

TEACHING BY NUMBERS

A Critical Analysis

of a New Graduate School of Education

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Previous research has documented the deficit language and White saviorism embedded in Teach For America scripts. This article details the findings of an analysis of Relay Graduate School of Education in an attempt to add the growing body of literature documenting the program's emergence as a new graduate school of education. Drawing on critical race theory frameworks, I argue that programmatic materials reveal a discourse of college readiness narrowly defined as gains on standardized assessments under the guise of racial equity. I also explore how Relay frames teaching as technical work bolstered by teacher and student compliance to academic growth measurement, suggesting that the emphasis on metrics objectifies teachers being prepared to teach in charter schools and the students they serve.

THE RISE OF NEW GRADUATE SCHOOLS OF EDUCATION

In 2015–16, approximately 676,000 teachers entered teaching through an alternative route to certification program (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2015). Enrollment in university-based teacher education programs has declined about 30% in the last 5 to 7 years. Meanwhile, enrollment at new graduate schools of education, independent institutions that confer masters degrees in education but are unaffiliated with universities (Cochran-Smith, Carney, & Miller, 2016), has steadily

increased. A relatively new phenomenon within the teacher education landscape, seven new graduate schools of education (nGSEs) have been established since 2000, and now prepare thousands of teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2019).

Proponents of nGSEs tend to emphasize how these programs are distinctly innovative in successfully recruiting teachers of color, providing programming that responds to teacher candidates' needs for more affordable coursework and flexible scheduling, and focusing on the practical needs of teachers. Those who critique nGSEs alternatively tend

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to highlight the programs' emphasis on preparing teachers for minoritized student populations, the use of prescriptive materials and methods, and the role of private funding within the nGSE network (Cochran-Smith, Stringer Keefe, & Carney, 2018).

RELAY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

One of the most rapidly expanding nGSEs, Relay Graduate School of Education, has garnered significant attention and funding.¹ Teacher U, the predecessor to Relay Graduate School of Education, was founded in 2007 by the leaders of three charter school networks (Achievement First, KIPP, and Uncommon Schools). For 3 years, Teacher U operated within the City University of New York system to train and certify Teach For America (TFA) teachers. After securing authorization to grant masters degrees in 2011, Teacher U became Relay. Now an independent graduate school that has no affiliation with any university, Relay confers masters degrees to teachers in 10 states and Washington, DC (Mungal, 2019). Relay benefits from Title II funding under the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind Act as The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), which allows states and districts to allocate money to alternative teacher certification programs as long as they purport to "increase and/or improve educator effectiveness and provide access to effective teachers for students from low-income families and students of color" (Horton, McGriff, Stevens, & Donaldson, 2017).

The teacher preparation academy provision of the Every Student Succeeds Act has led to a growing "parallel education structure," notably shifting TFA's role to recruitment while allowing Relay to prepare increasing numbers of teachers of record in a closed system (Mungal, 2016). While Relay confers masters degrees to teachers placed in both traditional public schools and charter schools, certain regions only accept students as masters candi-

dates if they have already secured a teaching position within one of the charter network partner schools such as Uncommon Schools (Relay Graduate School of Education, 2019). Teachers must receive an official offer from a participating partner charter school in order to be eligible to apply to Relay. Relay's founders, all leaders of charter management organizations, have clearly stated their mission to develop a new pipeline of teachers for their expanding networks of charter schools (Mungal, 2019).

Acknowledging the growth of these programs and the influence they wield in the shifting teacher education landscape, this study builds on the discussion of nGSE tendencies to emphasize technical practice (Ben-Porath, 2014; Smith, 2014; Stitzlein & West, 2014). Previous research has documented the deficit language (Anderson, 2013; Brown, 2013) and White saviorism embedded in TFA scripts (Barnes, Germaine, & Valenzuela, 2016; Cann, 2015; Sondel, Kretchmar, & Hadley Dunn, 2019). This article details the findings of an analysis of Relay Graduate School of Education's programmatic materials in an attempt to add the growing body of literature documenting the program's emergence as a new graduate school of education. Drawing on critical race theory frameworks, I argue that programmatic materials reveal a discourse of college readiness narrowly defined as gains on standardized assessments under the guise of racial equity. I also explore how Relay frames teaching as technical work bolstered by teacher and student compliance to academic growth measurement, suggesting that the emphasis on metrics objectifies teachers being prepared to teach in charter schools and the students they serve.

