

Title: Teaching for America Across Two Hemispheres: Comparing the Ideological Appeal of the Teach For All Teacher Education Model in the United States and Brazil

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Abstract: The last several decades have seen significant growth among private options in alternative teacher education and certification. In this article, I draw on two parallel ethnographic studies of the experiences of participants in variants of one particular alternative teacher education model, developed by Teach For America in the United States and spread internationally by Teach For All. Through analysis of interviews with recruits from Teach For America and its Brazilian sister organization *Ensina!*, I explore the thinking processes that lead young people to join these organizations, as well as how that thinking changes after two years of teaching in the classroom. I find that while participants join because they admire the Teach For All teacher education model, many leave their two-year commitment questioning the underlying theories of change driving it.

Teach For America (hereafter called TFA) and a Rio de Janeiro-based organization known as *Ensina!*¹ are both alternative teacher education organizations that began recruiting teacher candidates with purposefully similar pitches. Wendy Kopp, the founder of TFA, came up with the idea for the organization in her senior thesis at Princeton University (Kopp, 1989). When describing her thinking about teacher recruitment at the time, she has said, “I thought, you know, why aren’t we [Ivy League graduates] being recruited as aggressively to teach in low-income communities as were being recruited at the time to work on Wall Street?” (Kopp, 2012) While such recruits wouldn’t necessarily have the training of an undergraduate degree in education, Kopp (2007) has argued that this can be overcome through the recruitment of hard-working, competitive candidates whose relative inexperience also comes with optimistic

¹ While this first iteration of *Ensina!* closed down, a similarly structured organization, also supported by the international support organization Teach For All, is currently operating in other areas of Brazil under the name *Ensina Brasil*.

idealism: “The world needs your inexperience. It needs you before you accept the status quo, before you are plagued by the knowledge of what is impossible.”

Maira Pimentel, the first Executive Director of *Ensina!*, has articulated a very similar recruitment strategy for that organization. At a launch event for *Ensina!* with other social entrepreneurs and funders in Rio de Janeiro, Pimentel said the organization “plans to recruit the best young people from the best universities in Brazil, starting in Rio de Janeiro, to spend two years living an incredible experience teaching in public schools, schools here in Rio in dangerous areas, schools that are hard to get to, where students are not performing well according to global metrics” (Pimentel, 2010). At a TEDx talk several years later after *Ensina!* had begun functioning, Pimentel (2012) described *Ensina!* as focused on “identifying young people who I think are like many of us here in this room, with lots of desire, who really want to learn new things, who are very optimistic, who want to make a difference....with a sense of possibility and high expectations.”

A number of clear parallels can be seen in these recruitment strategies—in both organizations, the focus is on bringing young, professionally-minded, high-achieving, ambitious recent college graduates into low-performing public school classrooms as short-term teachers² (though Lora Cohen-Vogel and Thomas M. Smith [2007] have compellingly disputed whether this recruitment focus really does significantly change the pool). This recruitment focus, and the fact that this focus fits the way many recruits see themselves, has been noted in previous studies of TFA (Gottfried & Straubhaar, 2015; Straubhaar & Gottfried, 2016). However, no similar work on recruitment has been done in the many international sister programs of TFA affiliated with Teach For All, a nonprofit founded in 2007 by Wendy Kopp to support the spread of the

² Teach For All affiliates typically ask their recruits for a commitment of two years of full-time teaching.

underlying principles of the TFA program throughout the world. Teach For All spreads the TFA model through similarly structured, locally-led nonprofits in other countries, of which there are now 48 around the globe (Teach For All, 2018). Are these organizations, like *Ensina!*, also successfully recruiting the type of candidate described by Pimentel above? Why are recruits joining these types of organizations?

Another important question that has remained largely unanswered is how the attitudes of these teacher recruits towards their programs, and towards alternative forms of teacher education more generally, change as a result of their experience teaching and going through the teacher education programs of TFA, *Ensina!*, or other similar Teach For All affiliates. Recent years have also shown the growth of a small literature focusing on critical voices among TFA teachers and alumni. In particular, Brewer and deMarrais (2015) have collected intimate personal essays written by TFA alumni who have come to disagree with and in some cases oppose many of the underlying tenets of the program, and Matsui (2015) has ethnographically documented the psychological and emotional strains experienced by TFA teachers in the Philadelphia region. However, scholars have not yet explored the process of how the idealistic recruits entering these programs might reach the critical vantage point these studies capture so vividly. How, and why, do many of these once-idealistic candidates change their mind?

These are the two questions which orient this article, drawing on comparative ethnographies of TFA in Los Angeles and *Ensina!* in Rio de Janeiro: Why do potential recruits choose to join these alternative teacher education programs, and how does the thinking that informs that choice change over the course of a candidate's two-year commitment in the classroom? To answer this question, I will first provide some brief historical context for the development of both TFA and *Ensina!* as organizations, situating both in a theoretical construct I

call the *currently dominant educational project*. I will also describe the purposefully parallel methodological approach to these two studies, and then answer each research question in turn, drawing on interview data with teachers from both programs.

Historical Context

Teach For America

The following brief review of the historical and political context in which TFA has operated over the last several decades is provided so as to facilitate understanding of the context in which the TFA recruits in the first of these two comparative studies, to be introduced shortly, chose to join TFA.

