Critical Education

The Outsized Effects of Equating Teaching with Leadership

Implications of Teach for America's vision for Engaging Teachers in Reform

Laura Gutmann

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Abstract

Although Teach for America (TFA) members encompass a tiny portion of the teaching workforce, the organization both attracts and creates disproportionate attention as part of its quest to develop educators with strong leadership skills. Because TFA's mission goes beyond individual classrooms, it has strategically grown its presence in policy arenas and other venues for advocacy and reform in order to create broad influence. This approach is a controversial departure from traditional preparation programs that prioritize developing sound pedagogy and teaching strategies over leadership capabilities or public activism. However, it distinguishes TFA participants by positioning them as empowered to drive a particular brand of change. We can better understand how TFA characterizes its role by examining the messages within its Teaching as Leadership manual and comparing them to themes within mainstream texts like The First Days of School, while considering the implications of differences in the way teaching is defined.

Over the past twenty-two years, Teach for America (TFA) has gained widespread notoriety for its approach to recruiting, placing, and supporting its corps members as they serve in disadvantaged schools. In the fall of 2012, more than 10,000 members were slated to work as teachers in classrooms across the United States (Teach for America, 2012c). TFA touted its ongoing expansion, along with high levels of participation from graduates of prestigious universities, with a pointed emphasis on the character traits of its newest cohort. For instance, the organization proudly noted that incoming recruits included almost one hundred college student body presidents, among other markers of advanced leadership skills (Teach for America, 2012c). Although TFA members comprise a minor portion of the overall teaching force, their attention to leadership development is part of what distinguishes them from the rest of the nation's approximately 3.3 million elementary and secondary public school educators (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). By grooming carefully selected recruits to drive change, TFA consequently both attracts and creates outsized attention.

Since its origins as Wendy Kopp's senior thesis at Princeton, TFA's program design has been based on recruiting participants with high social capital who have already demonstrated a pattern of personal success. Its efforts to capitalize on the exceptional qualities of its members set it apart from more limited attempts to foster professional growth and develop leadership potential within traditional school settings. Furthermore, TFA offers an expanded view of the scope of the teaching role by holding the corps responsible for closing the achievement gap for minority and low-income children and consequently linking their job to a broader reform mission. As its model has risen in prominence, these features provide us with a frame for identifying why defining the task of teaching as a leadership endeavor and charging corps members with making academic gains within low-income communities has such striking societal implications, which some find troubling and others admire. They also provide a point of contrast with alternate visions for increasing teacher participation in democratic schooling structures, which might foster sustained involvement in reform without over-privileging TFA-style success metrics like achievement scores and performance data.

My Personal Experience: How Did TFA Fit In?

Throughout its history, TFA has grappled with the complicated task of integrating its unique programmatic features into existing structures within the school system. During my own experience as a novice teacher who was part of the corps, I encountered three distinct orientations towards the classroom that embodied the priorities and values of each of the institutions that were central to my initiation into the field. First, TFA worked to promote their reform mission and equip me to make "significant gains" during training and extensive follow-up support (Teach for America, 2010). For instance, TFA had continued opportunities to influence my efforts during monthly meetings, grade-specific "learning team" events, collaborations with the cohort of members placed at my school, and observations and coaching from TFA staff assigned to check-in on my classroom. At least to a certain extent, being a part of this network distinguished me from the traditional teachers within my school placement setting and immersed me in the principles espoused within TFA's "teaching as leadership" framework. In addition, it required me to collect data that charted my progress towards the organization's goal of advancing students not just one grade level, but an average of one and a half grade levels forward each year. The messages that TFA gave me about how to accomplish these objectives were similar to those presented with the guide to "teaching as leadership" that TFA has since

fine-tuned and published (Farr, 2010). As I saw it, TFA believed a successful classroom was focused on surpassing achievement goals in order to provide higher quality education to low-income and minority students.

However, on a daily basis, my role was that of a typical public school teacher, with the same classroom responsibilities as any of my colleagues within the district. As such, I received administrative direction from local authorities who emphasized aligning instruction with proscribed standards and mastering skills like classroom management. Directives to meet these expectations were typified by the guidance within books like "The First Days of School", which is a common gift for new teachers (Wong & Wong, 1991). Like many others, I was given a copy by my administration as I began to set up my classroom and plan for the beginning of the year. It encouraged adherence with institutional norms and contained tips for creating and maintaining order. According to this view, lessons were something to be delivered uniformly and efficiently, with minimal disruption from students. As I saw it, my school community believed that a successful classroom was quiet, organized, and in sync with systemic norms and mandates. Since my school was under review, administrators were also desperate to push teachers to prepare students well enough to meet No Child Left Behind-based accountability targets.

In an additional twist, through a TFA partnership with a progressive graduate school program, I was taking coursework that exposed me to yet another vision of ideal classroom practice that emphasized the community as the basis for learning and discovery, as well as a curriculum driven by children's interests. Their views were typified by the descriptions of school culture and student interactions within texts written by similarly child-centered scholars like John Dewey (1929/2009) or Vygotsky (1962). Social studies was at the center of a rich curriculum model that integrated science, math, literacy, art, and music into lessons that emphasized the diversity within each classroom, as well as supporting each student's unique inclinations. As I saw it, my graduate program believed that developmentally appropriate, interactive, and project-based lessons were the hallmarks of successful pedagogy, positioning the teacher as the facilitator of these explorations.

Attempting to Reconcile my Role as Leader within a Complicated System

Although they were not always diametrically opposed, each of these major influences needed to be negotiated as I navigated the teaching profession and considered TFA's charge to distinguish myself as a leader within the field and a champion for low-income students. For instance, in graduate school I took an entire four-week workshop on how to create rich student-learning opportunities in my block area. Yet, I was not technically supposed to be using blocks anymore within my kindergarten classroom. Back at my public school, I watched as many of my colleagues got rid of those materials, citing pressures to align with curriculum focused on building lagging math and literacy skills that left little time for free play in centers. In another example of the potential disconnect between these various approaches to teaching, TFA staff encouraged us to collect data that demonstrated end-of-year achievement gains – even though the types of assessments I had built into my curriculum were mainly designed as formative benchmarks to inform literacy instruction, rather than as measures of the entirety of a child's progress from September to June. More holistic data might have included evidence of strides in social growth, or observations of students making connections to curriculum during center activities – but TFA was not interested in that kind of information. In addition, although I was

supposed to be taking bold action to move my students forward, I was so new to the classroom that defying standard practice seemed daunting. As a result, although TFA had made its priorities clear, the reality of implementing its objectives was not as straightforward.

