

# Critical Education

Volume 4 Number 12

November 15, 2013

ISSN 1920-4125

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## *From the Trenches: A Teach For America Corps Member's Perspective*

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Citation: Brewer, T. J. (2013). From the trenches: A Teach for America corps member's perspective. *Critical Education*, 4(12), 1-17 Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/183939>

An article in the *Critical Education* Series Teach for American and the Future of Education in the United States.

### **Abstract**

This article provides a unique voice on the alternative certification program known as Teach For America's (TFA). As a traditionally trained educator who entered TFA as a corps member, the author brings a unique auto-ethnographic perspective on TFA. Combining personal insights with data and theory, the paper addresses TFA's recruiting practices, the application and interview processes, Institute practices and use of indoctrination, a holistic overview of TFA's neoliberal theoretical approach to pedagogy, and TFA's final regional placement of its corps members. As TFA continues to grow to over 10,000 corps members, critical examination is necessary as TFA becomes evermore present in our nation's schools.



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## Introduction

Teach For America (TFA), founded in 1990 by Wendy Kopp, has become a “prestigious” alternative entry into the teaching profession in the United States. Its reach has also become global as it expands to 25 countries outside of the United States through its spin-off organization known as Teach For All (Teach For All, 2012). And while Kopp initially argued for the creation of a teacher corps as a means of addressing teacher shortages (Kopp, 1989), the domestic and international versions of TFA operate under the ideology that what is lacking in education are smart and motivated young college graduates. As the organization has grown, the shift in focus is aligned with the movement to privatize teacher education and public schools (Hursh, 2011; Lahann & Reagan, 2011; Weiner, 2011). What is more, this alignment with the neoliberal ideology of privatization is consistent with the organizations that fund TFA; namely, the Walton, Gates, and Broad Foundations (Saltman, 2010).

As a sign of its growing popularity and influence, TFA’s recruiting has grown in recent years primarily due to the perceived prestige of being a TFA alumni and alumnae (Johnson, 2010). In fact, TFA spends more money annually on teacher recruitment and furthering the perception of elitism than it does on teacher training (Horn, 2011). TFA has also enjoyed significant support from the last two presidential administrations as well as support from the public due to its ability to “articulate tragedy of educational inequity in a manner that is accessible to the public, largely through its use of statistics and examples” (Lahann & Reagan, 2011).

TFA service has been seen to have “the discourse of bourgeois social voluntarism which is exemplified by TFA’s highly ideologically motivated intervention in the education of the inner-city child. The TFA ideology is based on a post-Reaganite selfish idealism” (McCarthy, 1998, p. 142). The schools where TFA places its corps members are said to be among the nation’s worst (Veltri, 2008, 2010), and as a result of being understaffed with under-qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Knapp, 2001; Kozol, 1991; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Zeichner, 2003) student achievement data at these schools are significantly lower than suburban schools.

The research on the effectiveness of TFA is mixed at best. While some research suggests that corps members are as good as other emergency licensed teachers (Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004); some scholars conclude corps members are more effective in some subjects (Turner, Goodman, Adachi, Brite, & Decker, 2012; Antecol, Eren, & Ozbeklik, 2013), while other researchers question such claims in addition to finding that corps members are not as qualified or effective as traditionally trained teachers (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005; Fuller & Dadey, 2013; Heilig & Jez, 2010). So, where does that leave the school districts who staff TFA corps members, the students of corps members, and more importantly, the global shift in education reform that supports temporary solutions to more systemic issues causing the academic achievement gap? Given that teacher turnover affects students negatively (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2012), what dangers exist when an organization recruits individuals into the teaching profession for only two years? What if they quit earlier? The answers to these questions are not obvious given the complex nature of the questions and potential answers. While I have analyzed the phenomenon of TFA corps members quitting prior to the end of their two-

year commitment elsewhere (Brewer, in press) many more questions remain unexamined and unanswered about TFA, its practices, and the implications for our nation's students, all of which are too immense to undertake in a single study. What follows is an autoethnography that attempts to make sense of my experiences in TFA (conceptualized broadly), an overview of TFA's recruiting practices, its theoretical framework, and how TFA places corps members in their regions. As a traditionally trained teacher who joined TFA out of desperation to find employment during the recent economic downturn, I was afforded with the unique opportunity to observe, evaluate, participate, and challenge TFA from the inside. The purpose of this account is to provide the academic community with a corps member's qualitative perspective of TFA that may lead to a deeper understanding of and future investigation of the organization, its practices, and the implications within the context of larger research questions.

