Critical Education

Personal Responsibility
The Effects of Becoming a (Teach For America) Teacher

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Abstract

There has been a great deal of research about Teach For America (TFA) teachers' efficacy and tenure in the classroom. However, there is little research that examines how TFA (as an organization) recruits for and then shapes the behaviors and attitudes of its teachers, or about the short- and long-term effects of that initiation period. This paper argues that this initial recruitment and training have clear effects on these teachers' mindsets as well as their desire to stay in teaching. The data for this paper come from a variety of sources, including a three-year ethnography of the same cohort of TFA corps members. Specifically, the three stages of TFA's recruitment and training practices (recruitment, application, and training) are examined in order to analyze how the TFA staff recruit college students and how they meld a group of recent college graduates with little teaching experience into a relatively uniform group in terms of pedagogical mindset. This initial training also has a long-term impact in that many alumni have a more nuanced and teacher-centric view of education after they leave the program than before they entered. For some, the teacher is still the main actor and cause for results in the classroom, but many also understand the effects of other societal factors on educational attainment.

Introduction

Teach For America (TFA) is a nationwide teacher recruitment and placement program that supplies teachers to low-income schools for a two-year teaching commitment. In some states, it also acts as an alternative certification program, thus allowing TFA teachers to bypass other certification programs. Since its inception in 1991, it has recruited about 35,000 college graduates, trained them primarily through a five-week summer teacher training institute, and then dispersed them to about 40 different regions. The TFA teacher, or corps member, is given periodic in-classroom support by TFA staff members and is required to attend additional training sessions on some nights and/or weekends, dependent on the policies of their region.

Numerically, TFA is a small program - as of 2008, it contributed less than 1% of new teachers in America, although numbers have increased somewhat in recent years.[1] However, its effect is larger than its numbers. As its website and recruitment personnel overtly state, TFA has both short-term and long-term goals for its teachers. In the short term, they want corps members to have a large and positive impact in their classrooms. However, since the mandatory stay in teaching is two years, the organization also places a great deal of importance on its long-term goal for the corps members: they were recruited for their intelligence, ambition, and track record of success, so TFA expects them to become leaders in a multiplicity of professions after leaving the classroom, including education, law, medicine, and politics. After reaching these leadership positions, the then-alumni should be able to affect education and the racial achievement gap through the means of their respective professions.

Additionally, I have found that TFA functions as a force for education reform, sending alumni/staff members to states in advance in order to make sure that corps members are needed and wanted in local districts. Additionally, those staff members encourage laws that allow for greater freedom in alternative certification of teachers, if necessary. In this way, even though TFA is quantifiably small, treating its numbers as synonymous with its impact is misleading. This paper argues that we, as researchers, need to examine TFA's recruitment and training practices and policies because it has a large effect on education reform in America: TFA deliberately picks elites to join, has a well-run and thoughtful plan for how to train those individuals, and a long-term plan for the effects that those individuals will have on education in America, as well as simultaneously acting as a force for legislation that allows for greater flexibility in the certification of teachers. Since some of the TFA alumni have fulfilled the long-term goal of moving into positions of power in various professions that have an impact on education, their thoughts on education (and the genesis of those thoughts) are important to understand.[2] Therefore, this paper answers the following questions: how does TFA recruit and

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[1] My own calculation – in 2008, about 388,000 new teachers entered both public and private K-12 schools in America (NCES 2011), while Teach For America contributed 3,700 of those new teachers (http://www.teachforamerica.org/press-room/press-releases/2011/teach-america-announces-record-number-teachers-2008-0 - accessed 1/16/13).

[2] While it would be impossible to list the profession(s) of every TFA alumnus, it is certainly true that several alumni are high-profile in the world of education reform and politics in America. One of the most often-referred to examples is Michelle Rhee, the former chancellor of D.C. public schools, but the alumni interviewed for this paper were less well-known than Ms. Rhee. For example, several of them served on school boards, were leading schools, had become politicians, or were lawyers who devoted their pro-bono time to school matters. Certainly, not every TFA alumnus is that connected to education or education reform in America, but this small (and growing) cohort of similarly trained and experienced individuals who feels morally obligated to help certainly has the potential to affect education in America.

train its corps members? What effects do that recruitment and training have, and how do those effects play out in the classroom and beyond?

Literature

While separated for clarification, the two literatures reviewed below that focus on Teach For America and how teachers acquire a professional identity are not mutually exclusive. Specifically, much of the literature on TFA focuses on comparing corps members with other teachers who entered the classroom from traditional routes (and consequently acquired their professional identities differently). Additionally, since the literature on teacher identity formation generally finds that a teacher's entrance pathway matters for their attitudes and tenure in the classroom, this suggests that an examination of TFA's recruitment and training practices is needed to determine how they affect participants.