Initial Consideration of Critiques of TFA's Influence

As I grew within my career, TFA's distinct organizational direction became even more controversial, especially as it aligned itself with approaches to reform backed by funders such as large corporate foundations perceived as having neoliberal interests (Hartman, 2011; Lahann & Reagan, 2011), which may have progressive undertones, but place a high value on "business-infused managerial strategies" (Lahann & Reagan, 2011, p. 13). While in the classroom, my fellow corps members and I had often debated the fundamental merits and weaknesses of the varied drivers of our practice, including our membership in TFA. However, when I left teaching and began further graduate work, I discovered just how vehemently opposed some critical scholars were to TFA's pervasiveness. Although I had expected resistance to TFA's model of abbreviated training and minimal commitment, as well as the notion of its members being the answer to low-income students' problems, I quickly realized that the tensions surrounding TFA were more politically and ideologically charged than anticipated. At one conference, I sat stunned as presenters egged on their audience in a brutal takedown that positioned Wendy Kopp as the cunning queen of an evil, corporate-backed empire that wanted to mold poor students according to middle class values by promoting a mindset reminiscent of eugenics. How could the organization that had been sold to me as an altruistic, worthwhile endeavor have become such a fire starter? My memories of the corps, which were largely rooted in the day-to-day realities of working with students and families, had suddenly become suspect.

As a result, although I had some sense of how my experience could have been both simultaneously valuable and flawed, I wanted to more precisely consider TFA's potentially problematic features, along with its ability to provide empowerment and fulfillment for novice educators. *What about the TFA model of "teaching as leadership" had positioned me to contribute to TFA's school reform movement? How did its particular view of reform shape the nature of my efforts, for better or for worse? How did its influence compare to the approaches I was encountering within my district and graduate program? And, have others suggested viable alternatives to TFA's strategy of coupling teacher leadership development with allegiance to its mission?* The following study provides further details about how TFA's reform strategy was constructed, and why both its intentions and outcomes have come into question. It makes explicit comparisons between TFA's focus on leadership abilities as central to pedagogical prowess and differing messages about the core components of the teaching role found within traditional education institutions.

Unpacking Teach for America's Reputation

Although I have personal experience with TFA, the organization's priorities and positions are well documented through their overt presence within the world of education reform. TFA's publicity could be largely characterized as either self-generated, as part of strategic plans to expand its reach, or as pushback in reaction to its aggressive agenda. Its ability to attract elite, accomplished prospects, for example, is linked to advertising its popularity within select groups, like the 18 percent of Harvard graduates who apply to the corps each year (Teach for America, 2012b). A certain cachet has been carefully developed around a competitive application process

that positions acceptance into TFA as being socially desirable (Labaree, 2010; Grant & Crutchfield, 2007). There are also distinct political and operational advantages that result from positive press. By promoting the value of its impact, the organization can secure funding and logistical support from key power brokers like district and state education departments or private foundations that pledge major dollars to keep TFA relevant (Blume, 2011; Teach for America, 2012a). TFA bolsters its image with extensive data mining of current and past participants, carefully tracking successes that range from achievement gains within the classroom to broader impacts like winning election to a Board of Education. No other organization has produced quite as many "edulebrities", as alumni like Dave Levin, a founder of the KIPP Charter Network, and Michelle Rhee, a former Chancellor of DC Public Schools, are frequently profiled within mass media (Brill, 2011; Ripley, 2008; Tough, 2011).

TFA also uses research findings to validate its approach, frequently citing an evaluation in which corps members were able to produce greater math results among high school students than their colleagues (Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004). Further ammunition comes from evidence like a recent analysis from North Carolina that ranked TFA's effectiveness above all other teacher preparation options for certain grade levels (Henry, et al., 2010), or studies that indicated a majority of corps members stay in the classroom for longer than assumed (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011, 2010) and maintain positive impacts on their career outlook past their initial service (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Higgins, Robison, Weiner & Hess, 2011). However, the body of research on TFA is not without critique from those who see the organization's impact as limited and question the extent of positive findings. For instance, the benefits of hiring corps members are less clear in the elementary grades, or in cases where corps members leave the classroom soon after fulfilling their initial commitment (Boyd, et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005; Heilig & Jin Jez, 2010).

Opposition to TFA's Structure & Training Model

On the other end of the spectrum, much of the resistance to TFA's strategies comes from traditional education schools. TFA's brief training time, centered on an intense five-week Institute, and short program duration, as corps members are only asked to commit to two years of teaching, are typical sources of tension with those who question the impacts of alternate routes to the classroom. Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) ardently defended the role of longer training periods within formal education programs, arguing that while areas with severe personnel shortages may still benefit from TFA, fully certified teachers are better equipped to impact students, and tend to remain in teaching long enough to benefit from experience beyond what the initial TFA commitment provides. "Studies of teachers admitted with less than full preparation find that recruits tend to be less satisfied with their training and have greater difficulties planning curriculum, teaching, managing the classroom, and diagnosing students' learning needs" (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 167). Although the organization has cultivated relationships with a slew of university-based graduate programs, corps member participation in such coursework may ultimately be limited to receiving triage support during their service or addressing requirements to working towards certification. Additionally, while there is some evidence that TFA members may be no worse than other uncertified staff, they are not necessarily any better, in terms of benefits to students (Heilig & Jez, 2010; Boyd et al., 2006).