POSITIONALITY

In 2008, I was one of 62,000 teachers who entered the profession through an alternative route to certification teacher preparation program. When I was first introduced to Teach

For America in college, I was drawn to the program's use of equity-oriented language and wanted to be part of an organization that I believed cared about all students' educational opportunities. It is with an understanding that teacher education requires that teachers of all races examine their sense of selves and racial consciousness as integral to articulating their principles and teaching practices that I think through a preliminary reflection of my journey toward developing racial literacy (Sealey Ruiz, 2011). As a middle-class White woman, I was largely oblivious to the realities of educational inequity and structural racism. Despite my limited prior teaching experience, I began to realize that the pedagogical approaches TFA promoted equated behavior management and compliance to teaching itself. I was wary of the implicit and explicit deficit language that I encountered about my students, who continually taught me to become a more responsive educator and patiently exposed many of my blind spots.

As an English teacher earning a masters degree through a hybrid partnership between TFA and a university partner (Mungal, 2015), I completed coursework taught by faculty from a graduate school of teacher education as well as TFA staff. My critique of some of the methods and approaches during the TFA Summer Institute and ongoing coursework were met with redirection to consider "the best interests of kids," and I was reminded by staff to speak as "a steward of the movement." When asked to provide summative student assessment data to indicate that my students had met their academic goals and that as a new teacher I was helping them to achieve "significant gains," I submitted student writing portfolios and left the TFA end of year tracker blank. I was unwilling to require that students endure another assessment that felt disconnected from my teaching or the learning of my students. Offers to join the staff and become an instructional leader felt like an effort to silence my critiques, and I declined.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article uses critical race frameworks as a lens to analyze Relay's approach to teacher preparation. I rely on the framing of critical race theory to emphasize an analytical shift from attributing racism to individual experiences to a structural engineering of oppression replicated by institutions and society at large (Sleeter, 2017). This study builds upon the important work of scholars who have used founding documents such as Wendy Kopp's thesis and her 2011 autobiography to uncover "endemic racism in the textual corpus" of TFA (Barnes et al., 2016, p. 2). Drawing inspiration from these scholars, and acknowledging the enduring permanence of racism (Bell, 1992, 1995; Lawrence, 1987), and my own complicity, I apply a similar lens to Relay to trace the organizational turn. I found that although renamed and rebranded, foundational texts suggest a troubling vision of teacher preparation. In this article, I draw primarily on the tenets of color-evasiveness (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017), the myth of meritocracy (Milner, 2010), and interest convergence (Bell, 1980) to make visible how Relay envisions quality teaching and a quality teacher education.

Color-Evasiveness and the Myth of Meritocracy

Critical race theory allows for unmasking "traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 129), and I trace how tying teaching certification to students' test scores in the schools where Relay teachers teach ultimately allows a closed social network of charter schools and teacher preparation academies to advance a largely unchecked privatization agenda (Atkinson & Dotts, 2019). Milner's (2010) notion of the achievement and opportunity nexus demonstrates that a singular focus on student outcomes neglects a critical examination of the

root causes and underlying inequities that create such gaps in the first place. When the assumption is that everyone has an equal chance at success and achievement because success is the product of an individual's merit, students who do not perform well are read as lacking effort or unmotivated. While some may believe that academic success is predicated by effort and merit, schools are powerfully implicated in reproducing inequity while appearing to exist as neutral sites (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

In the current school culture of accountability and standardization, test scores and mandated curricula are used to frame students in ways that perpetuate the education debt owed to students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As they are often presumed to be objective, standardized assessments further the ideology of meritocracy. Au (2017) calls the neoliberal recasting of language, which attempts to frame high stakes testing a part of a project for racial equity "meritocracy 2.0." Under the idea of incremental change, or presumably academic gains and data-driven education of marginalized groups, what is pursued is equality rather than equity.

Interest Convergence

Another key principle of critical race theory is interest convergence, which I use to explore the permanence and covert nature of unconscious racism. Although entrepreneurial reformers (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018) have recently begun to adopt the term "opportunity gap," some scholars have called into question a tendency to reduce complex rich scholarship to misrepresentations that serve the interests of reformers (Barnes et al., 2016; Sondel et al., 2019; Zeichner & Conklin, 2016). It is important to consider how a reform network led largely by White individuals might appear to offer equity to students and communities of color while actively benefiting those in power and solidifying what Love calls the "education survival complex" (2019). As a conceptual tool, interest convergence uncovers concealed

racism to ask how civil rights gains might serve to benefit the interest of White people without truly improving the lives of people of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Bell (1980) argues that advances that benefit minorities typically must coincide and keep pace with the interests of the dominant group. Although true convergence might be unattainable, exposing and naming points of convergence as well as divergence can illuminate how racism might be embedded in the fabric of institutions, and eventually light a path to "pursuit of convergence" (Milner, 2008, p. 342).