### **Method**

This work draws from my personal experiences within TFA in addition to interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and participant observation (Angrosino, 2008) conducted for a larger study examining the impact of TFA's theoretical framework and the impact it has on corps member retention (Brewer, in press). During the course of my two years within the organization, I kept a journal of my experiences and thoughts – essentially serving as fieldnotes. The interviews, as part of the larger study, were conducted during a summer while I worked on staff at Institute where I interviewed 20 corps members and other TFA staff.

### **TFA's Recruiting Practices**

My motivation to join TFA came out of desperation to find employment in a school district given that most were dealing with the economic recession by implementing hiring freezes. Other corps members join TFA because they believe in the "mission" of the organization, others join to bolster their resume's for law school, some join because they are not quite sure what they want to do with their lives following college and savor the idea of having two more years to figure it out, while some are stalked and recruited into the organization. Further, Veltri (2010) pointed out that TFA recruits potential corps members with a heavy emphasis on the personal benefits of joining rather than educational benefits for the students that corps member serve. Among these benefits are a full teacher salary, benefits, a stipend from AmeriCorps, and the prestige of TFA on a resume (Veltri, 2010, p. 16). During an interview, a 2009 New Orleans corps member exemplified how TFA targets individuals for recruitment:

I was pretty heavily recruited by a recruiting director on my campus because of leadership positions I held at school. I was the president of a pretty big organization and I'm pretty sure they got my name somehow and zeroed in on me. I honestly don't know if I would have applied had they not so heavily recruited me and encouraged me to finish up my application. I was interested in doing something with at-risk youth following an internship that I had; but, um, just never really took that next step. (Brewer, in press)

As Kopp suggested (2001), TFA provides the nation's smartest graduates from the most elite colleges a two-year service option following college graduation. TFA makes the argument that what matters most in a teacher is leadership and academic performance in college. However, Schalock (1979) suggested that a teacher's intelligence is not a significant predictor of teaching abilities.

Each prospective corps member, despite his or her reasons for joining, begins with an online TFA application. The specific scoring criteria for the online screening are closely guarded but consists of a point rubric system where applicants are awarded points based on GPA, college leadership roles, etc. (Confidential informant, personal communication, July 8, 2012). The TFA website informs readers that an individual's "potential as a corps member can shine through whether you've led your student government, achieved academic honors, managed a complex project at work, served our country in the armed forces, or rallied support for a cause that's important to you" (Teach For America, 2012). Further, the website states the specific skills TFA looks for include "demonstrated past leadership and achievement, perseverance and sustained focus in the face of challenges, critical thinking skills, superior organizational ability, respect for diversity, interpersonal skills to motivate and lead others, and a thorough understanding of and desire to work relentlessly in pursuit of our vision" (paraphrased).

After the online application is accepted, candidates are invited to participate in an hour-long phone interview. During the course of the phone interview, prospective corps members are asked how they would deal with different scenarios in the classroom, of which most prospective corps members answer with little to no experience with such issues. The interviewer and the interviewee take part in several role-play scenarios whereby the interviewer plays the part of a principal, parent, or student. The prospective corps member is told to ignore any pauses in the conversation due to the interviewer's need to type in the interviewee's responses to the questions and role-play scenarios. My experience seeking entry into TFA was no different. However, because I spent two years temporarily in finance following my undergraduate graduation while seeking employment in a school district, all of my questions were tailored to my business experiences. I was asked questions about challenges that I faced during my time in business (working with clients, managers, etc.). During these questions, I frequently attempted to weave into my responses how I overcame similar challenges as a student teacher. My initial thought was that if I could show that I had experience in the classroom and experience overcoming challenges in the classroom that the interviewer would see value in me as a prospective corps member. Rather, the interviewer routinely redirected my answers towards my business experience and even once asked me to only frame my answers based on my recent business work and not my student teaching experience.