On Teach For America

Much of the research done on Teach For America is comparative. That is, corps members are usually compared with other teachers with similar years of experience, but who may have a different certification type. Generally, the metric used is student standardized test scores or teacher tenure (years in the classroom), and the aim is to determine TFA's efficacy. This determination can impact funding (TFA receives multiple private and public grants every year) and also the reception of the program (some school districts may not hire TFA teachers if they are not seen as effective).

The literature is split as to the answers to those questions. In terms of comparison based on certification type, TFA teachers have been commonly compared with teachers who have a traditional certification. To give some brief background: there are two ways to get certified as a teacher in America. Traditional certification comes from study at a school of education and may be accompanied by a degree in education. Alternative certification allows individuals to gain certification while simultaneously teaching, sometimes through courses at night or on the weekends. As of 2007, there are about 1200 schools of education in America that offer traditional certification (Levine 2007) and, as of 2009, about 600 different alternative certification programs, all with their own differing requirements (Feitritzer 2009). About 65-70% of new teachers enter through traditional certification (TC) programs.[3] While I found a handful of TFA corps members who had traditional certification, by far the majority of corps members are alternatively certified. Some researchers have found that TFA teachers have positive or neutral effects on student achievement and schools, as compared to the similar traditionally certified population (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, and Rockoff 2008; Decker, Mayer, and Glazerman 2004; Glazerman, Mayer, and Decker 2006; Kane Rockoff, and Staiger 2006; Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque 2001; Xu, Hannaway, and Taylor 2011), while other researchers have found just the opposite (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, and Heilig 2005; Laczko-Kerr and Berliner 2002), and some others have found mixed results (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff 2006).

On the pro-TFA literature side, specifically, Decker et al. (2004) and Glazerman et al. (2006) found that elementary TFA teachers in Baltimore, when compared to teachers in the same schools with randomly assigned students, had the same growth in reading standardized test scores over the school year, but outperformed the control teachers in mathematics. Xu et al.

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[3] 2007-8 *Schools and Staffing Survey*, National Council on Education Statistics

(2011) studied the same question of efficacy, but in the secondary school setting in North Carolina. They found that TFA teachers, as compared to non-TFA certified teachers, had a positive effect on student achievement, particularly in science. This may be due to their stronger academic preparation in math and science, even when compared to certified teachers of more than three years of experience, suggesting that improving teacher quality may lie in raising the academic bar during the teacher selection process. In fact, Boyd et al. (2008) have found that the presence of TFA teachers and other teachers from similar alternative certification programs has led to a marked increase in the academic qualifications of New York City teachers since 2000, thereby improving student achievement.

The literature that found that TFA teachers have negative effects on students generally criticizes the teachers as being ill-prepared for teaching. Using data collected in Houston from 1995-2001, Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) found that the effect of teacher certification and experience greatly outweighed any other variable in predicting student achievement and that TFA teachers' students tested at the same level as other uncertified teacher. Overall, the "TFA effect" was only positive in the earlier years of the data, when more TFA teachers were certified and for one test in mathematics. TFA teachers had a negative effect in later years and on reading scores, likely because of their lack of certification and previous teacher education courses (Darling-Hammond et al. 2005). Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) concur with this finding, using data from two years (98/99 and 99/00) and teachers' classroom average on the Arizona standardized exam to match undercertified teachers (TFA and other uncertified teachers) with certified teachers on grade level taught and highest degree attained, then comparing the student achievement levels. Overall, TFA teachers performed at the same levels as other uncertified teachers. The effect of having an uncertified teacher was the equivalent of two months less instruction, as compared to the scores of the certified teachers (Laczko-Kerr and Berliner 2002). This result may be problematic in that it does not account for years of experience – it seems possible that certified teachers may have more years of experience than the undercertified, so matching them only on grade level taught and highest degree may be inaccurate.

Boyd et al. (2006) found mixed results when researching TFA teachers' efficacy, as measured by standardized test scores in New York City in 1998-2003. They found that having a TFA teacher (as opposed to a traditionally certified teacher) increased math achievement levels, but decreased reading levels. Overall, after studying the many different pathways that one could take to be a teacher in NYC public schools, they found that the within-pathway variance was greater than the between, so these pathways may be a means for attracting different teachers with differing strengths. Constantine et al (2009) somewhat concur, finding that there was so much variance between certification pathways that the binary of alternative and traditional may be meaningless.

In regards to the second question of tenure/attrition rates, researchers have found that the majority of corps members do leave the classroom by their third year of teaching. Independent estimates range from 60-87%, which is greater than both TFA's estimate of 40% and the percentage of comparably traditionally certified teachers, so there is little question that their attrition rates are higher (Miner 2009; MacIver and Vaughn 2007). However, given that one of TFA's goals is to construct an alumni movement of individuals interested in educational reform, what happens to them once they have finished their commitment? McAdam and Brandt (2009) studied those individuals who completed TFA in the years of 1993-8 and compared them to those who were also accepted in those years, but who either dropped out or who choose not to take up their acceptance in the program. Overall, they found that "85% of graduates report a very

positive experience in TFA" (2009: 966), and that those graduates report higher pro-social attitudes than drop-outs or non-matriculants, but that they also report less community service and civic activity. In contrast, Dobbie and Fryer (2011) studied those individuals who applied to TFA in 2007. They used TFA's internal databank of email addresses to email a survey to all applicants, and compared those individuals who were immediately above and below the cut-off for admission in 2007. This determined that participation in TFA in 2007 resulted in higher faith in the ability of poor children to compete with their wealthier counterparts and caused those who wouldn't have entered or stayed in education to be in K-12 teaching and other education jobs at higher rates than their very similar peers who did not gain admission. They also found that participation in TFA increased white-black tolerance by almost a standard deviation, likely because of the contact hypothesis (interpersonal contact with another group increases tolerance of that group).