Political and Ideological Objections

The program's structure creates ideological resistance from those who mainly view TFA as "a marvel at marketing, offering elite college students a win-win option…do good and do well at the same time" (Labaree, 2010, p. 48). Because TFA is seen as glamorizing a fast track to social change, "teacher educators argue that we do not need more missionaries in the classroom; we need more professionals" (p. 52). In addition, critical scholars who dislike the accountability-focused nature of TFA's reform strategy, which includes closely tracking teacher effectiveness according to student achievement scores, believe that it "underwrites, intentionally or not, the conservative assumptions of the education reform movement" (Hartman, 2011) that seek to institutionalize meritocracy, while deemphasizing how social class and race might affect education (Apple, 1996; 2006). As such, the organization's zeal for accomplishing its mission may oversimplify the task of leading students past significant challenges like the impacts of poverty and discrimination. TFA's stance concerns practitioners and advocates who are wary of the public schooling system becoming overrun by reformers who would ultimately seek to promote a "corporate-organized society" (Hartman, 2011) by reducing union power, making personnel decisions based on proof of student learning, and creating competition within the public school system by forming charters. Apple (2006) described how approaches to educational change that place a premium on improving how school systems are managed may appeal to action-oriented reformers (such as TFA members) by "merging the language of empowerment, rational choice, efficient organization, and new roles for managers all at the same time" (p. 25). Detractors who oppose these reform strategies are therefore just as concerned about the bigger picture of change that TFA promotes throughout its extensive network than the effects of placing corps members in classrooms for their two-year service. Their arguments against the broader ideologies that TFA aligns itself with are worthy of further exploration, if only to explore the complicated relationship between the organization's desire to improve educational opportunities for low-income students and the reaction from the very communities that TFA is trying to impact.

Teach for America's Response to Detractors

In response to naysayers, TFA argues that if motivated corps members work hard to hone in on proven instructional strategies, they can make a meaningful difference in students' lives strong enough to mitigate the effects of class structures on these students' future opportunities (Farr, 2010). Furthermore, TFA has made a notable shift towards investing more heavily in its substantial alumni base, with the intention of harnessing continued impacts on the school system that go beyond initial classroom placements. Annual reports reflect the organization's emphasis on supporting corps members beyond their required service, making it a priority to "set goals around three particular areas: school leadership, political leadership, and social entrepreneurship" (Teach for America, 2007, p. 15), and grow their influence through "transformational leadership on every level" (Teach for America, 2011). Its bid for an i3 grant from the federal government's Investing in Innovation Fund revealed similar plans to capitalize on the "readily accessible and high-quality pool of talent" (Teach for America, 2010, p. 13) its alumni provide. For instance, the organization cited plans to strengthen pipelines to school, district, and state leadership and increase its revenues to support these expanded efforts. Throughout, founder Wendy Kopp has continually expressed her commitment to leadership development as a way to influence reform agendas and increase human capital resources (Mathews, 2009), and in fact began attracting funders to TFA by arguing that teaching, particularly in high-needs areas, could be strengthened

by finding a way to attract top students to the profession (Schneider, 2012). As a result, TFA has bolstered its ability to shape educational reform by building on the strength and power of its ever-expanding network, which stems from its foundational focus on recruiting talent who might eventually gain decision-making power over school settings (Labaree, 2010). Philanthropic support for electing TFA alumni into political office is evident through efforts like Leadership for Educational Equity, a spin-off organization "focused on developing its members' leadership potential" and "inspiring members to become more civically engaged" (Leadership for Educational Equity, 2013). Alumni candidates for prominent legislative or board of education positions have been increasingly backed by funding from TFA-friendly groups, such as Democrats for Education Reform or StudentsFirst (Wieder, 2012).

Considering Different Preparation & Performance Priorities

Because TFA's approach to fulfilling its mission has leadership development and building a network of influence at its core, the organization takes a long-range view of a corps member's potential. While its promotional materials urge corps members to go to great lengths to produce academic progress while in the classroom, there is also an eye towards longer-term impact within the education field at large (Teach for America, 2012; Farr, 2010). In traditional education programs, courses are typically structured around gaining content area mastery and related pedagogical skills (Perry, A., 2011; Ball & McDiarmid, 1990), building a professional community marked by shared instructional expertise (Shulman & Shulman, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2001), and developing a social justice lens that prepares teachers for work with diverse populations (Ray, Bowman & Robbins, 2006; Zeichner, et al., 1998). These elements of successful pedagogy are geared towards mastering the world of the classroom, as measured by sound instructional technique, appropriate curriculum construction, and meaningful relationship building with families and students. However, in TFA, the summer Institute curriculum emphasizes the "teaching as leadership" concept as central to all other training modules that follow, pointedly equating being a teacher with taking on a powerful position with the potential for both personal and social gain (Teach for America, 2012b; Teach for America, 2009, Farr, 2010). TFA's other training priorities, such as providing guidance in writing effective lesson plans, are anchored by convincing corps members that a combination of their own characteristics, motivation, and hard work can propel them to top of their field.

Within traditional education schools, the organization of their goals, values and beliefs about what teachers need to know and how they should act reveals differing priorities and perceptions of teacher responsibilities. Because of this, while some teacher educators have begun to advocate for weaving teacher leadership into their preparation programs (Bond, 2011; Odell, 1997), it is not usually their primary driver. As a result, while there is support for the "idea of teachers deliberately claiming the role of advocate and activist as well as educator" (Cochran-Smith, 2008, p. 18), along with the belief that "teacher education should engage students in discussions and practice in the arts of public activism" (Grumet, 2010, p. 8), traditionally prepared teachers do not always have the opportunity to align themselves with reform to the extent that TFA has pushed for within its model. Similarly, while TFA's efforts to build pedagogical skills might include many of the same components as a standard preparation program, the organization's delivery of these elements is specifically aligned with its view towards producing effectiveness. Of course, its ability to create a customized success model and

training paradigm is in part due to its alternative route status, which relaxes certification and accreditation pressures in some areas.

