Teach First organisational discourse: what are Teach First teachers really being trained for?

Abstract

This paper considers the networked nature of Teach First in order to illustrate the different business, philanthropic and educational agents that have a vested interest in the organisation. It also reflects on Teach First's strategic positioning within the ITE landscape in order to attract high calibre graduates into the teaching profession and goes on to explore Teach First's institutional discourse and the ways in which this serves to shape the Teach First teachers' understandings of themselves, teaching and their potential career prospects after their two year commitment on the Teach First programme. An understanding of the Teach First institutional discourse is gained through an analysis of data gathered from Teach First documentation and interviews with people working at different levels within the organisation. Critical Discourse Analysis is used to understand the ways in which this institutional discourse serves to provide a particular ideological positioning for Teach First and its teachers. It argues that such a positioning encourages them to take with them a neoliberal understanding of ways of working into influential positions within the wider network invested in Teach First.

Introduction

Teach First is a particular model of Initial Teacher Education, based on Wendy Kopp's Teach for America, which was conceptualised in her 1989 Princetown thesis and then realised, with financial support from Exxon Mobil, in 1990 (Kopp, 2011; Exley, 2014). It involves 'non-profits' recruiting 'top' graduates from 'top' universities (in England, predominantly from Russell Group universities), training them intensively for a short period, before placing them in schools in areas of disadvantage, where they work on a salaried, full-time basis, whilst being prepared for 'leadership' (Straubhaar and Freidrich, 2015: 2). The graduates are expected to commit to the programme and to teaching for a minimum of two years, after which they are encouraged to 'challenge educational disadvantage' for the rest of their lives, in whatever professional capacity they may so choose. Teach First is part of an international network of forty eight member organisations that sit under the umbrella of Teach for All (TfA) which was co-founded by Kopp and the first Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Teach First, Brett Wigdortz, and launched at the Clinton Global Initiative in 2007 (Teach for All, 2017). Each of Teach for All's member organisations, whilst situated in geographically, politically, historically and educationally diverse contexts around the world, has this same structure and model of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Each member organisation is also connected to a number of national and international business, public sector, philanthropic, socially entrepreneurial and

educational endeavours that offer various levels of financial or 'in kind' support to the organisation and the schools that it is partnered with.

In England, Teach First has positioned itself strategically within the landscape of Initial teacher Education as a cost-effective route into teaching which meets a number of the recruitment needs highlighted in the House of Commons (2017) and Nuffield (2014) reports: it increases the pool of beginner teachers by attracting high calibre graduates who may otherwise not have considered teaching (Blumenreich and Rogers, 2016; Friedrich and Walter, 2015; Kopp, 2011; Price and McConney, 2013); it recruits participants for the shortage subjects of English, Science, Maths and Modern Languages; it places its participants in schools in geographical locations that otherwise struggle to recruit teachers and it fast-tracks its participants into leadership which helps meet the higher demand for leaders in Multi Academy Trusts. Yet compared to teachers trained on the PGCE route into teaching, 31% fewer Teach First teachers remain in the profession after four years (Hitchcock et al., 2017: 65) and Sam Friedman, Teach First Director of Research, Evaluation and Impact acknowledged that 'one of the most common criticisms of Teach First is that many participants see it as a stepping stone to something better' (Teach First, 2017). At the same time, multi-national organisations who are major Teach First donors, such as Accenture (2018), Price Waterhouse and Cooper (PWC, 2018), Procter and Gamble (2018) and Deloitte (2018) offer successful Teach First ambassadors an automatic place on their graduate programmes.

In order to explore the networked nature of Teach First and the Teach First teachers' role within this, this paper starts with a consideration of the literature relating to Teach First and Teach for All. It then goes on to examine data gathered from Teach First documentation and interviews with people working at different levels of the organisation. Critical Discourse Analysis is used to make sense of the data in order to gain an understanding of the ways in which teacher, teaching, leadership, professional aspirations and networks are constructed through the Teach First institutional discourse. The paper goes on to consider the implications of this discourse on Teach First teachers' ideological positioning and explores the particular set of values which they may take with them into influential positions within the public and private sector, facilitated by the Teach First wider network.