This lack of consensus in research about TFA may be due to differing variable configuration, but it also may be due to the national nature of TFA– different regions have different training methods and populations, so it is unsurprising that researchers studying different regions would have divergent results. Also, in speaking with TFA staff, I have learned that the organization changes its training and selection methods each year to attract and prepare those it believes are most likely to make significant gains in the classroom, so it is possible that results from, for example, its 1995 corps members will be different from results from its 2007 corps members. To my knowledge, no one has published a study that focuses on exactly how TFA recruits and trains its teachers, and the effects of that recruitment and training.

On Teacher Training

There is a plethora of literature on how to best train teachers in America, in the hopes of increasing both teacher retention rates and student achievement. Spatial constraints do not allow an exhaustive review of this literature (especially because it is sometimes subject-specific, focusing on how to best train secondary math teachers, for example), but broadly, one consistent finding among the majority of this literature is the importance that the researchers place on the teacher training itself – it seems clear that many believe that there may be a path-dependency effect at play, in that how a teacher enters the profession may affect his or her success and feelings about that profession. Somewhat problematically, some of this research sometimes treats that professional identity of "teacher" as a static end goal to be created through the acquisition of pedagogical knowledge and/or position in a socio-professional school network. Additionally, in their review of research on teachers' professional identity, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) point out that professional identity, as a concept, is rarely defined within the text, and that when it is defined, there is no consistency across the literature. This may be reflective of the confusion within the teaching field about who a teacher is or should be, or it may be simply a lack of consensus among researchers. Overall, the importance of socio-professional context is highlighted in this literature, albeit in a multiplicity of sometimes conflicting methodological and theoretical frames.

The importance of informal learning in concert with or even in place of formal mentoring and instruction is often pointed to as integral to that identity formation in student and beginning teachers: McNally (2006) found that informal learning and relationality (to other teachers) are highly related to how or if beginning teachers in Scotland develop a professional identity as teachers. In other words, peer effects (one's colleagues and/or entering cohort) matter. Zembylas (2005) concurs on the importance of relationality, but places the emphasis on the teacher's relationship with him- or herself. Specifically, that relationship is with his or her own emotions

as a catalyst for forming and reforming a multiplicity of identities called a "teacher-self" (109), but it may be affected or formed in concert with one's colleagues or professional mentors.

Other research focuses on the social and political context that the teachers are immersed in, and the teachers' linkage with that context as necessary for a sense of identity as a teacher to develop. Timostsuk and Ugaste (2010) point to the importance of a teacher's sense of place and purpose within an overall societal context, both within their schools on a micro level and within society at large on a macro level, suggesting that relationality and networks are implicit in forming a teacher's identity. However, there is little definition of relationality or nuance in the findings of what type or what strength of relationship matters. Lasky (2005) finds that current reform movements that cause teachers to feel more managerial in relationship(s) with students can disrupt an already formed identity as a "teacher" and cause disengagement with the profession. Overall, teachers form and disrupt their identity in relation to surrounding circumstances and pressure.

While the literature on teacher identity may not be able to find a consistent definition for what teacher identity actually is, it does seem to converge on several findings: (1) relationships with other colleagues matter in "becoming a teacher" both in terms of informal knowledge transfer and emotional support and (2) context - both on the macro societal and micro school level - is important. Thus, it seems possible or even likely that teacher identity may not, in fact, have one definition. If context and socio-professional networks are implicit in forming identity, and different teachers have different contexts and networks, then it seems likely that a Teach For America corps member (who has a much different context and socio-professional networks than a traditionally certified teacher) may experience forming that identity in a much different manner than has been studied previously. And, the effects of that formation may be different from those experienced in other methods of entering the classroom. Thus, it is important to research the specific contexts in which TFA teachers enter the classroom and the attitudes they form about teaching.

Data and Methods

The data for this paper come from multiple sources: over 100 semi-structured interviews with TFA staff members and alumni, textual analysis of the TFA-produced education textbooks and other training materials, and three years of ethnographic fieldwork with a cohort of TFA teachers. Since I am an alumna of the program, TFA granted me early access to the applicants and allowed me to participate in all their training activities, including taking part in the summer institute. The corps members were generous in their reception of me - after finishing their summer training from TFA, they invited me into their homes and classrooms over their two-year commitment. Additionally, they shared their personal journals, blogs, and emails with me. In total, I estimate I spent between 4-5,000 hours with staff and corps members.