Following another internal screening process, selected corps members who "passed" the phone interview are invited to a regional in-person interview. Many corps members drive and/or fly to a region relatively close to their homes to participate in this all day interview process. The day begins in a small room at the local TFA headquarters. My room held approximately ten other prospective corps members and two TFA staff that were conducting the day's events. It began with introductions and a brief overview of TFA followed by a very hard selling of TFA's need for corps members in the

Mississippi Delta. We were asked to strongly consider accepting a placement in the Delta region if we were accepted into TFA. After the sales pitch, each prospective corps member had to give a sample teaching lesson of exactly 5 minutes. Interviewees were told that they would be cut off promptly at 5 minutes. Each individual knew of this component of the interview and brought a prepared a lesson identified by grade level and subject matter. Realizing from my phone interview TFA was not interested in my student teaching experience and would possibly disregard any 5 minute sample of one of a hundred full lesson plans I already had, I chose to do a 5 minute lesson on the banking and financing Rule of 72. I characterized the lesson as a 12th grade economics class despite the fact that Georgia standards do not include the teaching of the Rule of 72. Using the other interviewees as stand-in students, prospective corps members conducted their 5-minute lessons. Following each lesson, there were approximately three questions asked by the two TFA staff members. Each staff person asked a serious question as if they were a principal, parent, TFA staff, followed by one question framed as a student in the respective grade being taught. In fact, when the interviewee's lesson was tailored towards elementary school, one staff member infantilized her voice to sound like an elementary student.

After the sample lessons, the interviewees were broken up into two groups supervised by TFA staff members to collaboratively solve a problem-based scenario. The staff members said that they would not intervene but that they would only take notes. We were told that it was not to be a competitive exercise. As I recall, my scenario was about a desire to create an after school program to tutor students that were falling behind. The challenge was that the principal was not necessarily in favor of the program given costs, students being on campus after hours, and transportation issues created for parents. We were told to work together to make the program a reality despite such obstacles. Sitting silent for a minute or so listening to other prospective corps members with no experience dealing with principals, parents, etc., I quickly realized that the exercise had indeed turned competitive. So, out of fear I would lose points for not joining the argument, I engaged in the debate providing solutions from my experiences. After a few minutes the exercise was over and if the conversation had been real I'm quite sure there would be no after school program as no one was willing to concede the argument. We then took a brief multiple choice test covering topics of which we signed confidentiality agreements not to disclose. After a lunch break, each prospective corps member came back for a one-on-one interview with a staff members. The interview was essentially identical to the phone interview, that is, with more scenarios and role playing all the while the staff member pounded away the interviewees' answers into a laptop. Depending on when the prospective corps member turned in the online application dictated when the above described process took place. The wait time between each event is different for everyone. For me, after my in-person interview, a month and a half passed before I received word via the TFA website that I was accepted.

Remembering back to the initial online application, I recall a full portion of the online application to TFA asked if I would be willing to teach special education. In a desire to get my foot into a school door, I selected yes. Subsequently, I was accepted into TFA as a special education teacher. I now understand that *anyone* who checks that box and is accepted into TFA is automatically slated to teach special education. While being grateful I had a teaching position, I knew that I did not want to, or more importantly, did

not feel qualified to teach special education. During my student teaching, I worked closely with a special educator and realized the amount of skill and training it takes to be a successful teacher of students with special needs. Given my new hesitation to start from scratch with a new content area, I began a dialogue with TFA. I started by sending emails asking that my teaching assignment be switched to middle or high school history as I held a degree and full certification to teach that subject. I was continually met with responses along the lines of, “If you are committed to close the achievement gap then you should want to work in special education because there is such a large gap” or just simply that I was already promised to the Atlanta Public Schools as a special education teacher.

Over the course of my summer Institute “training” with TFA, I attended a one-hour informational meeting about what it is like teaching special education. The meeting was led by a first-year corps member. There was an extremely limited amount of time during the five week training dedicated to teaching special education. In fact, I counted only two hours of training dedicated specifically to special education. This left me feeling as inadequate of a teacher as my fellow corps members with no training in pedagogy.