TFA's approach also remains distinct from district level guidelines such as teacher performance metrics, which may incorporate variations on demonstrating leadership and professionalism into their rubrics, but avoid explicitly encouraging teachers to act as change-agents on a systemic level (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2012; District of Columbia Public Schools, 2012). For example, districts may encourage participation in committees and professional development teams as ways to demonstrate leadership, but limit their view of such roles to existing structures within the current organizational hierarchy. Performance rubrics that simply focus on providing instruction, planning lessons, and creating a proper learning environment (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012) can be even further contrasted with TFA's perception of teachers as vital human resources attributes with the potential to initiate real action. Although TFA's focus on aligning lessons with grade-level standards and using data to make decisions about instruction would deem such information helpful, the organization has a more transformative view of adjustments that could be made to support teachers in taking related action. By telling teachers that they are capable of shaping those reform directions, TFA works to capitalize on corps members' motivation and prime them for future positions that may require administrative talent.

Approach to Gathering Further Evidence of TFA's Leadership Focus

Given TFA's distinct priorities, how has its strategy to focus on leadership been articulated and actualized as the corps spreads its approach to a wider audience? The following examination of a TFA-produced guidebook, contrasted with specific examples of other perspectives that I encountered during my service, provides additional evidence of TFA's leadership emphasis that goes beyond my anecdotal experiences. By carefully analyzing major TFA texts and promotional materials, more precise analysis of their content, including how the organization would define the scope of a teacher's role, is possible. Furthermore, although my own perspective towards TFA's mission naturally impacted this study's focus and analysis, grounding these impressions in explicit phrases and descriptions that characterize TFA's view of "teaching as leadership" allows for further discussion of its implications for the field of education. A better understanding of the components of TFA's preparation strategy that distinguish its recruits from the larger educator population might help determine which aspects of its approach are worthy of emulation, and which are more questionable.

While written resources that outline TFA's vision are just one marker of the organization's contributions to discourse about the teaching, they can provide a basis for systematically analyzing a text's significance and meaning (Krippendorff, 2013). Gee's (2005) broad view of what contributes to discourse values such data as indicative of contributions to dialogue, in print or otherwise, about how teachers should frame their responsibilities. Because TFA does not exist in isolation, its contributions to societal conceptions of an educator's priorities, along with its assessment of important skills for classroom leaders to develop, gain significance relative to the entirety of the profession. As described in my earlier accounts of the varied influences that impacted my initial practice, corps members often encounter alternate perceptions of their role through their affiliation with universities or school districts. The following questions guided an exploration of texts that describe TFA's vision in greater detail, alongside more standard texts that present a different approach to defining the teaching position:

> ▪ *How does TFA construct the relationship between successful teaching and having strong leadership skills?*
> ▪ *How does TFA's vision of the teaching role compare to other common views of a teacher's primary responsibilities and priorities?*
> ▪ *What implications does TFA's vision of "teaching as leadership" have for societal perceptions of the skills that a teacher should be able to demonstrate? For instance, what does TFA imply about the teacher's role in reform efforts? What might result from promoting its specific brand of reform within school settings?*

Data sources. To better understand typical TFA, district, and school of education ideals, one popular text was chosen to represent each realm of influence that had impacted my early career through its descriptions of the nature of a teacher's primary responsibilities and appropriate actions to take in the classroom in order to achieve success. Since TFA released a book describing its approach called, "Teaching as Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap", along with a companion website (Farr, 2010; Teach for America, 2009), the introduction to this volume served as the basis for textual analysis of the themes, messages, and patterns of language that form TFA's primary arguments about the role of leadership skills in the classroom. Its content both cements and illuminates earlier references to "teaching as leadership" forming the heart of TFA's training curriculum (Teach for America, 2012). The author, Steven Farr, was serving as TFA's Chief Knowledge Officer at the time of publication.

In contrast, "The First Days of School" describes the teaching profession and its primary structures and responsibilities within a guide to setting a classroom up for success from the start of the school year and practicing sound classroom management (Wong & Wong, 1991). When an administrator handed me this book, I saw it as a classic representation of institutional perceptions of the teaching role. It is immensely popular within the education field as a whole; for instance, in July 2013, its Amazon sales rank was 164th among all books, and first among books within the category of "Education & Reference" and within the subcategories of "Schools & Teaching" and "Pedagogy" (Amazon.com, 2013). Its authors, Harry and Rosemary Wong, present themselves as seasoned educators with knowledge about teaching gained from field experience. My analysis focus was on the book's introduction, called "Basic Understandings – the Teacher". This section outlines the book's premise and describes successful teaching practices and approaches to its readers.

Lastly, although Dewey's (1929/2009) short essay entitled "My Pedagogic Creed" is only a small piece within the larger scope of his work, it is often pulled from his body of writing as a synopsis of his values and beliefs about how schools should function, which references the purpose of teachers within these institutions. Because it includes descriptions of teaching responsibilities in relation to both students and the community, it provided me with a source for understanding theoretical approaches to the field that surface within college settings like the one in which I began graduate work while simultaneously beginning teaching. Although not all preparation programs embrace this particular Deweyian vision, just as not all districts support the Wongs' views towards classroom management and key teaching responsibilities, these texts were chosen to supply evidence of widely-held messages that traditional teachers may encounter, which could contribute to their professional identity formation and subsequent teaching actions. Similarly, because TFA published a book on teaching as leadership to document the methods and

attitudes that it considers to be crucial to success in the classroom, it is reasonable to assume that its messages encapsulate the organization's values and have the potential to affect how corps members, along with its broader audience of readers, approach their classroom assignments.

Data analysis. To better understand the implications of the messages that these texts send about the role of teachers, they were analyzed to identify data within the following categories that reveal how each text:

- *Describes teachers or teaching*
- *Defines teaching effectiveness or success*
- *Describes leadership or leadership actions*
- *Describes power and decision-making within educational institutions*

These organizational frames for content analysis were selected to help piece together a picture of how visions of successful teaching are constructed, and how leadership skills contribute to those ideal practices. Before beginning further discussion of each author's presentation of teaching, it is important to note that although these texts share common features, such as descriptions of the skills and attitudes needed to adequately fulfill an educator's professional obligations, this study does not intend to precisely map each text onto the others. However, because all three authors hope to convince readers of their perspective, reviewing the content of their writing helps build an understanding of the potential implications of their influence. In addition, although these texts have different purposes and contexts, their lack of congruence is what makes them representative of the divergent perspectives that novice teachers must decide how to reconcile and then incorporate within their instruction. As a novice teacher, I experienced this process of determining how to connect TFA's model of success to guidance from university and school-based authorities firsthand.