To focus data collection after the first six months, about 12-15 corps members were selected from the overall pool of 87 who joined in that year in the Connecticut region to follow in depth during the three-year data collection. Those individuals were chosen in order to provide differing perspectives on the basis of race, gender, age, school type (public versus charter school placement), school level (elementary, middle, secondary), living situation (whether they lived alone or with other corps members), and education background (some had majored in education, others had never taken an education course before). Connecticut was chosen as a region for two reasons: it is the state with one of the largest achievement gaps in America (Vanneman et al.

2009), which allows us to see these teachers in the trenches of closing the achievement gap. Additionally, I lived in the area at the time, which allowed for greater thoroughness and spontaneity of data collection. This was not a randomly selected sample, so I do not claim generalizability. Rather, this sample was purposefully selected to gain greater insight as to how TFA's recruitment and training methods affected individuals with different experiences and viewpoints. Corps members were engaged in multiple places: their homes, classrooms, training courses at a local university, nearby coffee shops, and over the phone and video chatting programs when they wished to speak to me at times when I couldn't be physically present. At the end of the three-year data collection (about 6-8 months after they finished their two-year commitment), I followed up with them to do exit interviews, in which they reflected on the impact of TFA on their lives.

Additionally, I was able to interview both alumni and staff members of Teach For America (these categories are not mutually exclusive). I had a high response rate for this research: only one person ever demurred of the about 100 I approached. This appeared to be indicative of the passion that alumni had for Teach For America and the education system in general – both negative and positive. In regards to staff interviews, I deliberately approached those who had responsibility for constructing TFA's recruitment and training protocols, as well as those individuals who were out in the field and implementing said protocols. Alumni were collected through a network sample, though I was careful to speak to individuals who had both negative and positive experiences with their time with TFA. Overall, interviews varied in their length. Some were repeated and took over 5-10 hours to complete, while others took less than 30 minutes. I did not develop specific questions in advance so as not to disrupt the natural flow of the conversation, but did predetermine several topics that I wished to cover.

When possible, interviews with staff members and alumni were either recorded via a digital voice recorder or written responses in a field notebook. During fieldwork, when possible, detailed notes as to corps members' actions and words were written *in situ*. Sentences in quotation marks below were recorded verbatim. All notes and interviews were then transcribed as soon as possible and coded multiple times thematically both during and after data collection. TFA textbooks and other written materials (such as blogs, journals, and emails) were also scanned and imported into the same coding software, thus allowing for interconnections to emerge holistically.

A note on researcher reflexivity: I am an alumna of TFA, so it is likely that staff and alumni allowed me greater access to their thoughts and information, as well as trusted me more because of this shared identity. The corps members confirmed that this status caused them to trust me faster and with more depth than if I had been an "outsider." As a qualitative researcher, I do not pretend to be objective, but it is important to be open about possible biases that may affect my results.

Findings

Previous research has found that how teachers enter the classroom and construct their initial socio-professional identity can affect how they construct their notion of the responsibilities and impact of teaching. Therefore, understanding how TFA teachers are recruited, apply, and are trained should be helpful in understanding their views on education while in the program, as well as after they have left the program. Chronologically, TFA staff members initially recruit

undergraduates[4] during their junior and senior years. At that point, the lengthy application process begins, and further solidifies the applicant's desire to be a corps member and their conception of what a good teacher is. Upon admission, the overt training begins: individuals receive their copies of TFA-written textbooks and pedagogical materials, as well as training exercises and classroom reflections to be filled in after visiting local schools.

About twelve weeks before they enter their own classrooms, formal training begins. The summer before the new corps members enter their own classrooms, they must attend TFA's weekend orientation session in their assigned region and then travel to the five-week Summer Teaching Institute, colloquially called "teacher boot camp." There are several of these institutes scattered around the country, allowing corps members to student-teach in geographic regions similar to those of their final teaching placement while simultaneously undergoing a uniform training and acculturation process. As will be expanded below, during all three stages (recruitment, application, and training) of this acculturation/identity formation process, two clear messages were communicated to and accepted by the corps members: 1) the racial achievement gap in America is an immense and systemic issue that requires the attention of the best and the brightest and 2) they have a *personal responsibility* to do whatever they can to close that gap. These messages are initially conveyed during recruitment and application, but are clearly and consistently communicated during the summer training institute and when the corps members enter their classrooms. The short-term effects seem to be that corps members expend a great deal of personal energy in pursuit of student learning and expect their peers to do the same, regardless of occasional speeches about work-life balance at which they roll their eyes.

The long-term effects are more diverse: alumni interviewed for this project report that they have informed and firmly entrenched opinions about what will work to close the achievement gap. However, only some still report that they believe that teacher actions are the main cause of student success. In other words, that sense of personal responsibility for helping to close the gap has persisted strongly in many alumni, but not all. Since many of these corps members will either stay in the classroom or enter professions in which they can affect educational reform (and teacher salary/expectations), this belief that has been fostered by TFA can have an effect on educational culture in America. This acculturation process begins with the first contact an applicant may have with TFA: a recruitment director.