We were excused from Institute for one day to allow for an interview fair. Recalling that I indicated a desire to teach high school and specifically not teach elementary school, I was shocked to find out that the five or six interviews pre-scheduled for me were all as a special education teacher in elementary schools. I was told by TFA those were where the needs were the greatest. I asked if I could interview with a high school principal, even for a special education position, if I saw a table open. I was told “no” as two staff members questioned my commitment to TFA and to closing the achievement gap.

It was during the closing weeks of my Institute that I received an offer to teach middle school history in a position outside of my affiliation with Teach For America. I wanted to use this information as leverage with TFA as a last attempt at having my assignment switched. I sent one last email to the regional TFA staff notifying them of the offer. In fact, I even encouraged TFA to consider this position as my TFA placement as they indicated a desire to expand into Gwinnett County Public Schools, which they did in droves the following year. I received a phone call from a high-ranking individual at the regional level notifying me that a high school history position had “just opened up.” Coming off of two years looking for a history job within a drought of positions I found it startling that a position simply opened up. I was then asked to politely decline the position outside of TFA. Ultimately, I was placed through TFA teaching history at a local Atlanta Public School high school. I met my principal the first day of pre-planning as he had zero determination on whether or not to hire me and only knew me to be an incoming TFA corps member. Many principals find themselves in this position as TFA brokers with the district to “reserve” a specific amount of teaching positions for incoming corps members (Christmas, 2006). This practice calls into question the fate of traditionally trained teachers who may lose their job as room is made for corps members.

## **TFA's Pedagogical Framework**

Corps members learn the bulk of their pre-classroom knowledge during TFA's Summer Institute. Prior to reporting at a regional Institute (which may or may not be in the corps member's assigned teaching region), corps members travel to their assigned region for a week of Induction. Many corps members subsidize their travel expense through a grant and/or loan offered by TFA. It is during this week that a plethora of scheduled events (e.g., icebreakers, dinners, team building activities, etc.) take place. In many meetings, corps members are introduced to the historical and current status of the school districts they are being sent to. In terms of the "future" of the school districts that corps members will work with, corps members are told (at least at the Atlanta Induction in 2010) that we were on the front lines of the new civil rights movement and that our goal was to get students into college – even if we were assigned to teach elementary school.

Because TFA considers college enrollment as one indication of success (Kopp & Farr, 2011), having corps members focus on college for students in their classrooms is critical. To engage students in thinking about college, many corps members during their Institute collaborative teaching group and in their final placement use university mascots to group students for tasks, award bachelor degree diplomas as public reward, and develop "big goals" of college acceptance for all. In fact, some have pointed out it is easy to identify corps member's classrooms from non-corps member classrooms (Diamond, 2012) given the intent focus on college enrollment. As an educator I certainly do believe that every student should have the opportunity to attend college; however, I am not naive enough to believe that college is the right direction for all students. Many of my students graduated from high school and chose to attend a technical training college or an on-the-job training program and continue to report satisfaction. Remaining in touch with them, I know that they are moving forward with happy and productive lives, sans higher education.

TFA has made a name for itself as it recruits corps members to be the savior of students who come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds insisting that college acceptance is synonymous with ending poverty. And while TFA benefits from incorporating language from the civil rights movement, the organization explicitly denies the impact that socioeconomic predispositions have on students and their educational opportunities (see, for example, Farr, 2010). However, based on decades of scholarship, (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bullough, 2001; Coleman et al., 1966; Ravani, 2011; Sacks, 2007; Thorbecke & Charumilind, 2002; Willis, 1977) socioeconomic predispositions can in fact prove to be a viable indicator of student achievement and educational experiences. Additionally, parental educational attainment, according to Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (DeGraaf, DeGraaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; Nakhaie & Curtis, 1998; Sullivan, 2001; Tzanakis, 2011), has proven to be a hindrance or support to student's learning. But TFA continually denies the power of student's home lives. Corps members are required to read Steven Farr's (2010) *Teaching as Leadership* prior to their arrival at Induction and Institute. In his book, Farr explicitly challenges the findings of the Coleman Report (1966) by stating,

this report fostered a perspective absolving teachers and schools from responsibility for students' success or failure, encouraging a disempowering tendency to look 'outside their own sphere of influence for reasons why students are not succeeding. (Farr, 2010, p. 5)