In the United States, the founding and growth of TFA represents part of a broader arc in which teacher education policy, and education policy generally, has been influenced by market principles and the influence of the private sector over the last 30 years (Burch, 2009; Lipman, 2013). Ever since the introduction of a discourse of American under-performance during the Reagan administration, most prominently visible in the publication of the report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence and Education, 1983), an education reform movement supporting school choice (Henig, 1995), private supervision of public education through charter schools (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002), private curriculum development (Apple, 2000), accountability-heavy education management systems (Au, 2007; Valli & Buese, 2007), and most pertinent to this article, private and for-profit teacher education (Weiner, 2011), has continued to gain prominence in U.S. education policy circles (Ellison, 2012).

TFA as an organization had its beginnings in the early 1990s, when this larger trend towards private sector solutions in education was complemented by teacher shortages in both urban and rural settings which made alternative teacher recruitment methods like TFA's

especially appealing to districts who were having trouble staffing their schools (Kopp, 2012; Macdonald, 1999). While that teacher shortage helped facilitate TFA's initial spread in the 1990s, the organization continued to grow in both the size of its corps and its larger policy influence even after the teacher shortage dissipated (Goldstein, 2015; Labaree, 2010). While recruitment numbers to TFA have dropped off in recent years, TFA alumni continue to hold prominent policy positions and hold an outsized policy influence (Trujillo, Scott, & Rivera, 2017).

In part, TFA's growth could be explained by the increasingly prominent role of a number of private foundations which have chosen to promote teacher education policies and organizations built on market principles, such as the Gates, Broad, and Walton foundations (Scott, Lubienski, & DeBray-Pelot, 2009). TFA has received substantial financial support from these and other similar foundations, with particular growth in funding in the late 2000s (Reckhow & Snyder, 2014).

Certain policy shifts have also facilitated the spread of TFA. For example, in part due to lobbying by TFA as an organization (Russo, 2012), the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 codified alternatively certified teachers (such as those who join TFA) as "highly qualified," meeting federal criteria to teach in public schools. The high-stakes accountability policies of the No Child Left Behind Act also made possible the rapid expansion of charter schools, as low-performing schools classified as in need of restructuring were often handed off to charter management organizations (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). Given the propensity for TFA alumni to work in charter school settings, and the high number of TFA teachers placed in charter schools (Sondel, 2015), the expansion of charter schools in the 2000s also allowed for the expansion of TFA, particularly in charter-dense urban settings—which then became a reinforcing cycle, as

TFA alumni also contribute significantly to the growth of charters (Kretchmar, Sondel & Ferrare, 2014).

Lastly, over the last several decades a number of reform-minded educational administrators in large U.S. cities have gained national prominence for promoting a “no excuses” platform focused on results, with the pragmatic inclusion of the private sector through charter school and curriculum development seen as means to this end—Joel Klein presented himself as such a figure in New York City during Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s tenure, as did Michelle Rhee as chancellor of schools in Washington DC, among others (Klein & Rhee et al, 2010). Notably, these figures (Rhee also being a TFA alumna) also gave significant support to the expansion of TFA in their districts during their tenure (Klein, 2011; Rhee, 2013).

Ensina!

While the organizational history of *Ensina!* is much shorter (it began to be organized in 2009, brought in its first cohort of teachers in 2011, and suspended operations at the end of 2012), the policy history of Brazilian education over the last several decades is remarkably similar to that just outlined in the United States.

Former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso is the politician most strongly associated with bringing the private sector into public policy in Brazil (Mollo & Saad-Filho, 2006), whether in education or otherwise, primarily through the privatization of sectors and industries traditionally controlled by the Brazilian state. However, while public education has largely not been privatized in Brazil, Cardoso also designed a number of educational policies (such as performance pay for teachers) based on the notion that the public sector is best governed by market principles (Evangelista & Leher, 2012).

Other market-oriented policies that have taken hold in Brazilian public education over the last several decades include the encouragement of market-like competition between schools and school-level accountability based on standardized tests (Afonso, 2009), both of which were encouraged at a national level throughout the 2000s. In 2005, under Lula's education minister Fernando Haddad, the Brazilian Ministry of Education developed a national standardized test measuring student proficiency on basic competencies, referred to colloquially as the *Prova Brasil*. That same year, the Ministry developed the Basic Education Development Index (or IDEB), a metric used to measure school-level progress for public schools throughout the country based on results of the *Prova Brasil* and grade-level passing rates. This began to be used as a high stakes accountability measure to encourage improvement in low-performing schools, despite many municipalities expressing concerns that the IDEB at best provides a simplistic look at educational quality (Franklin, 2011).

In 2006, a number of prominent politicians, management companies, banks, industrial groups and members of Brazilian civil society, including Haddad, founded the think tank *Todos Pela Educação* (“Everyone for Education”), an advocacy group calling for further implementation of accountability-based reforms, many of which were modeled after the United States' No Child Left Behind Act (Martins, 2009). Scholars have criticized *Todos Pela Educação* for its direct ties to corporate industry, and questioned the fact that calls for accountability-based reform in Brazil have consistently been supported by capitalist interests (for example, see Leme, 2011). Interestingly, a number of prominent Brazilian education policymakers have been affiliated with *Todos Pela Educação*, and a number of business and management professionals have begun their careers in education through the organization. This includes the last two national-level Secretaries of Basic Education and, most pertinent to the present case, the

influential reformist Secretary of Education for Rio de Janeiro from 2009 to 2014, Claudia Costin (Evangelista & Leher, 2012). It was Costin's administration that welcomed the implementation of a Teach For All affiliate in Rio de Janeiro public schools, and it was during her tenure that *Ensina!* began placing teachers—despite the fact that no codified form of alternative certification yet exists in Brazilian law, and therefore *Ensina!* teachers did not possess the traditional credentials required to teach in Brazilian public schools.