Recruitment

Recruitment for TFA is a thoroughly-planned and well-executed process that takes place primarily on college campuses. During data collection, I happened to be at a coffee shop to see an encounter that demonstrated how organized the process is, as well as how quickly it conveys TFA's message about the immensity of the achievement gap and the need for the elite to take a personal responsibility for it. On that morning, a recruitment director in her late twenties dressed in business attire was camped out at a prominent table in a campus coffee shop tapping away at her laptop, which was emblazoned with a red, white, and blue TFA logo. From my perspective, I could see the spreadsheet that she was compiling about admissions leads. Precisely on the hour, a young college woman in business casual walked in the door and the two exchanged pleasantries before sitting, smiling all the while. When they sat, the college student's freshly ironed shirt did

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[4] TFA also recruits graduate students and those who have recently graduated college, although this is not the majority of their population. Since the majority of applicants are undergraduates, this paper will focus primarily on them. The recruitment process is materially similar for all applicants.

not touch the back of the chair and I was able to hear them talking about mutual acquaintances on campus. Within a few minutes, they began talking in earnest about "the mission" - the goal that one day, all children in this nation will have an equal opportunity to receive an excellent education - and how this college senior might further this mission in the region of her choice. This might have been the applicant's first formal contact with Teach For America, but it's unlikely that it's the first time that the recruitment director has heard about her.

In fact, as several recruitment directors later told me, this young woman probably had her own row on that spreadsheet, detailing her leadership on campus, her contact information, who referred her, and who the best person is to follow up with her. Is she interested in law school after TFA? There's an alumna at the university's law school who will email her within a day of this meeting to answer any questions. Does she want to stay in teaching permanently? There's an alumnus who is principal of a local middle school who will call her to talk about how TFA's training can aid her in becoming a great teacher and educational leader. This process not only provides the possible applicant with information about TFA as an organization and its mission, but also with first-hand evidence of how TFA's socio-professional alumni network functions, as well as the professional success of individuals who decided to affiliate with the program. It is a seductive process to be wanted by such an organization and told that you have the power and responsibility to help close the achievement gap that has plagued American schools arguably since their inception.

While the organization and efficiency of this recruitment system can sound a tad "Big Brother-esque" and intimidating in its telling (and is even described that way in a jocular manner by applicants and recruitment directors), in my experience, every single staff member I interviewed or interacted with devoutly and earnestly believes that education is the most important civil right and that the achievement gap is America's biggest tragedy and challenge. As they reported to me, their way of solving it is to recruit those whom they see as the best applicants possible to teach in the poorest schools, in the hopes that effective teachers will help students in the short term, and that, if those Teach For America teachers leave after two years, they take that experience into their alumni lives to work to affect change from whatever powerful position they find later in life. The recruiting philosophy of Teach For America is straightforward, as described by a recruitment director:

> Take the best that you can find, train them in the best way, and get them into the classrooms that need them the most. We hope that they stay for more than two years - and, many do who would never have entered teaching except for us - but, if they don't, given how smart and achievement-oriented our people are, they'll go places. And, they'll remember those kids when they're in power someday, and work to affect even more change, on a systemic level. It's all about the kids.

This raises the question of what the definition of the "best" is. According to TFA's rubric, it is a person who firmly agrees that the achievement gap is due to societal inequality rather than personal failings on the part of students, who wants to work to close that gap, and who has a personal track record of succeeding at a high level in the face of large obstacles. This last characteristic is primarily measured through grades, personal stories of triumph, success in leadership roles in extracurricular activities, and other individual characteristics. It is an effective recruitment strategy - in 2009-10, the year the people in this study applied to the program, TFA's

admission rate was about 13%, making it harder to get into than most Ivy Leagues.[5] This exclusivity means that those who eventually gain admission may be more likely to place credence in TFA's notion of who a good teacher is – if TFA is their only source of pedagogical information and is considered highly sought after, then individuals who self-select into the program are likely to conform.

During discussions with potential applicants and information sessions, TFA staff members consistently and constantly refer to the racial achievement gap as the "civil rights issue of our generation" and that "teachers are the best and only hope for students who have been ignored and ill-served in low-income classrooms in the past." The responsibility that teachers have for their students' achievement is hammered home repeatedly by the recruitment directors and through any contact that the applicant has with TFA's website or informational materials. In a way, this is a recruitment strategy for TFA - it is a heady thing for a 22-year-old to be told that they have the power to "save" their future students and help to close the achievement gap (and that TFA can help get them there). That ethos of selectivity continues through the application period - not every applicant will have contact with a recruitment director, but every person does have to write essays about their desire to teach in low-income areas, why they want to teach through TFA (as opposed to other certification programs) and is repeatedly told how difficult it is to gain acceptance to TFA, thus making it more valuable. After making it through multiple rounds of online applications and phone interviews, the final in-person interview allows them to convince a TFA staff member of their belief that the achievement gap can be closed, they have a proven track record of success during adversity, and that they have the grit and perseverance to personally take responsibility for closing the gap. At the end of this recruitment process, about 1 in 10 of the original applicants will be able to accept their spots in the corps and receive their region, subject, and grade-level assignment and begin training.