METHODS

This article uses document review (Bretschneider, Cirilli, Jones, Lynch, & Wilson, 2017) which provides opportunities for qualitative research since official institutional documents often present organizations in an uncritical and favorable manner (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). To consider the literal level of the texts as well as the patterns of power within and across texts, I drew on a data analysis tool (Lankshear & Knobel, 2014, see Table 1). Additionally, as linguists have recognized, a compelling reading of a multimodal text is incomplete without a consideration of the visual features which carry important layers of meaning (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Images provide additional information that serve to emphasize or obscure certain meanings.

In the following sections, I primarily examine two publicly available video artifacts, augmenting my analysis with references to additional institutional documents. In the first section, I analyze a video designed for public consumption and recruitment purposes which outlines Relay's mission, tracing discourses of White saviorism and the deployment of color-evasive approaches to education. I then discuss another video which describes Relay's approach to teacher training and positions teachers as technical/managerial actors (Angus, 2012). Through my analysis, I consider how discourses of White saviorism and

TABLE 1
Data Analysis Tool for Analyzing Discourses in Written and Spoken Data

<i>Critical Discourse Analysis of Written Texts</i>	<i>Critical Discourse Analysis of Spoken Texts</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is this topic being written about? • How is this topic being written about? • What other ways of writing about this topic are there? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is this topic being spoken about? • How is this topic being spoken about? • What other ways of speaking about this topic are there?

meritocracy function in an effort to improve students' college readiness and college completion rates, positioning students as deficient and reifying color-evasive scripts.

Climbing the Mountain to College: Color-Evasiveness and the Myth of Meritocracy

I begin my analysis with a video entitled "The Relay Approach." Bowen (2009) suggests that the researcher should take into account the target audience and reasons behind textual production when undertaking document review. Certain discourses, although they might appear neutral, are actually socially constructed and continually normalized. One of the recurring discourses in Relay's recruitment materials is that educational opportunity might be attributed solely to socioeconomic status.

The opening seconds of the video features statistics regarding college graduation rates. According to the video, "71% of students born into wealthy families graduate from college and 10% of students born into low income families graduate from college." Here, it is useful to consider the critical discourse analytical tool of aggregation to surface the communicative choices being made (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Quantifying and treating students as statistics objectifies them while the suppression of discussion around race and a singular focus on income is reminiscent of the TFA discourses around an urgency for teacher saviors that tend to overlook the relationship that poverty holds with race and racism. As Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues, maintaining White supremacy involves a deliberate rhetorical refusal to engage with discourses of structural

racism. The absence and silence around students' racial backgrounds works to actively avoid and overlook the relationship that inequity holds with race and racism establishes a color-evasive (Annamma et al., 2017) scenario that portrays poverty and a lack of socioeconomic opportunities as discrete problems to be resolved.

Next, Norman Atkins, former president of Relay and the founder of the Uncommon Schools charter network, enters the video to present Relay's mission as a project to "create a relay of excellent teachers who are able to close the achievement gap in classrooms across the country" (Relay Graduate School of Education, 2017). Atkins refers to "zip code," as he explains that "it can't be the case that demography is destiny." The video then juxtaposes Atkins' voice with the uniformed legs and feet of students lining up in what appears to be a school hallway. In the subsequent frame, a Black male teacher is featured explaining to another Black male teacher that "our students are more likely to end up in jail or dead than in college." Allowing these teachers to remain in the frame only to speak to negative stereotypes devalues their expertise as educators and the children and communities they serve.

Relay echoes TFA's claim to be a successful provider of teachers from racially diverse backgrounds, noting that 60% of the graduate student body identify as people of color. The images and words of the footage lead one to ask how Relay might reproduce color-evasive scripts while actively recruiting teachers of color and, paradoxically, upholding practices that accelerate the displacement of Black teachers (White, 2016). While an increased retention of teachers of color benefits all chil-

dren, recruitment alone does not combat educational inequity or systemic racism.

The video then proceeds to the image of a poster strategically placed at the top of a flight of stairs adorned by college pennants, reading “Climbing the mountain to college!” Atkins ends by noting that excellent teachers ensure college bound students:

We are trying to prepare all students for success in high school and college. In order to do that, teachers are the biggest lever and we believe we can create a new generation of teachers to make sure that all students get to achieve at the highest level. In that case, demography is not destiny.

