

Liberals, ideology, and Teach for America (TFA)

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Liberals have taken way too long to understand that the bipartisan educational agenda, which started with the so-called “excellence” reforms in the 1990’s, has done harm. The good news is there’s liberal push-back now on TFA (Teach for America), which is replacing experienced teachers laid off in Chicago with new recruits who have several *weeks* of training. Bruce Dixon argues this makes TFA “scabs.”

What too many liberals still don’t get it is that this is an ideological struggle. The two sides are clear in this petition Bruce Dixon of Black Agenda has written, demanding that Tim Wise, a White progressive who writes and speaks about racism and White privilege, step away from his involvement with TFA. Wise’s explanation for working with TFA perfectly illustrates liberals’ confusion.

Wise is perplexed about why he shouldn’t work for TFA. TFA is not “fundamentally more unjust” than “other institutions where I try and bring antiracist messages.” Why should anyone want Wise to “refuse to attempt to educate folks” in TFA?

Here’s why: TFA was, from its inception, rooted in the idea that teaching doesn’t require much skill or experience. TFA was predicated on the assumption that we don’t need teachers who make teaching a career. A revolving door of hard-working people who become exhausted after a few years is fine. They can be replaced by others. TFA presumed that if we could just change teachers, we would solve educational inequality.

These ideological assumptions underlie what is known throughout the world (except here in the U.S.) as the neoliberal project. (Analysis about “disaster capitalism” also fits.) These ed policies have been imposed on Asia, Africa, and Latin America as a quid pro quo for development aid. TFA’s unique contribution has been to recruit the “best and brightest” who will alter the social class composition of teaching while simultaneously allowing teaching to become contract labor (a reform the World Bank says is essential).

Liberals want to believe that to judge whether a policy (or candidate) is worthy of our support we look at intentions. What they should know by now is that we have to look at evidence and ideology. What are the principles underlying the reforms? How do they correspond with what we believe and want? On both counts, TFA is clearly the foe of poor children of color, despite its propaganda and self-conception, and has been from its start.

Should we be challenging TFA recruits to leave their new employer? I’ll weigh in on this in another

blog, shortly, here on New Politics. In the meantime, you can follow me on twitter and Facebook.