Fighting for equity and justice: TFA's view of the teaching role. Although TFA members take on the same positions as those with traditional teacher certification, TFA's descriptions of the teaching role begin to distinguish its approach to the classroom from standard practice. Under the umbrella of equating teaching with a leadership position, TFA directs its corps members to "present academic content; manage student practice; check for academic understanding; communicate high expectations for behavior; implement and practice time-saving procedures and evaluate and keep track of student performance" (Teach for America, 2009) as they take charge of their students. However, these procedural tasks are contained within a broader vision of teachers as a "powerful force for overcoming the achievement gap" (Farr, 2010, p. 8), who have the ability to "fight educational inequity" and "end the injustice" (p. 12). Although TFA emphasizes that these lofty goals are achievable through "hard work" and tangible, "replicable actions", it is up to corps members to drive a constant cycle of reflection that views learning outcomes as a direct result of their inputs into the classroom (Teach for America, 2009).

In addition, while TFA gives particular mention to the need for teachers to consider the context for their practice and its inherent racial and socioeconomic dynamics, its methods of building relationships with the community are dependent on corps member-based skills like "interpersonal awareness" and the ability to maintain a "strong locus of control and a growth mindset" (Farr, 2010, p. 10). While TFA argues that teachers have the power to create academic success despite difficult job conditions, its elevation of the teaching role within an educational community embodies the axiom that with great power comes great responsibility. Emotionally-

charged, action-oriented language like, "force" and "fight" is repeatedly used to inspire and motivate teachers to make the efforts necessary to overcome such obstacles (Farr, 2010).

Serving children and maintaining procedural order: Traditional views of the teaching role. In contrast to TFA's texts, the descriptions of teaching within the introductory chapters of the "The First Days of School" position the teacher at the center of its vision, but focus on identifying effective procedural steps for ensuring successful outcomes. The book's language is not connected to a particular notion of reform, remaining narrowly confined to the structures that embody daily classroom life. Teaching consists of "practical techniques" and hallmarks of good classroom management such as creating a "well-ordered" and "productive" environment (Wong & Wong, 1991, p. 10). Although attitudinal attributes like having "positive expectations for student success" (p. 9) are important, their value is linked to their utility in creating "improved performance" or designing "lessons for student mastery" (p. 12). Because teachers, quite simply, "know how to teach" (p. xii), they will be able to "touch lives" (p. 8) and use their skills to impact children's progress. Wong and Wong (1991) described teaching as a "helping and caring profession" that provides services to "help people enhance the quality of their lives" (p. 21), evoking emotions that will inspire teachers to put in the effort necessary to run a smoothly flowing classroom. However, this emotional current is linked to bettering the children that teachers will serve, rather than extending that impact to influence reform within the field.

Dewey (1929/2009) also focused on how teachers can develop children's abilities, acting as "a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to those influences" (p. 37), while facilitating the process of "reconciling individualistic and social ideals" (p. 40). He provided the foundation for Wong & Wong's (1991) characterization of teachers as members of the service profession, describing a teacher as "as social servant to maintain social order and growth", and their job as "a calling" (Dewey, 1929/2009, p. 41). In his view, teaching should be driven by student needs, requiring the teacher to engage in "constant and careful observation of the child's interests" (Dewey, 1929/2009, p. 39), provide "psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests and habits" (p. 35), and "continue the activities with which the child is already familiar in the home" (p. 36). He did not believe that a teacher's primary task should be to "impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child" (p. 37), instead favoring a less didactic view towards involving students in community life and creating curriculum based on their life experiences. Although his connections between school and society create a bigger purpose for teaching, and reinforce the belief that teachers can contribute significantly to children's life trajectories, his definition of success is broader than leading students towards achievement gains.

Making dramatic gains: TFA's view of teaching success. Within "Teaching as Leadership", the author made continued use of narratives that follow teachers' experiences within the classroom (Farr, 2010). Each teacher's story is similar – despite being asked to "navigate and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles" that characterize deep poverty (e.g., gang violence, a lack of water and electricity, children reading years below their grade level), a combination of purpose, determination, and hard work allowed these corps members to lead their children to not just adequate but game-changing academic gains. This narrative arc provides teachers with the potential to take on heroic qualities, achieving far beyond expectations to change children's lives. In TFA's view, effective teachers will go beyond expectations to create remarkable results defined by "extraordinary academic achievement" (Teach for America, 2009; Farr, 2010, p. 10) "dramatic, life-changing progress" (p. 4); "dramatic academic success"

(p. 3 & 4); "making dramatic gains" (p. 8); "demonstrating tremendous academic gains" (p. 5); "changing the lives of their students" (p. 8); "having a profound impact on student learning" (p. 7); changing the academic trajectories of their students" (p. 12); and "transforming students' life prospects" (p. 11). Corps members are not trying to maintain the status quo; instead, they are "distinguishing" (Farr, 2010, p. 5) themselves by assuming "personal responsibility" (Teach for America, 2009) for "disproving the supposed inevitability of the achievement gap" (Farr, 2010, p. 12) and compensating for years of education inequality.

Process vs. product: Disparate views of teaching success within traditional institutions. Within the world of "The First Days of School", reaching success metrics hinges upon following procedural norms and demonstrating effectiveness through "efficiency" and proper management techniques (Wong & Wong, 1991, p. 5). An effective teacher "establishes good control the first week of school", "does things right consistently", and "affects and touches lives" as a result (p. 8). For instance, student success "will be the result of how well the teacher designs lessons and checks for mastery" (p. 11), following the guidance gained from expert training in "proven research-based practices" (p. 27). This model of achievement is firmly rooted in meeting institutional expectations, rather than encompassing visionary or revolutionary ideals that go beyond standard practice. Dewey (1929/2009), on the other hand, argued that the teacher's ultimate goal should be preparing the child to share in "the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends" (p. 36). Because he believed the "process and goal of education are the same thing" (p. 38), meeting standardized achievement or content mastery metrics are not the sole indicators of preparation for societal participation and growth.