Teach First and Teach for All literature

Price and McConney claim that organisations under the TfA umbrella have a shared 'set of beliefs about schools and teaching … which construct schools, students, teachers and teachers' work in a particular and deliberate way' (2013: 99). They note that TfA arose in an era that was increasingly dominated by political and social ideologies promoting individualism, social entrepreneurialism and a marketised economy, 'on the heels of nearly a decade of Reaganomics and Thatcherism' (2013: 99). Other commentators have also reflected upon the neoliberal ideological foundations of the model (Ahmann, 2015; Barnes et al., 2016; Blumenreich and Gupta, 2015; Friedrich and Walter, 2015; Lalonde et al., 2015; McConney et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2016 and Straubhaar and Friedrich, 2015). Its focus on the individual, choice, deregulation, competition, corporate style leadership, business and market forces have been noted repeatedly (Ahmann, 2015; Friedrich and Walter, 2015; Rice et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2016). Lalonde et al. suggest that TfA teachers act as embodiments of neoliberal ideology (2015: 2), with assumptions about 'meritocracy and credentialism as means and method of individualistic economic competition'. This is supported by Rice et al. who explored the values that 76 teachers from the Teach for Australia programme would take into the workplace after their two years on the programme. They discovered that these were overwhelmingly underpinned by a neoliberal notion of the individual 'exceptional teacher' needed to overcome inequality, with only one person mentioning broader societal change such as banning private schools (2015). Olmedo et al. claim that TF's Leadership Development Programme produces a 'new kind of professional and teaching subject' (2013: 497). The organisation's success in securing governmental, corporate and philanthropic support has also been commented upon (McConney et al., 2012; Scott et al., 2016), along with its 'highly successful and internationalised marketing strategy' (Price and McConney, 2012: 105).

Most notable of all, according to some commentators, is that TfA has 'accomplished the impossible' by making the teaching profession attractive to a large number of people who could easily choose other high-achieving career options (Labaree, 2010). This success is attributed to a number of factors. The first of these is TfA's highly successful marketing campaign which re-brands what it means to be a teacher. Commentators see these recruitment campaigns as being framed as 'ambition meets conscience', appealing to a make-a-difference sense of social justice and altruism which creates the idea of 'hero' teacher

(Blumenreich and Rogers, 2016: 24; McConney et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2015: 498). Ahmann judges that Teach First teachers are told they are 'saving children' and part of a 'moral project' (2015: 3); others comment on the trainees embarking upon a 'crusade for justice' (Friedrich and Walter, 2015: 5), as they challenge educational inequality, doing a noble, missionary-like 'redemptive service through giving back to the community' (Price and McConney, 2013: 105).

The second factor, which is related to the first, is the market position of TF as a brand. The organisation creates a sense of its teachers as elite and special. Price and McConney write of TfA teachers as 'the best and the brightest' (2013: 98); Labaree suggests that Teach for America has 'staked out a position for itself as the Harvard of teacher preparation programs' (2010: 54) with Kopp having successfully cultivated an 'aura of selectivity' and a widespread perception of the teaching profession as a high status, prestigious career (Blumenreich and Gupta, 2015: 93). The assumption with the TfA model of training is that 'teaching could be "picked up" on the fly by "smart" people', setting it apart from, and superior to, traditional ITE routes (Blumenreich and Rogers, 2016).

A third factor is the repositioning of teaching as a transitory venture rather than a career for life. The period of commitment in the TfA programmes is short-term (two years). There is an emphasis in the TfA materials on the transferability of skills, attractive for those who consider teaching to be a 'stepping stone to a different career' (Price and McConney, 2013: 106). McConney et al. (2012: v) point out that TfA teachers see their time within the organisation as an opportunity for 'short courses, networking and future career options'. Rice et al. (2015) comment that many of the trainees move into leadership roles in policy, business and education after they have completed their two year teaching commitment. Labaree writes of TfA teachers as moving on 'to their real life of work with high pay and high prestige' after their two year stint as a 'kind of domestic peace corps' (2010: 48), a sentiment which is echoed by Scott et al., who suggest that participants view their time in teaching as an interim period before continuing on to more 'high prestige' career options (2016: 15).