The readers of Farr's book are to internalize that the socioeconomic realities that students face play no significant role in the students learning. In fact, readers are to believe that,

Highly effective teachers first seek root causes [for student failures] in their own actions. Because they see themselves as ultimately responsible for what happens in their classroom, they begin with the assumption that their actions and inactions are the source of student learning and lack of learning. (Farr, 2010, p. 185)

And while it is important for teachers to ensure that they are being responsible for their actions, it is dangerous to assume that teachers should bear the complete burden when so many outside factors play a role in student learning. TFA has packaged this theory into its Academic Impact Model (AIM) (Brewer, in press). Incoming corps members are introduced to the theoretical framework on day one of Institute. The model holds that at the foundation of all things related to student outcomes are teachers and the mindsets, beliefs, and skills that they hold. These mindsets, beliefs, and skills are said to inform teacher actions. So, novice corps members with little to no background in method training, pedagogical knowledge, or even child development psychology (all staple courses for traditionally trained educators) are told through the AIM that teacher actions are the sole determination of student actions which lead to student outcomes, positive or negative. During Observation Debrief Cycles (ODCs) at Institute, corps members sit with their Corps Member Advisor (CMA) and debrief a recently taught and observed (by the CMA) lesson. The things that went well during the lesson, and conversely the things that did not, are directed back to the corps member in the highest form of accountability - it was either the teacher that caused things to go well or entirely their fault if student assessments were poor. In an interview conducted at the 2011 Atlanta Institute, it is clear many corps members internalize such notions. A corps member reported it was, "ultimately the teacher's responsibility for student failure, not the student. I always ask myself if I gave them real reasons to succeed" (Brewer, in press).

This indoctrination into hyper accountability is taken even further as TFA and its summer Institute staff coordinate a hazing event in which staff members scold and ridicule corps members. During the second or third week of Institute after teaching during the morning and prior to group sessions, all corps members are told to report to the Curriculum Specialist (CS) room for a whole group session. During my first year as a corps member, the School Director (SD) began by ridiculing the work being done with students and expressing his absolute embarrassment that we were corps members. Following him, the School Site Administrator (SSD) yelled at corps members for the "terrible job" they were doing, how they were destroying the lives of students, and that we did not deserve to be considered corps members because we were not taking responsibly for our student's failures. As I looked around the room I counted no less than eight people crying. We were then asked if we even knew what TFA stood for. So, in



chorus we all chanted Teach For America. After a few rounds of that, the SSD said, “no, it stands for Totally Free Afternoon” after which corps members return to their university housing site for fun and games. However, instead of being received by many as a well-deserved surprise and break, many corps members cried more or expressed incredible anger. In fact, the SSD felt inclined to climb aboard the buses to apologize to the corps members before leaving the school site and going back to university housing. This hazing event took place at all of the other Atlanta schools sites that year as well as the following year. Working as a staff member during the following year, I voiced protest about the practice to my fellow staff members. However, because the event is so entrenched in TFA culture, the hazing event took place again while eliciting similar reactions from the new corps members that I witnessed the previous year. The event does little in the way of preparing future teachers; rather, it serves primarily as a hazing event that is perceived by more advanced corps members and alumni on staff as a rite of passage that all corps members should go through. In fact, each Institute staff discusses possible delivery methods or other shenanigans that would bring corps members to the brink of distraught right before the revelation of giving them an afternoon off.