There are continual references to college access as a defining measure of success. While the notion of college readiness seems to operate rhetorically as evidence of rigor and thus equity, systemic inequities cannot be erased by classroom instruction. The deployment of color-evasive ideology demands that subjects change individually (under the guidance of saviors to accomplish the transformation), not the socially unjust system. Under neoliberalism, the responsibility of social transformation and academic achievement lies on each individual, rather than on the state. An educational agenda rooted in the logic of leadership, achievement, and redemption legitimizes color-evasiveness as a viable approach to teacher education and reproduces racism while promising the remediation of the American education system. Simply modifying the language without examining the underlying structures of institutionalized racism does not lead to equity. As DeCuir and Dixson (2004) argue, by seeking equality, structures and ideologies of inequity are hardly addressed or dismantled.

***“DO NO HARM:” DATA LITERATE
TEACHERS AND INTEREST
CONVERGENCE***

Programs like TFA have long sought to demonstrate teacher effectiveness through data

to obtain philanthropic support and solidify district level partnerships (Brewer & DeMarrais, 2015; Foote, 2009). What I want to highlight here is that the creation of nGSEs like Relay allows TFA to bypass university partners and generate funding, thus fulfilling the organization’s quest for expansion through direct monitoring of teachers and students through metrics. An important aspect of the Relay program is that teachers are required to provide evidence of students’ academic achievement to attain their masters degrees. Relay’s Student Growth and Achievement coursework documents note that “conferring degrees based on student growth and achievement is one of the main characteristics that distinguish Relay GSE from other graduate schools of education.” (Relay Graduate School of Education, 2017). Rather than conducting masters-level education involving research and reflection, Relay determines graduation eligibility in part through a culminating data narrative project where degree candidates must provide multiple sets of data to “demonstrate sufficient impact on student achievement in their classrooms” (Schorr, 2013), explicitly tying teacher preparation directly to student performance on assessments. While decades of research have demonstrated that a singular focus on test scores will only serve to exacerbate existing inequities and perpetuate harm to students (Zeichner & Conklin, 2016), the words from the Relay/GSE Year 2 Student Growth and Achievement Handbook suggest to new teachers that harm looks like low test scores:

In medicine, physicians pledge the Hippocratic Oath, committing, above all, to “do no harm.” Similarly, we ask teachers to generate at least 1 year’s worth of achievement in 1 year’s time—the educational equivalent of “do no harm.” We aim to do this by setting prescribed floors for the level of student achievement that each graduate student must achieve.

On the surface, it seems reasonable to expect that teachers hold high expectations for

students and that students would leave one grade prepared for the academic demands of the following year. Yet framing the teacher's role as a clinician savior and defining achievement solely in the form of gains on assessments ignores the cultural wealth of students and their communities while validating only one measure of academic competency (Yosso, 2005). To frame teachers as wholly responsible for "generating growth" neglects the existing assets that students bring with them to the classroom and the varied learning needs of students. Equating student performance on assessments with teacher performance constitutes one of the most pervasive myths of education, and it is tied to the myth of meritocracy when it ignores other factors impacting students beyond those that any teacher control.

The Call to "Get Better, Faster" and the Objectification of Teachers

I turn now to another source of programmatic innovation, Relay's emphasis on the rehearsal of prescriptive delivery of lessons through "deliberate practice." In a video of the same name, a faculty member explains that teachers gather weekly for a three-hour session where teachers "scrimmage upcoming lessons, building automaticity in their practice" (Relay Graduate School of Education, 2015). This phrase is attributed to one of Relay's induction texts, *Get Better Faster: A 90-Day Plan for Coaching New Teachers* (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2016). Written by the chief schools officer for high schools and K–12 content development at Uncommon Schools, the introduction addresses administrators and instructional coaches, explaining that the text is meant to be a toolbox to ensure that teachers "get better, faster" and "build a cohort of successful new teachers in 90 days" (p. 19). As they attempt to enact these moves under time constraints in the video, faculty and other teachers provide one another with feedback on the efficacy of the rehearsal, pretending to be students. The senior dean of faculty development explains the rationale for these deliberate practice sessions, lik-

ening teacher moves and teacher decision making to athletic training:

So the first thing we do is called a layup drill. That will isolate a specific teaching skill ... like how do you facilitate a turn and talk between students or how do you give a correction to an off task student? And we put them in small groups ... usually about three. One person will stand up and be the teacher and they'll just do the move for peers or a coach who's watching them and then they'll practice it again immediately. Then the next teacher will stand. And we will rotate through. These are like lay up drills in basketball. There's no resistance. No complex game strategy. Just how do you do the move? How do you learn to shoot the basketball?