A fourth factor is the access to a wider network that Teach First teachers are granted. Ball and Junemann examine 'the space where philanthropy and business meet' (2012: 68) - the web of interconnectedness between different actors from within Teach First - describing the organisation as 'an influential social enterprise', mobilised around philanthropic solutions to educational problems, deeply embedded within and between the communities of business

and government (2012: 114). A league table of platinum, gold, silver and bronze list of corporate and individual philanthropic sponsors of Teach First exemplifies the extent to which business, philanthropic, socially entrepreneurial and educational endeavours have aligned within one organisation in a truly networked and symbiotic way. This network creates a new 'epistemic community' of Teach First teachers and actors migrating from business, wishing to address educational problems through market solutions and social entrepreneurial activities. With this community comes new language, practices and values which are changing the discourse around education (2012: 124). Such an eclectic combination of agents within the same network can, Ball argues (2012), ensure a 'hearing' within government for policy ideas which are developed in 'policy micro-spaces' (ibid: 68) – the formal and informal meetings which take place over coffee and in corridors. LaLonde et al. claim that TfA has helped to spur a 'massive, global Intermediary Organisation Network' (2015: 17) which serves to spread TfA's underpinning neoliberal ideology in public and private sector networks around the world (2015: 17).

With this commentary in mind, I move on now to offer an analysis of a data set generated between January 2015 and July 2016. This dataset consists of training resources for the intensive summer school, the Teach First website and recruitment videos and nine interviews with Teach First students and staff. The interviewees were: a Teach First senior executive, a Teach First middle manager, and seven Teach First teachers in training. These interviews were transcribed, coded and thematised. The dataset was analysed using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Gee, 2005; Rogers, 2011; Van Dijk, 2008; Wodak and Meyer, 2009) with the intention of, firstly, exploring the claims made by Teach First and the commentary made about the programme and organisation. The second, and broader, aim of this analysis, is to understand better the organisational discourse, and the impact that this may have on the teachers' understanding of themselves and their sense of agency as they enter the wider business/philanthropic/social enterprise/education/policy network that Teach First facilitates access to.

The organisational discourse of Teach First

Four clear but interconnected themes emerged from the critical discourse analysis.

i)   *The reconstruction of the idea of the teacher.* It was striking that on the Teach First website, and in the language used by the Teach First teachers and middle manager, the word 'teacher' as a standalone noun rarely appeared. Instead, the use of the terms 'participant' and 'ambassador' (meaning beginner teacher and Teach First teacher in the third year of teaching, respectively) tended to replace the word teacher. These terms have particular connotations. 'Participant' does not convey a sense of long-term commitment, but rather a dipping in until the participation is complete. The term expresses the idea of agency and choice rather than vocation. 'Ambassador' is imbued with a hint of grandeur, 'a diplomat of the highest rank sent on a special mission' (Collins, 1984: 32). The use of these terms serves to set the Teach First teacher apart from the educational profession, suggesting that the trainees are different, active, high ranking and on a mission. This construction of the 'Teach First teacher' as something other than the common teacher is reinforced through the use of adjectives to enhance 'teacher' such as 'brilliant', 'life-changing', 'inspiring' and 'incredible'. 'Teacher' alone no longer appears to be enough. Instead, the figure of the teacher is either aggrandised or replaced by some form of 'leader': 'classroom leader'; 'leader for life' and 'future leaders'. Interviewees repeatedly referred to themselves as leaders and teaching as a form of leadership. On the Teach First homepage, teacher training is referred to as 'our Leadership Development Programme' in which 'schools', 'classrooms', 'pupils' and 'teaching' are conspicuous by their absence.

