

This film is a timely and poignant contribution, as the fight for rights of LGBTQI+ students is ongoing in Brazil and across the Americas. In a climate of conservative backlash to the expansion of rights, gender has become a battleground, often to the detriment of access to education for all, as exemplified with Brazil's Escola sem Partido movement,² protests against gender-inclusive guidelines in Colombia,³ and recent moves in the United States to censor content and block efforts to create inclusive environments,⁴ among other examples in the region. While this issue has gained some attention in comparative and international education scholarship in recent years, it is as yet understudied.⁵ Contributions by films such as this one can help expand understanding and reflection on this important topic, highlighting the need to further examine student experiences, school practices, and how policies have been shaped, contested, and implemented throughout the region.

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² Human Rights Watch, "‘I Became Scared, This Was Their Goal’: Efforts to Ban Gender and Sexuality Education in Brazil," report, May 2022, Human Rights Watch, New York, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2022/05/brazil_lgbt0522_web.pdf.

³ Sentiido and Colombia Diversa, "Mi voz cuenta: Encuesta de clima escolar LGBT en Colombia 2016," report, Sentiido, Colombia Diversa, Bogotá, 2016, <https://colombiadiversa.org/colombiadiversa2016/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/IAE-Colombia-Web-FINAL-2.pdf>; J. F. Serrano, "La tormenta perfecta: Ideología de género y articulación de públicos," *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad (Rio de Janeiro)* 27 (2017): 149–71.

⁴ M. Laviertes, "From Book Bans to ‘Don’t Say Gay’ Bill, LGBTQ Kids Feel ‘Erased’ in the Classroom," *NBC News*, February 20, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/book-bans-dont-say-gay-bill-lgbtq-kids-feel-erased-classroom-rcna15819>.

⁵ O. Pizmony-Levy, W. Liu, C. Moleiro, T. Msibi, M. Nascimento, and J. Ullman, "Out of the Closet and into the Classroom: Reassessing the Boundaries of Gender and Sexual Minorities in Comparative and International Education," call for papers, *Comparative Education Review* 64, no. 3 (2020): 557–59.

Hey! Teachers! Leave the Kids Alone? directed by Yulia Vishnevets, produced by Yevgeniya Vengerova, and edited by Olga Badina. OkaReka, 2020. 90 minutes.

Hey! Teachers! follows two young teachers—Katya and Vasya—as they navigate their first year of teaching at a public school in a small Russian town. Immersive filming with minimal commentary captures how these two teachers begin the academic year, participate in professional development, interact with students, and engage a small group of critically minded students in extracurricular activities. The viewers see some of the new teachers’ private lives—a party to celebrate one’s birthday or a solo camping trip. Most of the portrayal, however, rotates around the teachers’ actions and interactions in the classroom. Disruptive students get in the way of their efforts to impart knowledge or lead a discussion, exchanges of vulgarities turn into fist fights, and new teachers’ idealistic hopes of creating change gradually give way to despair. Katya leaves the school after three quarters of the academic year; Vasya is willing to return for the next year but is not given that opportunity by the school administration. At the film’s end, they maintain relationships with the students who participated in extracurricular activities but move onto doing other things in life. On the surface, the film argues that idealistic

new teachers with high aspirations for their students' ability to engage in critical thinking are crushed by the system and pushed out for their lack of conformity.

While the film is highly evocative, emotional, and at times painful to watch because of how those raw experiences are conveyed, the absence of contextual information and narrative explanation obscures important aspects of the story. Gaps created by this absence can be addressed through the director's interviews for the Russian media¹ and comments offered during the CIES film festivalette. It turns out that Katya and Vasya graduated from elite universities in Moscow and worked in a school through the program Teacher for Russia—a former Teach for All affiliate built on the Teach for America (TFA) model.² This context gives their challenges a new meaning—this film is no longer about what all new teachers go through but what teachers experience when they have no prior professional preparation for teaching. By offering an intimate look at failing initiatives that reformers worldwide present as universal solutions, the film speaks to several important lines of inquiry in comparative and international education.

While many teachers undoubtedly experience challenges during their first year on the job, more factors come into play for those who enter teaching through TFA-type programs. TFA adherents may indeed be idealistic and hopeful about the possibility of social change through education, but they are also a part of a flawed model that assumes that a novice can walk into a school and create “disruptive change”—the very hope of the film's main characters. Extensive research on the TFA model and its failures shed light on the thorny question of what constitutes sufficient knowledge for teaching. Graduates of elite institutions might demonstrate strong subject knowledge preparation. But teaching also requires other ways of knowing, such as pedagogical content and pedagogical knowledge.³ TFA members' classroom effectiveness has been limited, and their teaching did not create the dramatic change in student achievement that the supporters of alternative routes anticipated.⁴ Studies on TFA teacher retention in the United States have shown that 50 percent of recruits leave after two years of teaching, and more than 80 percent leave after three.⁵ Viewed from the angle of professionalism, Vasya's and Katya's struggles in the classroom, as well as their ultimate departure from the school, become less surprising. Positioned within the context of research on TFA, Teach for All, and their global affiliates,⁶ the film is no longer about