In addition to dozens of hours of lesson planning and rehearsing to ensure perfection of delivery, corps members are also told that the crux of their ability to facilitate learning is in their ability to manage a classroom. And while classroom management is an important role for teachers to understand and frame within their own personalities, TFA insists corps members employ behaviorist methods of control. In fact, TFA has partnered with Lee Canter and his “Assertive Discipline” program (Canter, 2009). During Institute, corps members are required to use behavior narration. To summarize, this process includes making positive reinforcing statements after a command has been given with the assumption that all of the other students will abide by the order in an effort to get praise from the teacher. For example, if a teacher tells students to sit down and quietly begin working on an assignment, the teacher should point out those students in compliance by saying, “I see Johnny is sitting quietly,” “Natasha is doing her work,” and so on. The philosophy is that students who are misbehaving, or otherwise not engaged in the activity, will respond positively to these verbal cues. During corps member’s observations, they are assessed on their use of behavior narration. During my Institute, I was consistently given demerits on my evaluation because I refused to do behavior narration. For me, it felt canned and cold and did not match my personality. Also with my experience student teaching at the high school level, I made jokes to the other corps members about what they were in store for if they engaged in behavior narration with a group of teenagers. To further implement Canter’s system, TFA staff that are trained by Canter come into each Institute site to do what they call “Real Time Coaching.” During this process, a struggling corps member wears a walkie-talkie on his or her hip with a wire going up to an earpiece. A real time coach will then sit in the back of the room and communicate to the corps members exactly what to say, where to stand, etc. Corps members are prompted to use behavior narration and are fed intelligence about students who are not engaged. This authoritarian outlook on the role of a teacher culminated during my first Institute as corps members competed on who had the best “teacher face.” During this TFA organized competition, no joy or smiles were allowed, only strict and stern faces would be considered winners and would progress in the competition bracket. All of these actions, when coupled together, fit within TFA’s

dedication to produce a corps of teachers who are committed to hyper-accountability not only for their students; but also for themselves.

The type of hyper-accountability found in the AIM, which is closely partnered with TFA's Teaching As Leadership rubric (TAL) as espoused by Steven Farr (2010), is situated within neoliberal calls for extreme teacher accountability (Ahlquist, Gorski, & Montano, 2011; Goldstein, Macrine, Chesky, & Perry, 2011; Rothstein, 2008) as a way of reforming schools by ignoring larger societal inequities like access to healthcare, livable wages, homeownership, and the rise of poverty and incarceration among non-whites (Kovacs & Christie, 2011). By ignoring these issues, social and economic inequality is only further exacerbated. For the corps members involved in this type of thinking, having a strict perspective of an internal locus of control, as espoused by the AIM, can lead to developing unrealistic expectations for their students and themselves.

To what extent does such thinking create the space for disillusionment and burnout? Certainly teachers that accumulate 18 hours of lead instruction time prior to becoming the teacher of record will struggle in the classroom. Are corps members then to believe that it is their mindsets, beliefs, and or skills causing the continuation of the achievement gap? Interestingly, TFA does not want corps members to understand the realities that inner-city students face. In fact, Kopp stated, "There is a power in inexperience - that it makes a huge difference to channel the energy of young people, before they know what's impossible and when they still have endless energy, against a problem that many have long since given up on" (Downey, 2011, p. A13). This ideology of exploitation has been the primal impetus for criticism of TFA corps members. In fact, many corps members blame their shortcomings on their initial naivety (Veltri, 2008).

### **Corps Members in Their Region**

As stated previously, I was originally slated to teach special education; but, after successfully advocating for myself, I was switched to a high school history assignment. The speed at which this change took place following what TFA may have interpreted as a threat to leave the corps for another teaching position was quite curious. In an interview for Ed Week's Living in Dialogue blog (2012), Heather Harding argued that corps members are not "forced upon a school or principal," and in fact, "[t]he decision to hire Teach For America corps members is made by school districts and individual principals, alone" (Cody, 2012). As a contributor, I pointed out such a statement was a direct attempt to distort facts and/or shows that the national TFA staff is out of touch with the school districts that take corps members. Prior to my application to TFA and during my search for employment as a teacher, a principal at a Title I school in Gwinnett County Georgia told me that he couldn't hire me to work in a school like his (he pointed out the specific challenges teaching in a Title I often creates) since my only teaching experience at the time of my interview was student teaching. However, the following year, the principal apparently abandoned his devout commitment to hiring experienced teachers as he hired a handful of TFA corps members. This, for me, became evidence of an incredible forgoing of previous hiring standards or it proved there were invisible hands at play forcing corps members into positions in which they were not welcome.