ii)   *Joining an elite*. Interviews with Teach First beginner teachers indicated that they saw themselves as an elite group. They referred to themselves as:

high calibre graduates of a certain personality … of a certain value system

They described themselves as 'lucky'; 'privileged'; 'resilient'; 'ambitious' and 'good leader(s)' and expressed concerns that the superior 'quality' of the trainees might be 'diluted' if Teach First were to expand. The middle manager spoke of the eight skills and competencies that are tested at interview and the importance of the inclusion of a 'commitment to social justice, humility and empathy'. This interviewee also noted that

most of the [trainees] could do anything that they want

suggesting that they were sacrificing graduate jobs in 'glamorous places' such as 'Westminster', opting instead for 'an £18,000 starting salary'.

A meritocratic view of themselves as individually special, gifted and superior is inherent in the language used about and by the teachers.

iii)   *The nature of the mission/vision.* An individualised hero narrative (Lalonde et al., 2015) is evident across the dataset. Teach First applicants are urged to 'challenge the impossible'; the teacher in a 2016 recruitment campaign speaks of 'solving conflicts', 'changing lives' and 'making a difference' (Youtube, 2017); the CEO's video for new trainees in the 2016 Summer Institute featured superheroes. This hero narrative is underpinned by a pervasive discourse of teaching as a 'mission', a fight against 'disadvantage', 'poverty' and 'educational inequity'. This mission, evident in the language of the web-site, was echoed in an interview with a middle manager:

we have really simple objectives for the work that we want our ambassador community to achieve … more ambassadors having a better impact in the classroom, more ambassadors in school leadership positions and more ambassadors in influential positions in policy and decision making.

One of the teacher interviewees explained:

I was always warned off teaching by my mum who is a teacher but I was just really captivated by the vision of TF.

Others commented that:

the TF vision was something I felt really aligned with … the mission itself, the vision of TF

I was just really kind of captivated by the vision of TF … I'll always be aligned with the vision.

Another saw the mission as expansionary,

branching out into all the other sectors so that we have the best kind of field to meet the vision … so I think the more people that have exposure to that, and have, you know, an opportunity to experience that, hopefully that will inspire more people to be part of the vision and to be part of you know, the movement, the social justice movement.

For all interviewees, the charitable status of the organisation framed teacher training and teaching as a benevolent, altruistic endeavour. The web-site, seeking donations from benefactors, proudly lists its 'valued supporters' who provide 'vital funding, pro-bono support and hours of volunteering to enable us to have a meaningful impact on young people, their families and communities'. Without

these 'transformation partners' 'dedication to our mission and invaluable contributions', Teach First would not, it is claimed, be able to 'work to improve the life chances of thousands of children from low-income communities each year' (Teach First, 2017). Linking the notion of 'mission' to the work done by the wider network partners serves to unite them all, despite their very different agendas, under one philanthropic umbrella. This sense of coherence through the mission facilitates an easy step from the inner city classroom to the boardroom, as the nature of the work done in both blurs as if it were one and the same.

iv)   *Moving on and up.* In the final frames of Teach First's 2016 recruitment video, the question 'Where next?' fades slowly into 'Teach First'. The question takes on greater salience than the answer, setting a temporary tone to the notion of teaching: an applicant would teach *first* before moving *next* onto other endeavours. In a similar, if rather more direct, manner, one interviewee spoke of their two years in teaching as 'doing your time' and then 'escaping'. The beginner teacher interviewees revealed that, rather than seeing themselves as entering the teaching profession, they saw themselves as joining a network and that this was one of their key reasons for applying to Teach First:

I never had planned to be a teacher. I'd never explored those options. It was Teach First the company that gave a presentation that sold me on this idea of teaching…

it's two years and I've got all of this experience and these qualifications and access to different companies and different people.

it was a springboard to anything that I wanted to do….

a good programme that opens doors, that, that was sort of why I originally entered it

One interviewee claimed she would

always be connected to that network… it just feels like really there are so many opportunities for me. I'm really glad that I'm part of it.