Creating the Market-Oriented Educational Project

I highlight these histories, and in particular the role of certain organizations and individuals within these histories, because scholars have begun to note the role played by networks of reformers like Klein, Rhee and Costin in promoting and spreading particular ideas regarding what teacher education reform “should” look like (Ball, 2012; Scott, 2008). As market-based reforms have formed the basis of a great deal of global social policy (including educational policy) over the last several decades (Ball, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009), a generation or more of policymakers have now grown up and become professionals in policy environments in which a market-based approach to social policy has simply become generally accepted common sense (see popular opinion pieces like Colyandro & Withers, 2016). That is, in such an environment (like Rio de Janeiro and Los Angeles in the last several years, during the time periods of the two studies included in this article), most policymakers have come to share a common notion of “good” education reform, and organizations (like TFA and *Ensina!*) that promote those notions are thus able to effectively market themselves as solutions to educational inequality (Anderson, 2013).

The Market-Oriented Currently Dominant Educational Project

Elsewhere (Straubhaar, 2014) I have created a theoretical construct that accounts for the spread of market-based reform models like that created in TFA and franchised through Teach For All, which I call the *currently dominant educational project*. This construct draws upon Lesley Barlett's (2003, 2010) notion of *educational projects*, which she defines as “durable (but not permanent) constellations of institutions, financial resources, social actors, ideologies, discourses, pedagogies, and theories of knowledge and learning that shape the way people think about schooling and its purpose” (2010, p. 52). My construct of the *currently dominant educational project* expands this model in two primary directions: a heavier emphasis on the role of power in the spread of particular educational projects, and a recognition of such projects' temporal dimension.

First, I argue that the role of power plays a significant role in the development and spread of commonly accepted educational ideas, policies and best practices. Particular individuals and institutions (like the World Bank or the US Department of Education) have an outsized impact on what is considered “good” educational practice that is worthy of replication. Indeed, these actors are primarily responsible for both the initial development of the ideas behind an *educational project* and the spread of those ideas through the exercise of their power and influence. These *educational projects* are then reflected in the opinions of “good” educational practice that are held by administrators, teachers and organizational leaders in particular, localized spaces. As some *educational projects* enjoy the support of powerful institutions and actors and others don't, I differentiate those that are spread in this manner by referring to them as *dominant educational projects*.

Second, as accepted notions of “best practice”—as well as the institutions that support such notions—change over time, with today's “bad practices” being yesterday's “best practices”

(Anderson-Levitt, 2012), I have added a temporal dimension to this construct. The *currently dominant educational project* represents the model supported by currently dominant global educational institutions, actors and financial resources. Generally speaking, in today's global educational climate the supporters of the *currently dominant educational project* include, in the United States, the federal Department of Education, certain foundations (like those mentioned above), the administrations of prominent urban school systems like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, and organizations like TFA. In Brazil, the primary network of supporters of this project are affiliated in some way with the aforementioned *Todas Pela Educação*, including public officials like Claudia Costin and the founders of *Ensina!*.

I will here argue that the *currently dominant educational project* in the United States and Brazil is a market-oriented project in which the *status quo* consists of business-derived accountability policies focused on improvement of the “bottom line,” which in most cases today is defined as standardized test scores. This project is supported in both the United States and Brazil by educational administrators who often have backgrounds in business and finance rather than education, as was the case in Rio de Janeiro at the time I conducted research there (Claudia Costin’s background is in public administration and economics).

Of the various facets that make up the *currently dominant educational project* (institutions, financial resources, ideologies, and so forth), my focus in these two comparative ethnographic studies was on ideology. More specifically, I focus on the ideological discourses undergirding Teach For All as a global phenomenon. In these studies, one such discourse is manifest in the way TFA and *Ensina!* recruits talk about their decision to join, which reflects how they think about teacher education and the teaching profession more generally. I refer to this way of thinking about teacher education (and schooling as a whole) as *market logic*: that is, the

presumption that private industry is inherently more effective, efficient and innovative in the provision of educational services and ideas than the public sector, due to the competition that is assumed to be inherent to the free market. Innovation and efficiency are commonly associated with the free market and the private sector, but this theorization of market logic goes beyond association—it is more akin to what is referred to as “common sense,” or the instinctive assumptions one relies on in everyday decision-making. To an individual or group of individuals whose ideological worldview is based in market logic, the idea that private is superior to public is an instinctual truism that is seen as accurately and reliably applying to any program or policy. As I will show hereafter, subscription to market logic was a primary reason that recruits in these studies joined TFA and *Ensina!*, though their experiences within these respective programs would lead many to begin to question that same logic over the course of their two-year commitment.

Setting and Methods

Though this article draws from two different studies, namely an ethnographic study of TFA teachers in Los Angeles and an analogous ethnographic study of *Ensina!* teachers in Rio, the data sets drawn upon were purposefully structured to be parallel, as are the methods used for data collection and analysis.