¹ Anna Malgina, “Ya Po-prezhnemu Veryu v Obrazovaniye.” Rezhisser Yulia Vishnevetskaya o Kartine *Katya i Vasya Idut v Shkolu i Yeye Geroyah*,” *Nastoyashchee Vremya*, September 6, 2021, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/vishnevetskaya-interview/31445951.html>; Larisa Artemova, “Pochemu Fil'm *Katya i Vasya Idut v Shkolu* ne Ostavit Ravnodushnym ni Odnogo Uchitelya,” *Vesti Obrazovaniya*, September 16, 2021, https://vogazeta.ru/articles/2021/9/16/culture/18017-pochemu_film_katya_i_vasya_idut_v_shkolu_ne_ostavit_ravnodushnym_ni_odnogo_uchitelya.

² Elena Aydarova, *Teacher Education Reform as Political Theater: Russian Policy Dramas* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019).

³ Lee Shulman, “Those Who Understand: Knowledge Growth in Teaching,” *Educational Researcher* 15, no. 2 (1986): 4–14.

⁴ Donald Boyd, Pamela Grossman, Hamilton Lankford, Susanna Loeb, and James Wyckoff, “How Changes in Entry Requirements Alter the Teacher Workforce and Affect Student Achievement,” *Education Finance and Policy* 1, no. 2 (2006): 176–216.

⁵ Julian Vasquez Heilig and Su Jin Jez, *Teach for America: A Review of the Evidence* (Boulder, CO: Education and the Public Interest Center, 2010).

⁶ Sara Lam, *From “Teach For America” to “Teach For China”*: *Global Teacher Education Reform and Equity in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Matthew. A. M. Thomas, Emilee Rauschenberger, Katherine

new teachers' idealism but rather about deprofessionalizing teaching and discrediting its expert knowledge, craft, and accumulated wisdom.

Inadvertently, the film captures the question of education in the context of socioeconomic inequality. From the director's interviews, it becomes apparent that Katya and Vasya—themselves from a more affluent background by Russian standards—were assigned to a school in a high-poverty area. Katya, throughout the film, makes comments about helping students see themselves as successful, thus echoing the globally circulated neoliberal narrative of individualized responsibility for the social conditions in which students find themselves and the meritocratic solution of having to pull themselves by the bootstraps to rise out of poverty.⁷ These comments are based on the myth promoted by Teach for All and its affiliates around the world that “inequalities in education seem to be the result of bad, uncaring, or uncommitted teachers, and it is only through the action of young, willing, and committed individuals that those inequalities can be reduced or eliminated.”⁸ As the familiar logic goes, poverty, underemployment, and unemployment can allegedly be addressed by sending in enthusiastic young people from higher socioeconomic classes to save their impoverished students from failure by helping them develop a positive self-image. Studies in economics and social sciences, however, have provided extensive evidence debunking those myths. Inequality can only be addressed through policies that curb excesses at the top, redistribute resources across the social strata, and invest in communities that have historically experienced divestment and other forms of resource extraction.⁹ Elite saviors do not bring about this kind of change. Instead, they perpetuate the charade of pretending to change the world even as they maintain the status quo of the unequal and unjust social order.¹⁰

However, these myths about social class seep through the film, partly because the director, herself a Moscovite from a privileged background, describes the film as “a tragical comedy about mingling with the masses” (in Russian: *khozhdeniye v. narod*). Snippets of conversations between Katya and “old” teachers indicate that parents from working-class or impoverished communities hold little regard for education. The viewer is expected to empathize with this perspective. The scenes of Katya's teacher-parent meeting show faces of tired and overworked middle-aged people who remain silent on camera. What can demonstrate the lack of parental care and concern more effectively than these blank stares? Yet, this classist portrayal contradicts reality. In an interview, the film director explained that Katya was encouraged to resign after three quarters because of parents' complaints. She was teaching Russian—the subject tested

Crawford-Garrett, eds., *Examining Teach for All: International Perspectives on a Growing Global Network* (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁷ Elena Aydarova, “Shadow Elite of Transnational Policy Networks: Intermediary Organizations and the Production of Teacher Education Policies,” in *Palgrave Handbook of Teacher Education Research*, ed. Ian Metier (Cham: Palgrave, 2022).

⁸ Daniel S. Friedrich, “Global Microlending in Education Reform: Enseñá por Argentina and the Neoliberalization of the Grassroots,” *Comparative Education Review* 58, no. 2 (2014): 310.

⁹ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: Norton, 2012); Thomas Piketty, *The Economics of Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (New York: Vintage, 2019).

on the national summative assessment that Katya's students would take at the end of the academic year. Parents asked the principal to assign a better teacher to their children out of concern that their children would fail. Hardly the action of people who do not care.