She continued:

if everyone is keen to like still be involved with the organisation, then that only creates more opportunities and more links and more relationships between people … I hope to continue being able to tap into those contacts

Another spoke of Teach First as providing:

the opportunity for really powerful relationships to form, so it might have a little offcut of Teach First doing something else in a different sector in the economic sector or in the political sector

The Teach First middle manager spoke of the organisation's 'constellation effect':

The world isn't going to change if we just keep putting more and more teachers into the system, however great and wonderful they might be. We need the innovative social enterprises, we need school leadership, we need policy decision makers, we need philanthropists, wealthy individuals,

> we need kind of corporate social responsibility. We need this constellation effect to actually make the change

signifying the various business, socially entrepreneurial, charitable and educational agents that comprise the intricate web that is Teach First's network, and which the Teach First teachers find so attractive.

He also articulated a wider global aspiration for the organisation stating that he would want to see:

> the TfA voice as influencing global politics, so they need a seat at the UN

McConney et al. write of a global neoliberal educational policy reform agenda which is based on the tenets of choice, deregulation and marketization (2012). These neoliberal tendencies are reflected in the organisational and network structures of Teach First as well as in the ways that the Teach First teachers express an ease of agency within the network.

Discussion

The common phrases, terms and language coming from the Teach First teachers, managers and documentation create an organisational discourse (Wodak and Meyer, 2009), which constructs a particular type of teacher. Critical discourse analysis scholars assert that not only does activity create discourse, but also that the reverse is possible: discourse can drive, influence, shape and create activity and practice. Exploring this can expose power differentials in situations which may otherwise appear neutral (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2010; Fairclough, 2012; Fairclough, 2013; Gee, 2005; Jones, Chik and Hafner, 2015; Rogers, 2011; Van Dijk, 2008).

The erosion of the word 'teacher' through the pervasive messaging in the Teach First institutional discourse, along with the positioning of the Teach First teacher as 'hero' on a 'mission' sets them as other than, and apart from, the traditional teacher. This discourse serves to reinforce the binary of 'traditional' versus 'alternative' routes into teaching, casting the traditional teacher as 'other' and almost certainly inferior (Barnes et al., 2016; Blumenreich and Gupta, 2015; Labaree, 2010; Lalonde et al., 2015; McConney et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2015). The repetitive replacement of 'teacher' with the word 'leader' suggests that the Teach First teacher is superior to and more powerful than other teachers. Teach First teachers and teachers are doing the same job, yet the Teach First teachers are encouraged to see themselves differently which serves to separate them off from teachers, not fully identifying with the profession. This disconnect is captured in the musings of one interviewee struggling to grasp that the work she was doing as a Teach First teacher was different from any other teacher:

> I get that we're going into schools, but we're still doing a job, that, in the schools, that someone else would do that was just working

She goes on to refer to Teach First as:

a company I work for, it allows me to go and teach in a school, to do a job sort of thing

Along with this sense of otherness and special status of being someone who is doing more than just 'working', comes the membership of the wider network which spans above and beyond educational circles. The networks embedded within Teach First, and indeed within all the 'Teach for ...' organisations under the TfA umbrella, serve to normalise private participation in education (Olmedo, Bailey and Ball, 2013). Ball suggests that these different agents create a 'network governance' where individuals from within the companies have access to shaping the policy and vision of the organisation, sometimes by sitting on the management board, sometimes by more informal means (2007; 2008; 2012). Symbiotically, Teach First teachers also know they have automatic and easy entry into the network when their time in the classroom is up, as the routes privileged for Teach First ambassadors into the multinationals Accenture, Proctor and Gamble, PCW and Deloitte suggest.