Training

TFA's training of its corps members begins before the mandatory five-week summer boot camp. Soon after accepting their offer, applicants receive a box of TFA-produced books and instructions to complete several classroom visits, the accompanying readings, and reflection essays before June. While about 9 out of every 10 corps members I spoke to did complete these visits and assignments, the (self-reported) time that individuals spent on them varied considerably. This is unsurprising, considering that they are generally simultaneously finishing college. Some reported spending 10-15 days of about twelve hours shadowing teachers in both high- and low-income schools (as called for by the assignments) and writing lengthy research-based reflection papers after reading the TFA-produced books. Others reported significantly less time spent on school visits (if they even completed all of them). I asked them if they read other, non-TFA education books, and responses varied. As two different recruits put it:

> I don't have time for that. TFA knows what it's doing and I don't want to waste my time on other things that I'll just have to forget - I'm trying to finish my thesis! Also, have you noticed that education textbooks seem to be written for really dumb people? Not that teaching isn't super hard, but the books on how to do it seem to lack…rigor.

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[5]Teach For America, http://www.teachforamerica.org/node/239 Accessed 1/28/13

> Sure - I have no clue what I'm getting into. I mean, I've read a bunch of things, but I don't really have any direction on it. I'm just picking up things in the library that look good, but I don't really know.

Both of these corps members were doing pre-reading and training activities to orient themselves for their formal training, although the first places her trust in TFA and rejects the "other things that I'll just have to forget." The second is reading other books, but does not have a great deal of expertise in what to read.

On the first day of institute, corps members are introduced to TFA's model of student achievement (Figure 1). This approach to education conveys to corps members the "proper" attitude about their effects on their students and how their individual actions can affect the achievement gap. While the effects of poverty, a lack of health care, and other societal issues that may retard student achievement were brought up by staff members on numerous occasions, it was always in the context of how the corps members could attempt to overcome them in the classroom so that their students could achieve (generally measured by standardized tests or graduation rates) and fix those issues for themselves in the future. Those societal issues are not referred to in this model – the basis for student progress/achievement is the individual teacher.
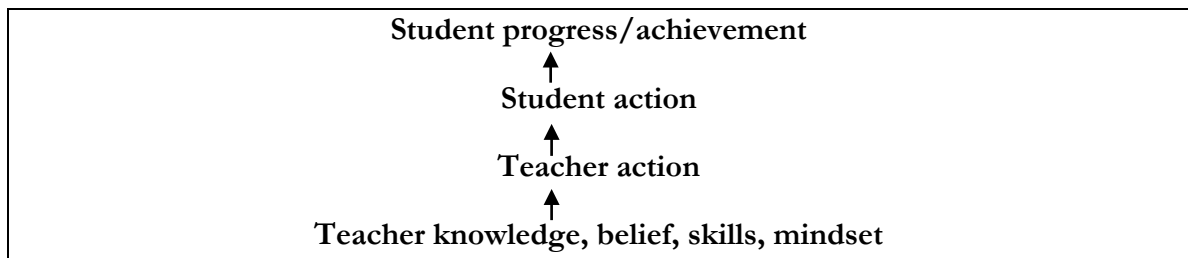
Student progress/achievement

↑

Student action

↑

Teacher action

↑

Teacher knowledge, belief, skills, mindset

Figure 1: Teach For America's Model of Student Achievement

The corps members took this to heart. For example, one staff member asked them to fill in an analogy: "OK, you finish this: corps members are to student achievement as ___ is to ___. My example? As Wendy [Kopp – the founder of TFA] is to TFA." Answers varied, but the woman next to me answered, "As a spark is to fireworks." All the answers from the corps members displayed this causal linkage, showing that they had understood the premise that they were the cause of their students' learning.

On multiple occasions, I asked corps members what they had learned from that night's presentation, and whether they agreed with it. All agreed with it, and said that it cemented their desire to "help my students learn and be stars - after all, if TFA can't help me do that, then nowhere can." At the end of Institute, after five weeks of student teaching and education classes, one of the final training sessions overtly referred back to this model: "Remember to point with the thumb, not the finger and always ask yourself: how am I doing, what do I need to do to have my students excel?"

Short-term Effects in the Classroom

Much of what affects a TFA corps member's experience and opinions about teaching occurs during their two years in the classroom setting. Those events (and their differing impacts)

are covered in other papers that have come from these data, so fall beyond the scope of this article. Universally among the teachers I followed, the pedagogical training that they received through TFA (how to teach reading, etc.) faded in favor of school-specific practices taught to them by their principals and colleagues. However, the one aspect of that summer training that stayed with them was that mindset of personal responsibility – the TFA credo that was instilled in them that teacher action leads to student action, and that they were responsible for the success of their students.