Pushing corps members to act: TFA's rhetoric of leadership and power. In order to demonstrate teaching as leadership, TFA corps members are expected to "set big goals; invest in students and their families; plan purposefully; execute efficiently; continuously increase effectiveness; and work relentlessly" (Farr, 2010, p. 5). Within their placement role, their primary responsibility is "leading students to dramatic academic gains" (p. 7). With strong action verbs like "declare", "prove", and "maximize" characterizing these directives, TFA teachers are supposed to utilize their personal skills and ambitions to create movement within the system. These skills will help them resist the temptation to "give up or make excuses" (Teach for America, 2009), instead choosing to persevere. As such, this notion of leadership actions asserts that teachers can have control over seemingly impossible circumstances. They can be the ones to "invest families and influencers" (Teach for America, 2009) in improving children's lives, acting as a catalyst. In addition, they can have enough influence over students' lives to put them on a different academic trajectory than their prior achievement would have indicated; indeed, despite poverty, teachers can "close the gap" (p. 5). However, in putting the weight of change on teachers' shoulders, TFA offers a paternalistic view towards low-income, minority children, describing them in ways that imply that they need to be saved from their circumstances in order to succeed. This stereotypical relationship between teacher and struggling students is often propagated within mass media representations of working in inner-city schools, such as *Dangerous Minds* or *Freedom Writers* (Trier, 2001; 2005).

An obligation to maintain order and support the common good: expectations for teacher leadership within traditional school settings. In contrast, "The First Days of School", representing a typical institutional perspective towards the responsibilities of its instructional staff, assures readers that this book has nothing to do with educational reform, and purposefully avoids "controversial, cutting-edge, sacrilegious, outrageous ideas" (Wong & Wong, 1991, p.

xiii). While "efficient and effective" (p. 7) teachers can influence the lives of students, proven, basic strategies are the best way to get there. Wong and Wong (1991) explained that, "as a district employee, you are not allowed to teach only what you want or do as you please" (p. 22), and should instead adapt to fit the local school community's needs, abiding by its operational rules and regulations. They suggested that if teachers cannot accept that schools are "owned and operated by the citizens" as "foundations for transmitting the values of our society" (p. 24), or dislike being obligated to further the district's goals, they should "go into private practice" (p. 21). As such, their attitude was more about compliance within school structures that traditionally limit teacher agency to the classroom level.

Dewey (1929/2009) also expected individual teachers to function as part of the community/school unit, leading and guiding children's experiences while recognizing that school is a "social institution" (p. 35). As such, the "discipline of a school arises from a school as a whole, and not directly from the teacher" (p. 37). He saw the school's primary functions as connected to "social progress and reform" (p. 40), and thought the community had a duty to provide educational opportunities that would prepare children for active citizenship. Within this vision, teachers act as mediators between individual inclinations and societal good and realize their leadership potential through their daily interactions with students. Furthermore, although Dewey advocated for incorporating children's individual needs and preferences into curricular decisions, he still expected teachers to foster shared values towards productive participation in society. As a result, while his ideal educator would still have a substantial role in determining appropriate instruction and developing responsive pedagogy, working towards the greater good should play a part in shaping schooling objectives.

Highlighting Strengths That Distinguish TFA's Model

At first glance, TFA's positioning of teachers as leaders has the potential to be more empowering than standard views of practice that confine teacher agency and decision-making to the classroom. Most strikingly, TFA's definition of teaching as leadership counterbalances the weight of increased responsibility to enact reform with the lure of the possibility of making a difference. Some corps members, such as the exemplars profiled within the introduction to their guide (Farr, 2010), do produce dramatic results, and their affiliation with TFA is part of what equips them to position themselves as change-makers (cue TFA's promotion of star educators like Jason Kamras, National Teacher of the Year). In addition, building a network of influence across a variety of roles within education allows corps members to envision affecting change that goes beyond their own pedagogical practice. Like Dewey (1929/2009), TFA sees teaching as a socially situated endeavor with the potential to contribute to the betterment of society. It connects teaching to taking action, as evidenced by words like "drive" and "overcome" that inspire movement, rather than static acquiescence.

Because more traditional conceptions of teachers tend to value passive traits like a sense of servitude and compliance with community norms, TFA's desire to cultivate bolder participation in reform is revealed within its contrasting descriptors of teachers as a force to be reckoned with (Farr, 2010). As a result, the organization is less wedded to teachers maintaining the instructional and institutional status quo that Wong & Wong (1991) promoted by actively dissuading teachers from overstepping their boundaries and participating in politics. Although "The First Days of School" is narrowly focused on initial classroom setup and fails to fully represent the range of new teacher resources available, the notion that district employees are not

supposed to actively demonstrate against their employer's directives differs from both TFA's particular push for action and other alternative approaches to the classroom that emphasize actively teaching for social justice. Furthermore, although TFA does not share as holistic a view towards achievement as Dewey (and refrains from encouraging teachers to be as child-centered and experiential as he described within his vision), it wants teachers to see their efforts as potentially transformative (Farr, 2010). Its belief in the power of education to change students' lives paints teachers as the catalyst for reducing social disparities, countering the realities of struggling schools with the potential for its members' outstanding personal characteristics to significantly add to a district's human resources. While this vision may not always match what corps members are able to actualize, the narrative that TFA has created leads to partnerships and opportunities that help the organization move forward. Its alumni benefit from these partnerships, which boost their future education and career possibilities.