The short-term nature of the commitment in the classroom, construed as a journey into leadership either within education (including the wider Teach First organisation or the network more generally) also helps to create a particular kind of Teach First teacher who, whilst young, enthusiastic and prepared to give her all to the classroom for two years, is actually already half out of the door, looking for bigger and better ventures. The 'where next?' for these participants – not all, clearly, but a significant proportion – is mapped out. Reflecting on the ease with which Teach First Deutschland ambassadors slip into influential positions within multinationals, the equivalent programme in German, Olmedo et al. comment that the programme serves as a useful way of getting able, trained and up-skilled graduates into the multinationals at tax-payers expense (2013). This paper argues that these graduates are also shaped and moulded within the organisation's neoliberal ideology and that they then are likely to take a particular set of values with them into any future work that they do.

The casting of the Teach First teacher as a hero has also acted as a motivating factor for some to leave. Realising that there is a dissonance between the ways in which the institutional discourse has framed their work, and the stark reality of actually struggling with the usual difficulties of any beginner teacher in a challenging school, Teach First beginner teachers have reported feeling overwhelmed and incapable of doing what they were tasked to do. They do not identify as the heroes they are expected to be but instead they feel the mission is impossible (Ness, 2003; Rice, Volkoff and Dulfer, 2015). It is unsurprising then, that many take refuge in the readily available alternative (and possibly less immediately challenging) career options that are offered from within the Teach First network.

The influence and reach of this discourse, which reimagines the teacher as an elite, heroic leader, and teaching as a charitable mission, can be seen in the government's 2016 education White Paper 'Educational Excellence Everywhere'. The White Paper describes a 'National Teaching Service' which seeks to 'support *elite* teachers and strong middle *leaders* to move to work in some of the nation's *most challenging areas*' (Adams, 2016; DfE, 2016: 33). This proposal was aborted due to a lack of applicants to the programme. Teach First's

discursive impact, nonetheless, is powerful. Ball writes of 'boundary spanners' (Ball, 2012: 77) – individuals who straddle different organisations within a network by, for example, working for one, and playing a role on the board of others. He argues that such individuals are in positions to influence, potentially at a high level, the different organisations. The Teach First network, Ball argues, is rife with such individuals who sit at the same tables as those in financially and politically powerful positions (2012). The language used in the White Paper reflects the 'enacted, inculcated and materialised' (Rogers, 2011: 124) nature of the Teach First discourse, as conversations in board rooms and coffee bars about teachers and teaching flourish and appear in different contexts. Through its pervasive organisational discourse, Teach First is in a strong position to keep its neoliberal agenda current and on the lips of those in influential political, business, charitable and educational circles.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Teach First has positioned itself effectively within the ITE landscape in England in 2018. It attracts strong graduates, who otherwise might not have considered teaching, into shortage subjects and places them in schools which struggle to recruit teaching staff. Teachers are framed as 'leaders' within a context that has created more leadership roles due to the rise of Multi Academy Trusts (House of Commons, 2017). Despite Russell Hobby, the CEO of Teach First's commitment to improve Teach First teacher retention (Hazell, 2017), another, almost oppositional agenda is actually revealed through a closer scrutiny of the Teach First institutional discourse. Within its organisational discourse, teachers are constructed - and construct themselves - as elites who are other and better than teachers, doing heroic, philanthropic, life-changing work. They are leaders and they are looking for the next challenge, which may or may not be in teaching. They are members of a national and global network with stakeholders, amongst others, in multi-nationals, businesses, social enterprises as well as in education. The messages about not really belonging to the profession, about short-termism and better professional options are thoroughly and unembarrassedly embedded throughout the organisation. With its neoliberal ideological underpinnings, Teach First shapes its already privileged ambassadors into its own image, creating a Trojan army of mini neoliberalists, empowered to move onwards and upwards from the classroom to the boardroom, taking with it its elitist sense of entitlement and a heroic, individualistic, meritocratic approach to the work that it does. Teach First and its missionaries are then strategically positioned to gain influence within powerful national and international educational, political, business, socially entrepreneurial and philanthropic organisations at the expense of those outside of the project.

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Any data referred to in this journal article may be accessed by contacting the author.