Setting and Population

Los Angeles. Los Angeles was chosen in part because as a large, urban area, it is the type of setting where the majority of TFA teachers teach. TFA’s Los Angeles program is one of its oldest and most well-established, having had a placement office since TFA began. Los Angeles is also one of TFA’s largest placement regions, with around 300 new teachers arriving each year and around 1500 alumni in the region (Teach For America, 2013a)—this size provided this

project with a significant pool of potential interviewees, who represented a wide diversity of personal backgrounds and classroom experiences.

Rio de Janeiro. Unlike TFA in Los Angeles, *Ensina!* at the time of data collection was a pilot program involving only one cohort of 32 teachers, intended to provide baseline data to potentially support the extension of a Teach For All-affiliated program throughout Brazil. While Teach For All already had several dozen affiliates at the time *Ensina!* was founded, including in sites such as Chile, where the privatization of public schools is arguably more parallel to the U.S. experience (Parry, 1997), *Ensina!* was largely chosen due to professional connections I had to several people affiliated with *Ensina!*, as well as over four years of experience working within and conducting research in Brazil (particularly on the Brazilian education system).

Ensina!'s teachers were primarily recruited from universities in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brazil's largest and most influential cities, and all 32 teachers were placed in Rio de Janeiro's municipal public schools (governed at the time by Claudia Costin's administration). Many recruits had heard of TFA from its occasional mentions in the elite national media³, but this was the first time its model had ever been operationalized in a Brazilian context. While that first cohort finished their two-year commitment to public school classrooms (the typical commitment for TFA and other Teach For All affiliates), for various reasons the organization shut down operations and did not bring in any further cohorts.

Recruitment

In both Rio and Los Angeles, my professional and social networks were the primary means used to find participants. As a Research Associate at _____ University, which is

³ Prior to the founding of *Ensina!*, Teach For America had been highlighted in *Folha de São Paulo* (2007), one of the country's most prominent newspapers, and *Veja* (2008), the nation's premiere news magazine.

the Los Angeles region of TFA's partner school where their teachers receive their licensure coursework, I recruited all of the participants for the first study from that program. In Rio de Janeiro, I had initial contacts with several former teachers from *Ensina!* due to my own social ties through the TFA alumni network, as a former TFA participant myself. After reaching out to and interviewing those participants, I then expanded my population through their social networks, both in person and online, as outlined methodologically in Straubhaar (2015).

In Los Angeles, I recruited 30 TFA teachers at different stages of their two-year commitment to teach in public schools. These participants were from three different TFA LA cohorts—10 were in their first year of TFA, 15 were in their second year, and five had just finished their two-year TFA commitment. Four were elementary multi-subject teachers, 11 were secondary math teachers, four were secondary English teachers, three were secondary science teachers, three were secondary Spanish teachers, three were secondary social studies/humanities teachers, and two were special education pullout teachers (one at an elementary school, the other at a secondary school). 19 of the 30 were placed in charter schools, while 11 were placed in traditional public schools.

In Rio de Janeiro, *Ensina!* had only brought in one cohort of 32 teachers, and I recruited 26 of those participants to be interviewed for this study. All 26 were placed in municipal public schools in Rio de Janeiro, teaching students in 6th to 8th grade. Specifically, though some began their commitment teaching subjects such as biology, after a short period at the encouragement of the Municipal Secretariat all *Ensina!* teachers were teaching core Portuguese language and mathematics courses, typically according to which was most related to their undergraduate areas of study.

Data Collection

As noted above, I conducted in-person interviews with 30 TFA teachers in Los Angeles, and 26 of *Ensina!*'s 32 teachers in Rio de Janeiro, at different stages of their two-year commitment to teach in public schools in their respective cities. These interviews are the primary dataset used for the present analysis. All participants in both studies were interviewed at least once, though most were interviewed twice, in a semi-structured interview format that typically lasted 2-3 hours.

The interview protocol in both studies was purposefully similar, as I was conducting data collection in Los Angeles at the time I was designing the follow-up study in Rio. These protocols included specific questions asking for teachers' impressions of TFA/*Ensina!*'s recruitment, training and school placement process, their placement schools, their impressions of TFA/*Ensina!*'s staff, as well as their thoughts on TFA/*Ensina!* generally. Following the open-ended format of these interviews, each of these core questions was accompanied by numerous follow-up questions that probed more deeply into participants' perceptions and experiences.

Research Questions and Data Analysis

In both studies, every three months I took the interviews that I had conducted during that period and I transcribed them, analyzed them and coded them through the lens of the two primary research questions driving this work: 1) Why did the recruits in these studies in the United States and Brazil join TFA and *Ensina!*? and 2) Did any of the personal opinions or ideologies which led these candidates to join change after their two years in the classroom?

In the case of my Brazilian work, I first transcribed those interviews in Portuguese, and then translated them into English prior to my analysis. Every six months in each of these projects, I took an inventory in which I re-analyzed previous coding and themes, and at times updated them to account for new trends that had arisen in my subsequent interviews. To maintain

anonymity of participants, when coding I gave each participant a pseudonym—in referencing participants' comments here, I will similarly use those pseudonyms rather than participants' real names⁴.

Findings

In subsequent sections, I will explore findings related to the two primary research questions mentioned previously: First, why did recruits join, and second, did the opinions or ideologies which led them to join change after their two-year commitment? In addressing each of these questions, I will first draw on answers from TFA participants, before comparing their answers to those of *Ensina!* participants.