The effects of this attitude while they were in the classroom were mediated by the type of school setting in which they were placed.[6] That is, even though the sample was deliberately selected to provide multiple viewpoints on the basis of race, gender, etc., those characteristics seemed to matter much less than the support that their schools offered new teachers. For those corps members who were placed in school settings with high levels of administrative support and who had strong school cultures to rely upon while learning how to teach, this attitude was empowering. For the purposes of this study, the administrative support that caused strong school culture that these new teachers indicated was most helpful in aiding them to become successful teachers was comprised of three disparate elements: (1) a formal coaching system that was proactive in mentoring them, rather than waiting until the new teachers asked for help, (2) administrators who were willing to speak to them asynchronously via text message because that made asking for help or the answers to "stupid questions" less stressful and (3) ambitious but achievable goals on standardized tests for students. Certainly, this last element is not without its issues (teachers uniformly stated that they knew that using standardized tests as metrics of student knowledge was incomplete). However, it is logical due to the population of teachers and their relative inexperience in teaching: TFA corps members are intelligent young people who went to elite colleges. Generally, they themselves did quite well on standardized tests as children, so it is easy for them to accept tests as at least somewhat valid metrics. And, for new teachers, standardized tests could be seen as a clear cut way to teach and measure progress, given the relatively prescribed methods of teaching that can be used to increase scores. For more information on this argument and their reactions to different types and amounts of administrative support, please see Maloney (forthcoming).

One teacher, who was placed in a high-achieving school known for well-executed school-wide disciplinary policies and a formal coaching system for new teachers, told me:

> Of course the teachers are the main factor in their success. My actions and my mood shape their day, particularly since I'm the only adult some of them interact with at all. There's no doubt it's hard work – harder than I ever imagined – but I don't understand how other people can't get it together. Teaching isn't magic, it's just consistent hard work. We just need more people who are unafraid of hard work and who are actually intelligent in the classroom – not people who are just average and expect to coast. The students, the gap matter too much. If nothing else, this has taught me that if I work hard enough at something, I can do it.

This teacher's school setting has enabled her to maintain her belief that her hard work will lead to student success. She can see the impact of her individual actions on her students and her initial success with them begat further hard work and success. That is, she was in a positive feedback

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[6] For more information on this argument, see Maloney (forthcoming).

loop, with rewards following effort. In contrast, a different teacher in a very low-performing and chaotic school environment had the opposite experience:

> I just need to get through this year and the next year. Survival. I'm so sick of trying to design innovative lesson plans and have the kids crap all over them. I used and internalized all the TFA buzzwords - relentless pursuit, personal responsibility. Goddammit if 85% of the class didn't fail. I don't like to track because I hate looking at the failure, because I think - despite everything that my therapist says - that it's my failure. I didn't try hard enough. I drank enough of the TFA Kool Aid that I know it's all my fault. Teacher actions lead to student actions. If I just worked harder then it would be OK. You know, seven months ago, I was the guy sitting in the back of Institute who thought all that was bullshit and that I'd never believe it - I'd just be in for two years and go to grad school. But, they got me. I don't even know when it happened. I've magically internalized it. Seven months ago, I thought that me and TFA were different things - that I could divorce myself somehow. Now, I talk to my therapist and family and friends about how teacher action causes student action. It's a communal feeling - everyone should think this way. If I didn't think this way, then there's something wrong with me and my value as a corps member.

This teacher has still maintained his belief that his actions and work result in student outcomes, although he is not able to engage in that positive feedback loop. His hard work is met with failure, which he has internalized as his own fault, despite his initial belief that he "and TFA were two different things." This was a pattern among nearly every teacher in this study: this mindset led to a feeling of success and self-fulfillment in well-supported schools (and, therefore, teachers who mostly decided to stay in teaching) and a feeling of failure in poorly supported schools (these teachers universally left teaching after two years).

Given the data for this project, it would be unwise to speculate as to what proportion in the general population benefitted versus suffered from this attitude of personal responsibility, but in my 12-15 person sample for the ethnographic portion of the data, the nine who were placed in strong schools were empowered by that attitude, and were able to achieve success with their students both academically and behaviorally. Their success affected their self-worth. The rest of the sample – those not placed in well-supported schools – still maintained that attitude but saw their failure in the classroom as indicative of a personal failing: they just didn't work hard enough.

Long-term Effects

While the teachers I followed in-depth during the ethnographic portion of this study can only report on the effects of this mindset immediately after they left TFA, their exit interviews as well as the interviews conducted with alumni (from between 3-18 years beyond completion) can shed light onto the long-term effects of the inculcation of this belief. Universally, alumni report that their time in the classroom has led them to have passionate opinions and a knowledgeable view about the efficacy of school reforms in America. Most point to this as the primary benefit of TFA, thus suggesting that TFA has successfully completed its goal of having alumni who both know and care about education. Additionally, all reported being taught by TFA that their actions mattered the most for student achievement, so this tenet appears to be consistent in TFA's training over time. Of the alumni I interviewed, most still reported being connected to education in some way (volunteering, donating time, serving on school boards, etc.), although this may also

be a selection effect (individuals had to be chosen and then choose to complete an interview, even though the response rate was high) and a reporting effect (individuals may be reporting activity that reflects well on them).