TFA connects teachers to the world of policy and advocacy that educators are traditionally absent from by linking their participation in the program to an associated movement backed by prominent foundations, think tanks, and government officials. Consequently, TFA's long-range view towards how to drive teaching success is in some ways well aligned with prominent theories about the conditions necessary for reform, such as Fullan's (2006, 2001, 1994) notions of change, which advocate for systemic responsibility for improving education. By asking teachers to consider their role within the larger context of reform efforts, both Fullan (2006) and TFA encourage motivated educators to participate in their educational environment while acknowledging that multiple stakeholders need to invest in its evolution towards greater functionality. In order to keep corps members aligned with its mission, TFA directs teachers to think of their task not as an isolated endeavor, but as an important step towards more widely ensuring that, "kids growing up in poverty get an excellent education" (Teach for America, 2012). Although the organization wants corps members to demonstrate achievement within their individual classrooms, its ultimate purpose is bigger than creating better educational opportunities for just one group of students at a time. Because TFA recognizes the value in positioning alumni to "address the whole host of socioeconomic challenges confronting children and their families in low-income communities", it seeks to form a network of high-powered leaders that can "catalyze education reform efforts" (Teach for America, 2007, p. 15). As a result, members can enjoy the benefits of organized support structures and ready-made pipelines to future action, which offer the chance to remain involved in education long after they have left their initial classroom stint behind. Since there is ample evidence of TFA's efforts to provide opportunities for its alumni to make continued impacts on the reform landscape, corps members can anticipate being actively guided into roles within school leadership, policymaking, and public office if they choose to leave the classroom (Higgins, Robison, Weiner & Hess, 2011; Labaree, 2010).

However, alumni who take advantage of these avenues for future reform must consider the nature of TFA's political direction, and decide if they want to align themselves with a strategic vision that heavily depends, for example, on the use of high-stakes, standardized testing. As a result, former corps members may find themselves struggling to incorporate TFA's merit-based worldview with the hallmarks of progressive educational philosophies, such as Dewey's descriptions of a child's learning experiences as more continual and fluid than summative assessments can fully capture (Dewey, 1902/1956; 1929/2009).

Summarizing the Problematic Features of TFA's Reform Vision

Although TFA draws much of its power from the collective efforts of its network, its success metrics are still largely based on meritocratic conceptions of academic achievement. This focus on individual attainment most prominently manifests itself in teachers striving to meet goals for their practice by encouraging students to produce test scores that are good enough to put them on the path towards further social mobility and progress. TFA's emphasis on developing an elite leadership force that ranks at the top of its field can be problematic when considering how corps members might integrate their work within existing school communities that have already established their own views towards what might benefit their students. Since TFA asks its teachers to join them in spreading a particular brand of reform that embraces a more business-like, data-driven approach to school management, it automatically sets them apart from the rest of their colleagues in ways that might be alternately beneficial and detrimental to, "pursuing strategies that promote mutual interaction and influence within and across" school systems (Fullan, 2006, p. 11). In addition, it may put too much pressure on its corps to achieve at a superhuman level, expecting them to push past historically entrenched barriers to create progress through sheer determination and a belief that teachers can become "a major force in the quest for educational equity in America" (Farr, 2010, p. 5), simply by focusing on data-driven strategies for reaching achievement objectives.

TFA's drive to push its corps members to meet difficult challenges, along with its belief in the power of teachers to have an impact, may have the side effect (unintended or otherwise) of glossing over the realities of working with impoverished communities, as well as the root causes of inequities within the larger social order. By the time corps members leave Institute, they have been repeatedly told that their personal commitment, drive, and effort can supersede the challenges presented by their working conditions. Because the corps wants to inspire its members to persevere through disheartening workplace conditions, the difficulties presented by children who enter the classroom with inadequate preparation are positively reframed as the impetus to keep working towards its mission. This contributes to the notion that teachers can help their students succeed regardless of their life circumstances, thanks to their ability to ascend within a competitive meritocracy (Apple, 1996; Hartman, 2011). Since TFA believes that inequities within the school system have been bolstered by the false perception that low-income children will not be able to achieve at the same level as their better-off peers, the organization works to make such circumstances irrelevant to classroom activities and objectives. This is in line with research contending that providing students with better across-the-board teacher quality is the key to closing the achievement gap (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sander, 2007; Goe, 2007; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Wenglinsky, 2002), as well as the ideal of education being the great equalizer within a society that allows for social mobility and growth. On the one hand, this approach holds teachers accountable for providing high-quality instruction to the students who arguably need it most, and champions their potential. However, it minimizes the connection between school and community, as well as the effects of entrenched poverty on students' well being (Noguera, 2011). While I agree that within schools, teacher quality can be a primary determinant of student outcomes, corps members need to be prepared to work with colleagues, administrators, families, and community members to foster a collective responsibility towards progress, as well as a deeper understanding of the cultural and socio-economic contexts that surround their mission.

As evidenced by my own experience, corps members are instead tasked with maintaining the motivation to achieve within a program culture that perceives complaints about teaching conditions as letting students down, or making excuses for poor performance that could have been resolved by providing better instruction (Noguera, 2011). It is no wonder that prominent TFA alumni are known for taking a similarly hard line towards teachers who protest that the expectations being put on them are too burdensome to shoulder alone or try and discuss how poverty is affecting their ability to provide adequate learning experiences. Rhee, for example, purposefully named her latest endeavor "StudentsFirst", citing her belief that major problems with the school system often stem from "putting adult interests ahead of student interests" within bureaucracies that fail to take responsibility for producing learning (StudentsFirst, 2013). Part of the urgency in convincing corps members they need to push forward despite their circumstances may be due to TFA's short program duration; if teachers are only going to have two years in the classroom, there is no time for them to do anything but excel. And, if these corps members are not convinced that they can provide excellent instruction in spite of their limited classroom experience and contextual challenges, then the power of their mission is deflated.

In addition, by continuing to insist that its corps members, by virtue of their exceptional personal characteristics, are capable of producing "significant gains" (Teach for America, 2010), TFA avoids admitting that many of them do not actually provide students with much better instruction than their traditionally recruited and trained colleagues, at least at first (Boyd, et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005; Heilig & Jez, 2010). In fact, the accomplishments of its alumni after their two-year commitment, such as more sustained efforts to provide high-quality education to students or contribute to policy discourse, are ultimately more substantial than the results of their initial service, whether they stay in the classroom or choose, as I did, to explore other aspects of the education field. While Heilig and Jez (2010) found that after three years, about 80% of TFA corps members leave the classroom, the corps claims that a substantial number remain connected to education through other career venues (Higgins, Robison, Weiner, & Hess, 2011). Although this may simply be a byproduct of their pre-existing inclination for civic engagement, rather than an outcome of their TFA participation, it allows the organization to harness the potential for future involvement in this arena (McAdam & Brandt, 2009). To their credit, as evidenced in earlier sections, TFA has begun to capitalize on this opportunity to draw attention away from the corps' more limited effect on classrooms during their initial commitment.