Why Join TFA/*Ensina!*?

Earlier in this article, I refer to the ideology undergirding the market-oriented currently dominant educational project as market logic, or the presumption that the public sector (and thus the public education system) is ineffective, resistant to change and inefficient, while the private sector is inherently more effective, efficient and innovative. Given the dominance of this market-oriented project for the last several decades of education policy in the U.S. and Brazil, the people who are becoming of age to be ripe candidates for TFA and *Ensina!* are individuals who have seen market logic reflected in public policy throughout their lives—as such, it is understandable to see such logic influence their career decisions upon finishing their undergraduate degrees. Given its roots in the private sector, and strong rhetorical and ideological ties to private industry, I will show here that the teacher education model of Teach for All (reflected in affiliates like TFA

⁴ The reader may notice that the Teach For America participants' pseudonyms are last names, while the *Ensina!* participants' pseudonyms are first names. This is a reflection of the cultural norms of public education in both countries, as the Teach For America participants in their classrooms typically were referred to by last name, while in Brazil most used their first names. As a result, the pseudonyms chosen have followed the same custom.

and *Ensina!*) had understandable appeal to participants in these two studies, appearing to them to be a more effective means of combating educational inequality than going through the traditional teacher training and certification process. As previously mentioned, I will discuss these findings in two parts: first, drawing from my interviews with TFA teachers in Los Angeles, and second, drawing from my interviews with *Ensina!* teachers in Rio de Janeiro.

Teach For America. Among the 30 TFA teachers I interviewed, 13 specifically expressed in passing the belief that traditional public school teaching is insufficient, or as TFA has argued on its website, “not enough to close the achievement gap” (Teach For America, 2013b). As Mr. Brooks clearly states,

The mission of TFA is not to create lifelong teachers, it took me awhile to accept that, that two years wasn’t enough....The achievement gap, TFA knows this, it won’t close just in the classroom....[teachers who] experience education and go on to be senators, businessmen, that’s how it will change.

Mr. Brooks makes clear here that he does not believe the teaching that occurs in public school classrooms will be sufficient to address the educational inequities that exist for many children in the United States. This on its own might not be a very polemical statement—however, in his words he also reveals where he does believe the solution lies, that is, in the work of people outside education, notably including the private sector. Classroom teaching experience is seen here as necessary to the degree that it provides some baseline first-hand knowledge of education—however, educational equity is not seen as coming from that public sector experience, but from elsewhere. This clearly reflects the construct of market logic.

More specifically, 22 of the 30 interviewed made comments that displayed that they saw in TFA a rigorous, efficient teacher education organization that held their same beliefs. As Ms. Evans puts it, “I believe in everything that TFA stands for.” Or in the words of Mr. Martin, “TFA

is really efficient, more business-like. They focus on results. They don't have all the bureaucracy...[TFA] is everything I wanted, again, all in one organization.”

This teacher's word choice belies the unspoken priorities of “good” teacher education practice in education reform circles: “business-like,” “focus on results,” lack of bureaucracy. These are all qualities typically associated with the private sector, and rarely associated with the public sector. From this perspective, the degree to which TFA emulates private sector “best practices” is precisely what made it appealing to these teachers when they were still being recruited. To them, TFA was an organization that took the principles they accepted as business-world “common sense” and applied them to what they saw as the inefficient, bureaucratic world of teacher education (and public education more generally).

Of course, it is important to note that TFA had appeal beyond the ideological—namely, as Labaree (2010) points out, TFA offers college graduates an opportunity to both “do good” (that is, give back to society as teachers) and “do well” (that is, get ahead in life). More specifically, Labaree (2010) points out that TFA provides material benefits such as a free (or at least significantly discounted) Master's degree and connections to an alumni network with members in elite positions in law, medicine and other trades—perks that traditional teacher education programs cannot match. However, I would argue that part of what Labaree (2010) identifies as part of TFA's appeal to “do well,” namely being part of a selective, well-trained and elite organization, is also at its root the same ideological appeal seen in Mr. Martin's comments. This elite status, more commonly associated with working at a prominent Wall Street or law firm, is part of what makes TFA, to paraphrase Mr. Martin from above, “everything [a recruit] could want...all in one organization.”

Ensina!. Similar to what was apparent in my interviews with TFA teachers in Los Angeles, *Ensina!* participants in Rio de Janeiro also expressed that a large part of what convinced them to join the organization was a commonly held understanding, based on the rhetoric of *Ensina!* staff and recruiters, that the Teach For All model represented a business-savvy, numbers-driven “proven” teacher education formula that was ready to be franchised outside the United States. Indeed, I argue that the ideological appeal was stronger in Rio than in Los Angeles, as *Ensina!* in its pilot phase had not yet established the kind of long-term corporate and government partnerships held by TFA that allowed for material benefits like discounted graduate degrees.

However, I also argue that part of the ideological appeal of the TFA/*Ensina!* model corresponds to the selective and elite branding identified by Labaree (2010). Specifically, potential recruits were told that part of what made this organization so promising was its foundation in an elite, successful, rigorous, U.S.-based teacher education model:

When I learned about *Ensina!* and that it was taking applicants, I thought the proposal was different in a very appealing way...the advertising cited the success that this model had seen elsewhere, and this was a chance to bring it to Brazil. They sold this idea very well, with beautiful marketing. At each step of the application process I was more and more interested and invested in the project.
(Jessica)

Other *Ensina!* recruits express feeling similarly encouraged by the idea that *Ensina!*'s model represented a “proven” teacher education model that had experienced success elsewhere. Jorge expresses thinking at the time that “it was a very cool idea...that we would be part of an international network that had already been doing this work for a long time.” Ana Clara similarly states that “*Ensina!* was using a model that had already been shown to be effective and was adapting it here.”