I am not trying to suggest that clinical practice itself is without value. It is not surprising that newer teachers crave applicability and the pragmatic, and as Ben-Porath (2014) acknowledges, there is something about teaching that is like playing a sport: eventually one learns to play basketball not simply by discussing strategy and skills but by physically engaging in plays. However, there is a considerable difference between focusing teachers' attention on practices that facilitate and approximate responsiveness to students and routines grounded in behavior management models touted by "no-excuses" charter schools. An emphasis on rehearsing core practices like cold calling or narrating student behavior to maximize instructional time on task does not encourage teachers to practice responsiveness to students and their ideas (Kavanaugh et al., 2019). Kennedy (2016) argues that reducing the complexity of teaching to only the visible practices or strategies enacted in the classroom can lead to novice teachers mimicking procedures and moves without a robust sense of the purposes of such procedures and how they might figure into an overall lesson.

The clip shows small groups of teachers rehearsing teaching moves such as a turn and talk. One of the teachers in the video explains that he values the deliberate practice sessions because it gives him an opportunity to correct

his pedagogy: “it doesn’t allow me to practice the wrong thing for way too long that it gets in my body and becomes a habit.” This statement raises important questions about what is deemed correct practice in the institutional setting. Scholars of teacher education have posited that an emphasis on behaviorist core practices implies a singular standard, with differentiation or modifications then framed as the act of modifying for “others” (Phillip et al., 2018).

The approach suggested in the video and the induction text treats teaching as if it were “a set of empirically proven techniques that can be reduced to their core elements and reproduced” (Friedrich, 2015, p. 60). To do so eliminates the contingency and uncertainty inherent in teaching responsively to one’s students. Alim and Paris (2017) assert that culturally sustaining pedagogies are not interested in “pedagogical quick fixes or ‘best practices’ that teachers can drop into the same old tired curriculum that deadens the souls of vast numbers of children of color in U.S. schools” (p. 12). In rejecting the idea that students must conform or assimilate, culturally sustaining pedagogies are necessarily localized and contextualized, oriented toward students’ dynamic resources, and produce outcomes that are not easily measured by tests alone. Teaching is relational, and reflective teachers develop in response to and in dialogue with students, parents, and the school community.

A scrimmage stripped of these human elements oversimplifies the complex social emotional aspects of teaching and learning and implies an epistemology of technical teaching. This approach to teaching as technical work offers a certain kind of training for teachers in certain kinds of schools, socializing teachers into a “no-excuses” model where “teacher radar” is used to monitor student performance at all times and teaches typically deliver curriculum rather than designing it. The notion of teachers “building muscle memory to deliver instruction effectively to students the following day” reveals how market-based reform in teacher education leads to a striving for auto-

maticity and standardization. Practical teaching moves that center around anticipating students’ disengagement and surveillance might offer some initial reassurance to novice teachers, but they also position teachers as “complete” when they have mastered a set of responses.

CONCLUSION

According to Sleeter (2017), what most teachers learn about culturally responsive pedagogy in teacher education programs does not adequately disrupt deficit theorizing about students, particularly in schools where teachers are under immense scrutiny and pressure to improve student test scores. Thus the problems I have outlined here are not exclusive to Relay, and I do not seek to critique for the sake of critique. The recent attempt to create an SAT adversity score indicates the ways in which entrepreneurial reformers are continually creating new ways to obscure and recast underlying equity issues and double down on seemingly objective metrics as if we lived in a meritocracy (Patel, 2019). The latest iteration of the initiative seeks to measure a student’s background through a collection of data points rather than a single metric. At a time when metrics are being used to quantify and ultimately reduce the complexities of structural racism and its role in education, we must question how they work to solidify the meritocracy 2.0 project and their role in the broader teacher education landscape.

Little research has been conducted to examine the coursework or experiences of teachers learning to teach through nGSE programs, and given their rapid expansion, it is important to ask what stories teachers and students in this growing teacher education context tell and what insights are generated when they are able to share their experiences. This study represents only a preliminary attempt to understand the ways that teacher education in one nGSE envisions teaching and learning. Trujillo & Scott (2014) have shown that most TFA

alumni corps members believe that inequity in schools could be improved with greater teacher and student accountability and tying salaries to student achievement on tests. Further research is needed to consider how teachers completing their teacher certification through Relay and other nGSEs make sense of their teacher education and how these experiences impact their teaching in the classroom, and ultimately, the students they serve.

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NOTE

1. See Kretchmar, Sondel, and Ferrare 2014; Mungal, 2016; and Zeichner, 2017 for a more robust discussion of the policies that enabled Relay's emergence and funding from sources that include the New Schools Venture Fund and the Carnegie, Dell, Fisher, Gates, Schusterman, and Walton foundations.

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