Lastly, TFA's reliance on promoting an accountability-driven reform culture does little to disrupt patterns of policy mandates that narrow curriculum, fail to consider children's cultural background and interests when planning instruction, and ignore the need to address other areas of potential growth, such as socio-emotional domains (Darling-Hammond, 2007). The organization's acceptance of a merit-based worldview leads TFA to obsessively document achievement gains and implicitly give them precedence over more holistic conceptions of child development and other valuable teaching objectives. This tendency to deify test data contributes to the sense that while corps members are encouraged to participate in reform as representatives of TFA, in doing so, they become bound to the priorities embedded within the organization's interpretation of how to best fulfill its mission. Despite its entrepreneurial and action-oriented approaches, TFA may contribute to maintaining the status quo by encouraging its corps members to guide students towards the same middle-to-upper class definitions of success that have shaped their own achievement. Although I believe that modeling choices and behaviors like preparing for college and doing well on standardized exams can benefit students who aspire to take

advantage of such opportunities, emphasizing the need to direct students towards a better life path promotes the assumption that students who live in poverty have not already received valuable advice and support from their community. This issue can also be tied to TFA's casting of teachers in the role of heroic savior previously described as a primary feature of its program structure. Although the corps includes a discussion of racial, class, and culturally based dynamics within its training materials and emphasizes the importance of listening to the perspectives of more established stakeholders, shades of paternalism (Hartman, 2011; Whitman, 2009) emerge within their model. While it professes that "the movement to ensure educational equity will succeed only if it is diverse in every respect" (Teach for America, 2011, p. 9), the organization has not always made headway in building the connections necessary to appear sufficiently inclusive and integrated, even as its alumni have begun to participate in local leadership and politics.

Considering an Alternative Vision of Teacher Empowerment

Further consideration of the value of TFA's model requires educators to compare the organization's view of how to empower teachers to alternate approaches for increasing teacher participation in reform efforts. Although TFA is unique in the degree of its emphasis on the teacher as leader within its preparation strategy, there are other visions for teacher participation in both school-level and systematic reform that offer a counterpoint to TFA's core principles. One of the most striking is Henry Giroux's conception of the teacher as public intellectual (Giroux, 1988; Giroux & McLaren, 1986). Giroux (1988) explained that rather then training teachers to act as technicians who can deliver curriculum and produce learning outcomes, they should develop the ability to "address issues that concern the wider functions of schooling", such as, "questions of power, philosophy, social theory and politics" (p. 8). His concern about the "dumbing-down" of teachers prompted him to advocate for more opportunities for educators to participate in democratic schooling models that value teacher's opinions and voices, instead of placing disproportionate blame on them for the education system's failures (Giroux, 2010). Among others, Apple (2006) demonstrated a similar ethos towards the need to afford teachers authentic opportunities to participate in schooling decisions, rather than continuing to denigrate their abilities within a hostile culture that has created a "loss of autonomy and respect" (p. 43). As described within this study's textual analysis, Dewey (1919, 1929/2009) was also one of the first to advocate for a democratic approach to education that regards the teacher as an important contributor to communities charged with determining how to best prepare future citizens. However, the current political climate has reduced the possibility of these visions coming to fruition. Opponents of TFA's reform ideology would argue that the organization and its supporters contribute to this environment by playing a complicit role in diminishing the value of traditional paths to the classroom and advancing neoliberal political tactics, such as reducing the power of unions.

In addition, because Giroux's (1988) conception of the teacher as public intellectual takes a critical approach to examining schooling norms, it has met with resistance from those who want to maintain status quo relationships between teachers and administrative authority, to the detriment of teachers who would like to play a stronger role in shaping their school's culture. Although TFA tries "to elevate the profession" and encourage corps members to become change agents, the organization may want to consider if its stance towards accomplishing its mission is overly reliant on mainstream tactics like utilizing achievement data as a marker of teacher effort and quality. As corps members try to initiate change, do they need to remain linked to normative

accountability metrics, or should they feel free to suggest more radical alternatives? In addition, because TFA sees their recruits as possessing exceptional personal characteristics, how can it balance utilizing those differentiators to improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged students with the need for corps members to work with colleagues and community members to develop a united response towards such inequities? As a former corps member, I still struggle to understand how to reconcile the components of my TFA experience that I value with disparate critiques from equally significant influences on my perspective.

To better facilitate this process, perhaps what I see as the admirable aspects of TFA's framing of the teaching role as an empowered position could be better balanced with an openness to collaboration with scholars, practitioners, and families who possess a different political orientation towards improving schooling institutions and mitigating the impacts of poverty. Several universities have retooled their traditional education training to incorporate social justice, activism, and critical scholarship into the core of their curriculum, such as UCLA's Center X, which has the core goal of "transforming public schooling to create a more just, equitable, and humane society" (UCLA Center X, 2013), or the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, which offers a certificate in community leadership that emphasizes social justice and civic engagement, as well as a Bachelor's degree in community engagement and education (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, School of Education, 2013). Such programs could serve as models for TFA as it considers the implications of its distinct view of teaching as leadership and addresses criticism from those who question the ways in which corps members are being encouraged to utilize the organization's platform. In turn, those who dismiss TFA as the tool of business-minded, neoliberal interests might consider the value in preparing educators to work directly with students while purposefully linking their practice to a network for broader, ongoing reform efforts. Since the contrasts between typical teacher texts and TFA offered within this study are just a slice of the varied and complex visions of education that corps members encounter within the reform landscape, they should not be considered as a binary argument either for or against a particular viewpoint. Rather, this complexity allows for nuanced possibilities like recognizing that the concept of teaching as leadership effectively positions corps members to enact change, while continuing to debate the efficacy of TFA's specific leadership direction.

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Author

Laura Gutman is a doctoral student in the Culture, Curriculum and Change program in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She also works as a research assistant for the FirstSchool project at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. She was previously a kindergarten teacher as part of Teach for America in New York City, as well as the Vice President of Programs for Junior Achievement of New York.

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