Here these interviewees illustrate the way that, from a market-oriented perspective, growth is perceived to be equivalent to success. That is, if Teach For All is able to grow and spread internationally, it must be succeeding in its mission to improve education. For several interviewees, the existence of the Teach For All network itself is proof of this success. As one *Ensina!* teacher succinctly puts it, “After all, TFA has been around for more than 20 years⁵, and it must have had good results in the United States, because after all it has been replicated, right? They wouldn’t replicate something that was ineffective or hadn’t been proven already” (Julia). Here, the underlying assumption is strong—replication, or to frame that in more business-friendly terms, “scaling up” or “franchising,” is seen as an inherent symbol of an organization’s rigor and effectiveness. Again, we see reflected in these recruits’ thinking a strong alignment to market thinking, based on the assumption that private sector institutions like TFA and *Ensina!*, especially when they apply market-based solutions to educational problems, are an effective means to undo educational inequities in their respective countries. Interestingly, as will be seen in the following section, these recruits’ two years of classroom experience led many (specifically, at least 14 of 30 in Los Angeles and all 26 *Ensina!* participants) to begin to question these implicit assumptions.

Two Years Later: Unpacking the TFA/*Ensina!* Experience

In interviews that typically took place near the end of their two-year classroom commitment or shortly thereafter, it was interesting to note the shift in perspective and ideological orientation demonstrated by the interviewees in these two programs. While 10 TFA and eight *Ensina!* teachers made statements of support for their respective programs and their

⁵ Teach For America was founded in 1989 (Kopp, 2001).

parallel theories of change regarding how teachers should be recruited and trained, most (14 in TFA and 26 in *Ensina!*) made comments that showed they had come to question some portion of their previously held beliefs. At least, these 14 TFA and 26 *Ensina!* teachers expressed some cognitive dissonance relative to their earlier trust in these programs in the face of contrasting personal experiences. For many of these individuals (10 of the 14 in TFA and 4-5 of the 26 in *Ensina!*), this dissonance expresses itself in the form of implementation-related critiques—that is, the core principles behind the program are still seen as sound, but they were not implemented correctly. Interestingly, though, other participants (including only two TFA, but 21-22 *Ensina!* participants, a majority of the entire cohort) began as a result of their teaching experience to question more completely the ideological underpinnings of the Teach For All model, with four of the *Ensina!* teachers going so far as to question the role of nonprofit organizations or other non-university actors in teacher education. As will be seen hereafter, those four *Ensina!* teachers even question the role of the private sector or civil society in public education more generally. As in the previous section, findings from TFA interviews will come first, followed by the experiences of *Ensina!* teachers.

Teach For America. 18 of the 20 TFA teachers I interviewed who had either finished their two years in the classroom or were finishing their second year felt very strongly that their potential impact as teachers was limited. As Ms. Morris states: “There’s only so much you can do as a teacher because there are so many restrictions. So I know I need to go beyond the classroom to make change.”

Perhaps the most interesting trend I noticed in these TFA interviews was among eight of the 30 who saw TFA as a pathway to teaching, and who joined the organization to become trained career teachers. All but two of these hopeful career teachers, after their two years, were

reconsidering their commitment to teaching due to the intensity and stress associated with their TFA experience. As one participant notes, “There’s a constant pressure which on one hand is a good thing, to feel a constant need to refine your practice, but ... I haven’t found the right balance with my school and private life” (Ms. Taylor).

Another participant who had taught for several years before joining TFA, but who had been placed teaching an age group and subject area that was completely different from her previous teaching experience, is one of the six mentioned who is reconsidering teaching altogether due to her time in TFA:

I used to think my plans were clearer than they are now. I think going into this new subject area, like, with new pressures also, has been a really big challenge for me, and there have been some times recently when I’ve wondered if I will be able to stick with education after this. Which is a kind of heartbreaking thing to think, because working in education as a teacher has been a dream of mine for a very long time, and up until now it seemed like a positive opportunity as opposed to an excruciating one....There’s overwhelming feeling that, while I realized before that I made mistakes on a daily basis, now in TFA I’ve never felt so much that I fail, like flat-out fail on a daily basis, and I worry that the most that I’m doing for the kids is offering them a bare minimum of mediocre or barely quality education instead of a very good education. And that to me is a tough thing to come to terms with.
(Ms. Parker)

Other scholars have documented this feeling of despair and feeling of underperformance that often plagues preservice and early career teachers, whether within TFA (Matsui, 2015) or among those who went through more traditional teacher education pathways (Strong, 2005). However, the primary cause of Ms. Parker’s disconnect in this instance seems related to something out of her control as a teacher, in that her feelings of failure stem from her placement by TFA in a completely unfamiliar grade level and subject area. This, as has begun to be explored elsewhere in discussions of TFA’s placement and

contract practices (Brewer, Kretchmar, Sondel, Ishmael, & Manfra, 2016), is standard practice within the organization, as open contract needs are prioritized over previous corps member experiences. While this is logically defensible from the standpoint of organizational efficiency (and what I have here called market logic), it can lead to mismatches and experiences as drastic as the one shared here by Ms. Parker.