But this was not an isolated event. Because my teaching assignment was changed towards the end of the summer, the first day that I met with or spoke with my principal was the first day of pre-planning. While my relationship with my principal became a good one, he was initially irritated he was forced to take on another TFA teacher. In fact, the situation was more than just taking on another corps member; rather, the traditionally trained and experienced teacher who held the position that I would take was forced to vacate his job the day prior to my arrival. The teacher was “leveled” due to low student population projections.

It has been argued that replacing traditionally trained and otherwise experienced teachers with novice TFA results in negative outcomes for students (Cody, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2005). Also, during layoffs in the recent economic crisis, TFA corps members have been spared and many have been given immunity towards leveling or layoffs given their TFA status (personal communication, 2011) while other corps members have been hired in spite of teacher layoffs (see, for example, Cancino, 2010; Takahashi, 2012a). At the end of my first year of teaching there was to be additional leveling of staff based on student population projections. The school originally had four social studies teachers, one of whom I replaced, and needed to be reduced down to three. My principal told me not to worry because I “couldn’t be touched because I was TFA.” My initial thought was that perhaps this only happens in Atlanta. However, the Clark County School District in Nevada announced in June of this year it was laying off 419 teachers and eliminating more than 1,000 teaching positions in the following school year to balance its budget (Takahashi, 2012b). However, despite such deep economic challenges the board agreed to hire 50 TFA corps members and pay TFA a “finder’s fee” of \$2,500 for each corps member (Takahashi, 2012a). The finder’s fee, in more economically prosperous times, can be much higher (Veltri, 2010). As stated above, TFA corps member’s teaching positions are not controlled by local principals; rather, TFA enters into a memorandum of understanding with the school district to provide a specific amount of corps members to specific teaching assignments months prior to the beginning of the school year (Christmas, 2006). Further, my interviews, and experiences in TFA, show many corps members are placed in teaching assignments that are not in alignment with undergraduate studies. Such practices fill classrooms with underprepared teachers and create the opportunity to widen the very achievement gap TFA claims it is closing.

In an effort to grow its financial coffers, TFA frequently brought visitors to my classroom. From John Barge (Superintendent of the State of Georgia), Matt Kramer (President of TFA), Kristin Bernhard (Education Policy Advisor to the Governor), Chip Rogers (then Georgia Senate Majority Leader), and countless other state elected officials and TFA donors over my two years. In addition to these dog and pony shows, TFA reaches out to local businesses to sponsor a corps member. The legal firm McKenna Long & Aldridge sponsored me at a price tag of \$10,000. None of this money went towards my classroom in the form of supplies, nor did it go to alleviate barriers to student performance (e.g., access to food, healthcare, technology at home, etc.). Rather, it bolstered TFA’s training and recruiting budget for future corps members.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to report and make sense of my experience in TFA as a corps member. I began publically voicing skepticism about the organization as my second year drew to a close. Given the nature of my questioning, I have been sought out by other corps members and alumnae on Facebook and emails who seek to lambast my questioning and lack of dedication to TFA and to “closing the achievement gap.” I am told what is not needed is criticism of the organization, rather, a focus on “what is best for kids.” Despite this negative notoriety within the organization, I continue to challenge the ideology and practices of TFA even down to examining paternalistic statements about “kids” and what is or is not “best” for them. And while most who have contacted me have expressed how vehemently they abhor my outspokenness, there are a growing number of other corps members and alumnae who are beginning to organize against the organization.

However, despite increasing criticism from alumnae and researchers (see, for example, Barnum, 2013; Fuller & Dadey, 2013), TFA – and its lobbying arm known as Leadership for Educational Equity – continues to play an increasing role in shaping the discourse around teacher preparation and education policy (Strauss, 2011). And, as stated previously, this impact is not limited to education policy in the United States as TFA continues to expand internationally through its spin-off organization known as Teach For All serving as a manifestation global neoliberalism. So, as TFA continues to grow domestically and abroad, more scrutiny must be placed on its leaders, theoretical framework, and its corps members. Specifically, more in-depth studies need to be conducted to determine the long-term impact, whether positive or negative, that corps members have on student learning. There is still a great need for more scholarly investigation into TFA as well as outlets for disenchanting alumnae to share their experiences.

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ISSN 1920-4175

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