Resisting Teach For America. On 17 February 2014, #ResistTFA trended on Twitter as TFA recruits shared their stories through the social media giant as to why they will personally resist TFA. The #ResistTFA Twitter event was so successful that at one point during the evening it had even generated more Tweets than #Olympics (Strauss, 2014).

### **The Future of Teacher Resistance is Now**

The opening up of public schools to private markets is becoming more threatening to democratic education each year. In post-Katrina New Orleans, 7500 school staff were laid off, a majority of public schools were converted to charters, and between 2005 and 2010, the proportion of black teachers went from 73% to 56%. Meanwhile, TFA has expanded in New Orleans from 85 corps members in 2008 to 375 in 2013 (Cersonsky, 2013). Venture capital investments in the K-12 education sector hit \$389 million in 2011, up from 'just' \$13 million in 2005 (Simon, 2012). Pearson, the world's largest education company and book publisher, earns more than \$9 billion annually, largely from producing tests and test-related materials (Figueroa, 2013). Pearson's profits soar every time districts set new standards and inevitably purchase new tests and new textbooks.

The neoliberal reforms indeed weigh heavily on teachers. Nevertheless, the following lessons can be learned from the aforementioned instances of teacher resistance. (1) In Chicago, the CTU opted to develop *social-organizing unionism* practices, which included community voices as well as the voices of the membership. (2) Teachers in Seattle and Chicago banded together to speak out against high-stakes testing in solidarity with students and parents who were opting out. (3) Former TFA corps members and TFA critics have taken to the Internet and social media to challenge TFA and the proliferation of de-unionized charter schools. In order to transform these *moments* into a *movement*, teachers across the USA need to find new and engaging ways to build coalitions with one another and with concerned stakeholders starting at the grassroots level. There is much work to do, and I am hopeful.

### **Notes**

- [1] The names of all places and people are pseudonyms.

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