Earlier in this same interview, Ms. Parker talked at length about how rewarding she had found teaching to be in her previous teaching positions. Given those feelings, it was especially fascinating (and to some degree tragic) that due to her experience and training with TFA, she had felt such a degree of failure that she was reconsidering her commitment to the teaching profession. The confidence that she and many others had felt upon joining TFA about being able to “make a difference” through participation in what they saw as this rigorous, business-minded approach to teacher education had dissipated when, upon entering the classroom and seeing the rubber meet the road, their training and efforts seemed insufficient to enact real, lasting change. This sense of disillusionment was notable across the interviews I completed with TFA teachers in Los Angeles. For example, another participant (Ms. Johnson) with a strong background in Biology was told by TFA that she would be teaching Spanish, and had trouble for several months finding a position. Even after finding a position, she didn’t feel it was a very good fit, and struggled with feelings of inadequacy. In her words, “So yeah, I’ve come to question TFA’s judgment. Why wasn’t I placed in biology? I wasn’t sure why they didn’t take those skills for what they were worth because I knew the need [for STEM] was so high and those teachers were snatched up like that. Instead I was placed

in a subject where it took almost until the end of my TFA time to feel I was doing any good. Why was I teaching this subject?”

It should be noted that, while the teachers discussed in this section had begun to question their potential impact as teachers or their choice of teaching as a profession, Ms Johnson is somewhat of an outlier for expressing an organizational critique towards TFA. Only two TFA teachers, Ms. Johnson and Ms. Williams, articulated a specific critique of TFA for what they did organizationally.

Ms. Williams was placed in a traditional public secondary school with four other TFA teachers, and noted a distinct social divide between TFA teachers and traditionally certified career teachers in her building. Specifically, she said the TFA teachers tended to work together, and while she didn't think much of that at first, midway through her second year a coworker expressed sadness to her that the TFA teachers seemed to close off and hold themselves above the other teachers. In response, Ms. Williams began developing stronger relationships with her non-TFA colleagues, using their lesson plans and altering her pedagogy. She was surprised when her TFA coach, then called an MTLT (Manager of Teacher Leadership Development), corrected her pedagogical style in a site visit and told her to go back to the way she had been taught. When Ms. Williams did not change, her relationship with her MTLT began to fray, and she began to question why TFA seemed to insist on doing things its own way. In Ms. Williams' words, “TFA made it pretty clear there was no going against them, and that really made me wonder—why? Why only the TFA way?”

Ensina!. This sense of questioning (and even disillusionment) was more widespread in my interviews with *Ensina!* teachers. This is understandable given the specific stressors

associated with *Ensina!*'s status as a pilot program—as the management team within *Ensina!* was trying to fundraise to expand the program and make it sustainable long-term, *Ensina!* teachers within this study felt an intense pressure to demonstrate results that could impress possible funders. More specifically, the teachers I interviewed felt pressured to raise their student's grades and standardized test scores. As Gustavo states, “My Big Goal⁶ as a Portuguese teacher was to see my students' Portuguese grades go up, simple as that.” Mariana adds, “The priority was tests, to improve test scores. This was all tied up to the IDEB⁷, which determined educational funding, so the stakes were high for all of us.”

As much as this focus on test scores as a quantifiable “bottom line” might be understandable in the efficiency-minded worldview many of these *Ensina!* recruits held previously, a view which attracted them to the program in the first place, the focus became frustrating when they did not see grades or test scores go up. While early in their time in *Ensina!* most recruits expressed optimism about their ability to make a significant difference in the learning outcomes of the students in their classes, near the end of the two-year commitment few teachers I interviewed felt they actually did make that kind of difference. The little successes they did share in our interviews seemed harder to measure, like seeing a student gain self-confidence or come to enjoy a certain subject. At the end of their time as *Ensina!* teachers, most participants left having appreciated their experience, but feeling like they had really done very little in terms of their teaching. Julia, one of those who most fully believed in the Teach For All

⁶ Within Teach For America parlance, a “Big Goal” is a teacher's larger target for the school year in terms of student achievement, which is typically drafted in conjunction with the teacher's trainer and shared with students to motivate their growth (Foote, 2009).

⁷ As mentioned earlier, the IDEB is a metric based on school-wide test score performance, used to hold schools accountable for student performance, in much the same way the AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) system functioned under the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States.

teacher education model, nonetheless doubted her ability to contribute much to education after her two years in the classroom:

I was invited to work in city government in education, but I felt that my *Ensina!* experience wasn't sufficient for me to be able to contribute to education in Brazil. It's a bit sad, even though I enjoyed the program and thought the model wonderful, when I thought about it I don't feel like I contributed anything.

Interestingly, of the 26 *Ensina!* teachers I interviewed, Julia is the one who most fully continues to express her support for and belief in the power of the Teach For All model. However, she nonetheless felt some significant cognitive dissonance as she did not see the results at the end of her experience which she expected when she came in, to the point that she began to question whether she had learned anything about teaching during her time with *Ensina!*.