In the realm of educational politics, however, the film offers a poignant critique of the relationship between the state and school. The film captures a struggle between the liberal ideals that young teachers bring into a school and the conservative backlash they experience—be it the encounters with religion or the state surveillance of students' protests. In one scene, Katya murmurs that she could get fired if she publicly says there is no god. In another scene, the principal explains to teachers attending a professional development session that the work of a teacher is as important as the work of the Federal Security Bureau (FSB) and that teaching is service to the *gosudar'*—an old Russian word for a czar. In yet another scene, through a conversation between Katya and the assistant principal, the viewers learn that FSB—the KGB successor—had questions about students' extracurricular activities that new teachers supervised. After one of the students posted on social media a picture of himself in front of the blackboard with the message “Day of NO-Constitution” as a personal protest against Putin's regime, the new teachers got blamed for it. When Katya leaves but Vasya wants to stay, he is pushed out. The viewers get hints of administrators' perspective on his work: he is spreading dangerous ideas and presents a threat to the established order. The school exists to conserve and preserve the existing power arrangements, not question or subvert them. Anyone perceived as violating this dictum presents an imminent threat that must be eliminated.

This point is particularly poignant for the deadly moment of 2022 when the war in Ukraine is taking thousands of lives, but educators in Russia are pressured to discuss “a special operation against Nazis” and exalt the heroic actions of the Russian army. Teachers who dare to oppose state-sanctioned messages get fired and face criminal charges. This struggle over the school's role in upholding the power of the dominant groups or disseminating state-sanctioned messages is not unique to Russia. In the United States, 2021 and 2022 have become years of assault on truth, with legislative bans on discussions of critical concepts—race, racism, gender diversity, sexism, social inequality, trans rights, as well as student and teacher activism—sweeping across the nation. Teachers and principals have lost their jobs over bogus accusations of violating these bans. In this regard, *Hey, Teachers!*—with the English title intentionally echoing the famous Pink Floyd song “Another Brick in the Wall”—points to a system that punishes educators across the globe for attempting to create change. With the rise of authoritarianism worldwide, ideals lost in schools are opportunities for open discussion about not just ethical values but also basic human rights, dignity, and respect.

Overall, once the missing contextual details about the teachers' backgrounds and the contexts of their school are filled in, the documentary addresses several ongoing debates in the field of comparative and international education: how global reforms, such as the introduction of alternative routes into teaching represented by the global spread of Teach for All, play out in specific contexts; how attempts to solve the issues of social inequality through new teachers' enthusiasm inevitably fail; and how intensifying authoritarianism turns education into the tool of surveillance and social control. The film ends on a sad note of lost hopes and dashed dreams of creating change, but for the global educational community,

the pursuit of educating for freedom, democracy, equity, and justice has become more important than ever.

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The New Classmate (Nil Battey Sannata) directed by Ashwini Iyer Tiwari; produced by Aanand L. Rai, Ajay Rai, and Alan McAlex; and edited by Chandrashekhar Prajapati. Jar Pictures, Colour Yellow Productions, 2015. 100 minutes.

Ashwini Iyer Tiwari's *The New Classmate (Nil Battey Sannata)* is a lovely film. It is heartwarming. It leaves a smile on your face despite a somewhat preachy and predictable ending. The acting by the cast is superb. Really, at the face of it—the film does what it is supposed to do—pulls you in with a simple story about a mother and daughter. A mother whose aspiration is for her daughter Appu (Apeksha) to do better than her in life. To achieve this Appu has to do well in her studies. Appu, of course, is way more pragmatic. She prefers bunking school, having fun with her friends, and not wanting to study math. She truly believes that a domestic worker's child will become a domestic worker. It takes Chanda, her mother, to enroll in her school and challenge Appu to do better than her in math.

In many ways, Chanda's character captures the reality of millions of poor and low-income communities in India. Education for their children is seen as a ticket out of their cycle of intergenerational poverty. So much so, that education spending has gone up to 16 percent at the bottom of the pyramid while it's 34 percent among the top expenditure quintile.¹ But that is not the entire story. *The New Classmate* also interweaves a critical narrative of the Indian Education System and, in many ways, affirms Appu's belief—that education and hard work alone do not equal success in life. The film holds up a mirror to the sociology of education in India, where gender, caste, class, and economics play critical roles in determining access and opportunities.

India houses the largest number of young people in the world. It has the largest public-school education system—a severely underfunded one (India has the lowest GDP allocation to public education among the BRIC [Brazil, Russia, India, China] countries²), resulting in low education attainment, which is not directly correlated with employment. The state of girls' education in India is worse. Despite significant strides in increasing enrollment numbers, girls continue to drop out of school upon attaining puberty because of restrictions on mobility, sexual harassment, and the high burden on unpaid work that falls disproportionately on women and girls.³ A recent study found that 47 percent of graduates were unemployable in any skilled

¹ P. G. Rani, "Family Spending on Education in India Pattern and Determinants," NIEPA Occasional Paper no. 55, 2021, New Delhi.

² Stefan Trines, "Education in India," WENR, <https://wenr.wes.org/2018/09/education-in-india>.

³ World Bank, "Education Girls, Ending Child Marriage," <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2017/08/22/educating-girls-ending-child-marriage#:~:text=Girls%20who%20complete%20secondary%20education,and%20nations%20out%20of%20poverty>.