Regarding the long-term effects of the belief that teacher action is the sole or primary cause of student action, the results found in the short-term effects were somewhat replicated. Some of those individuals who retrospectively reported that they were well-supported and successful while teaching maintained a belief that teachers were the key (and sometimes only) factors in closing the achievement gap, although many said that they had

> grown out of that belief when I really had some distance from my classroom. There are so many factors at play. I see how much I affect my kids. I don't expect their teachers to be the main influence in their lives, so why would I disrespect parents of low-income kids and say that they weren't the most important factor in whether their kids can achieve?

Others said that they maintained this belief, and said that the way to solve the achievement gap is through teacher-focused initiatives like merit pay and incentives to bring individuals with higher GPAs from selective universities into teaching, as well as greater flexibility in teacher certification policies. The ones who reported that they were not well-supported and "hated" their time in the classroom (of the sample of almost 80 alumni, about 25 placed themselves into this category) disproportionately made very similar statements as the above quotation. By far, the majority of that 25 (23 people) stated that they believed that the solution to the achievement gap was outside of the teachers' control. Generally, they pointed to macro-level causes such as racism and the structure of school funding. Interestingly, when asked whether they still felt responsibility for closing the gap through affecting those issues, almost every person reported that they did, although in a more diffuse, less personal way. Most stated that they were devoting time and money to education causes and voting for candidates who agreed with their viewpoints on equity in school funding and other social issues.

One story that is rarely told is how TFA can use its alumni to affect change on state law regarding education and teacher certification. Indeed, this is foundational to how the organization operates but also indicative of the long-term effects that TFA has on alumni. That is, before the corps members are even recruited for the program in a particular region, TFA staff members (who may be alumni of the program) have already been working in that region, both to make sure that the current laws allow for corps members to enter the local schools and to form relationships with school districts that will allow for placement of corps members into schools. This is a foundation for all later recruitment/training because, without these laws in place, corps members would not be able to be placed into a given state's schools. As one staff member told me, "we needed to get some bills passed to make sure we could get our teachers into the schools. So, our people got on the ground here early, lobbied to make sure that the necessary reform would happen, mobilized the people and alumni in the state, and made it happen. We needed to make sure that the best teachers could be where they were needed." A different staff member put it more overtly:

> We needed to work together with other stakeholders to get things done for education in this state. Our alumni are awesome - they're still part of the mission, and were invaluable in calling and putting us in contact with the right people. When people

with power and privilege leverage that power and privilege, politicians listen. Since our kids don't have that privilege yet, we have to do it for them.

Due to pressure from alumni who lived in the state and from other education stakeholders (like boards of education and non-profit leaders), the first bill allowing TFA to be its own alternative certification program did pass in Connecticut and began a domino effect: now, TFA serves as an alternative certification program in several different states. So, before the corps members profiled in this paper were even recruited or trained, some of the alumni who came before them are fulfilling their long-term purpose: helping to change education laws and policies in the hopes of closing the achievement gap. Their presence laid the groundwork for the mechanisms of recruitment and training to function smoothly in the assumption that someday these applicants may turn into alumni who perform the same function for later corps members.

Conclusion

Due to its recruitment practices of targeting high achievers who show promise of becoming leaders, its own efficient staff, and its careful construction and use of an alumni socio-professional network, Teach For America is influential in education reform. The organizational practice of using both recruitment and training to communicate messages of personal responsibility to teachers for their students' progress has both short- and long-term effects on those corps members who will someday be its alumni. For the corps members in this study, this mindset stuck with them during their two year teaching commitment, independent of school setting and support. However, school support did seem to affect corps members' sense of self-efficacy: for those who were well-supported, it confirmed their belief in the impact of their own, individual hard work. For those who identified as failures (and who were almost exclusively in poorly supported schools), it compounded their belief that they just weren't trying hard enough, with sometimes negative consequences for their mental health.

Alumni reported remembering being taught and believing that they had personal responsibility for closing the achievement gap, but this belief faded for many over time. Instead, many pointed to societal factors that may be causing the achievement gap, although every alumni informant reported that their time in the classroom and TFA (which may conflate) have led them to have more passion and knowledge about education. For many, the belief that teachers are the sole cause for student achievement has faded, although it is still present in some, who tend to favor educational reform initiatives that focus on teachers: for example, merit pay or incentives for high-achievers to enter the classroom. Overall, the individuals in this study entered teaching and formed their socio-professional identity through a unique route, which has had particular consequences for their beliefs about the nature of teaching and educational reforms in America.

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