Many of those I interviewed had a similar feeling, but on a larger scale, attributing their lack of success to larger structural issues. To Jessica, the lesson is that her previously held optimism about transformational change was ill placed: "I learned a lot from my experience and it was very rich, and I'd like to work more in education, but I don't think anything I do will be as transformational as I might have hoped." Nina, on the other hand, feels the problem was that *Ensina!*'s training materials, adapted from those developed by TFA, were not adequate. As she states, "I'm now one year into a Master's in education, and I would do everything differently than what I did in *Ensina!*."

To several of *Ensina!*'s alumni, their primary take-away was the inefficacy of trying to fix Brazilian public education from the private sector. Guilherme, who at the time of our interview was working towards traditional licensure as a public school teacher, says that "I plan to continue in education, but in other forms, different from what we did in *Ensina!*. I want to do something that will really change things, something truly revolutionary, unlike *Ensina!*"

Guilherme has not lost his optimism about his ability to teach—however, he does seem to have lost his confidence in the ability of organizations like *Ensina!* to effectively prepare him.

Gustavo, who at the time of our interview was working in public policy with the city, had developed a more ideological opposition to *Ensina!*, seeing it as one representation of a larger trend of privatization of Brazilian public schools. His *Ensina!* experience had led him to not only be critical of the program’s implementation, but to oppose the theory of change behind it: “My time in *Ensina!* was a powerful motivation to oppose myself to the types of ideas I saw defended in *Ensina!*, the waves of reform that it represented.”

Claudia was one *Ensina!* alumna who, through the connections she had made in the program, had secured a competitive position with the city. However, in her interview with me she expresses guilt and remorse that her time in *Ensina!* had benefited her personally without bringing proportional benefit to the communities where she taught. In her words,

I think this NGO-ification of education is very problematic, because who benefits from NGO work are the NGO workers, the “change makers,” not the people they’re supposed to be serving. Look at the example of *Ensina!* which came in supposedly to trigger big changes: what changed? Whose life was changed? Mine was, my boss’ life was. Who’s making money from this is us.
(Claudia)

Claudia seems to interpret the “NGO-ification” of education as the commodification of the sector—or in other words, a means of making money and advancing personal careers rather than a public good. What Claudia sees as the interests driving private teacher education entities like *Ensina!* are capitalist interests rather than the preparation of teachers.

Overall, it is quite startling to note the difference in ideological position between the participants in this study when they were first being recruited into the program and when they were leaving it. Some participants, whether in TFA or *Ensina!*, felt inefficacious in bringing

about change for their students and held themselves personally responsible. Others, like Claudia, came to make more pointed structural critiques of the Teach For All teacher education model, and what they perceived as its market-oriented ideological underpinnings and larger connections to the privatization of education.

Discussion and Conclusion

These parallel ethnographic studies of recruits who joined Teach For America in Los Angeles and *Ensina!* in Rio de Janeiro are fascinating examples of the role of market-influenced thinking in influencing young peoples' decisions to seek teacher training through these organizations. In both cases, recruits saw the business-minded structure of TFA and *Ensina!* as evidence of well-organized efficiency and a theory of change through which they could really make a differences as teachers of disadvantaged youth in their respective countries.

And yet, perhaps the most interesting legacy of being trained as a teacher through TFA and *Ensina!*, at least for participants in these two studies, is the effect that training has had on the career plans and ideological perspectives of these teachers. Around half of the TFA teachers interviewed and the vast majority of interviewed *Ensina!* teachers had come to question the efficacy of the Teach For All model, both as a teacher education program and an education reform initiative intended to address educational inequality.

In the United States, there is a growing literature that critically examines how many TFA teachers go on to careers in education reform or as education-minded politicians, supporting the expansion of charter schools, the elimination of teacher tenure, and other market-oriented reforms (Kavanagh & Dunn, 2013; Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014; Maloney, 2013). The two studies I have drawn from in this article show a yet-unexplored contrary trend, of Teach For

All alumni in two countries whose participation in their programs led them to doubt their training, and by extension the theories of change on which their training was based.

These studies also provide insight into the role of ideology in providing popular support for the market-oriented currently dominant educational project, as in both studies it was largely an ideological pull that drew recruits into these programs. This article also adds to the very small literature begun by Brewer and deMarrais (2015) and Matsui (2015) on how some TFA alumni become critical of the program, while also adding a previously non-existent comparative angle from another Teach For All affiliate.

Theoretically speaking, building upon the theorization of the *currently dominant educational project* (Straubhaar, 2014), this article has provided a comprehensive construct whose various components assist in accounting for why particular models of teacher education, and other education reforms, gain traction. However, as the participant pushback on display in this article shows, the market-oriented currently dominant project is not uncontested. As Bartlett (2003) has stated, “there is rarely a single, coherent educational project...instead, projects intersect with subordinate...ideas...[and] multiple projects compete for hegemonic control of the public's imagination” (p. 187). In the present case, a number of TFA and *Ensina!* teachers have come, through their own experiences in their respective programs, to distrust and disagree with the larger Teach For All teacher education model. For many of them, this change in thought went one step further to distrust of market logic more generally, or the argument that private civil society organizations like TFA and *Ensina!* can more effectively train teachers and impact educational inequality than their public counterparts. While these teachers do not necessarily agree sufficiently in their general educational ideologies or notions of pedagogy to constitute a viable *counterproject* (Bartlett, 2003), they do represent a call for context-driven reform that

requests that higher priority be given to the voices of those implementing policy at the ground level.

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