Who Joins Teach For America and Why? Insights into the "Typical" Recruit in an Urban School District

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Abstract: Building upon previous research on how personal and demographic characteristics of teachers are correlated with larger issues in teacher recruitment and retention, this study contributes unique insight into the personal attributes, characteristics and career aspirations of new teachers brought into teaching in Los Angeles through the Teach For America program. Drawing from ethnographic interviews with 25 current Teach For America teachers, this study finds that teachers in this sample perceive themselves as embodying personal characteristics that prior research would support as less common among teachers in urban schools: that is, they see themselves as being competitive, high-performing, and enthusiastically committed to ending educational inequality. However, these participants tend to come from privileged backgrounds and colleges and consequently view their time teaching in urban schools as an interim period before pursuing other more "high prestige" careers. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Teacher recruitment and retention continue to be pressing areas of concern within educational policy circles (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Ronfeldt, 2012) because numerous studies note that the percentage of teachers who leave the profession is alarmingly high (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001; Luekens, Lyter, Fox, & Chandler, 2004). According to one study, 40% of teachers exit the profession within the first five years of teaching (Ingersoll, 2002). Kirby, Berends, and Naftel (1999) found that 50% exit within six years of initial entry. Equally as striking is the number of teachers who exit from urban schools. Approximately 21% of teachers in urban schools leave annually across the U.S., compared to

approximately 14% in other school systems (Planty et al., 2008). When looking specifically at the largest urban school systems in the country, like Los Angeles, New York, or Chicago, these percentages become even more disproportionate (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Boyd, Grossman, Ing, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2011). Research on Chicago public schools, for example, found that the district loses from one-fourth to one-third of its teachers every year (Allensworth et al., 2009).

To better understand why teachers leave the profession, a great deal of academic work has explored the characteristics of those individuals that choose to become teachers in the first place. As presented in the next several paragraphs, a teacher's demographic characteristics and personal background can be strongly correlated with his or her likelihood of leaving the teaching profession, especially for those working in a low-income urban school. Thus better understanding the demographics and personal characteristics of those who become teachers in the first place is a crucial first step towards understanding the relationship between recruitment and retention.

Within the literature on teacher recruitment, there are some clear, consistent themes regarding teaching as a career choice: those college graduates with the highest recorded ability levels, those with strong math and science backgrounds, and those from prestigious undergraduate schools tend to avoid the teaching profession (Ballou 1996; Gitomer, Latham, Ziomek, 1999; Henke, Chen, Geis, & Knepper, 2000; Levin, 1985; Podgursky, Monroe, & Watson, 2004). Among those that do become teachers, they tend to be women (Broughman & Rollefson, 2000; Henke et al., 2000), and they tend to be white (Kirby et al., 1999). Some studies (e.g., Gordon, 1994) find that many college students of color feel discouraged from becoming teachers, due to negative personal experiences in school, concern about a lack of respect in the

classroom due to race, the perception of teaching as a low-paying, low-status profession, and the perceived norm of teachers being predominantly white, middle-class women.

Among those teachers that enter the profession in urban school systems, their personal and demographic characteristics have been found to be indicative of whether or not they will remain in the classroom. In particular, new teachers (meaning those with two years or less in the classroom) leave more often than veteran teachers (Guarino et al., 2006; Hanushek et al., 2004; Kirby et al., 1999; Shen, 1997), and math and science teachers leave more often that those teaching other subject areas (Arnold, Choy, & Bobbitt, 1993; Grissmer & Kirby, 1992). Urban school districts have particular problems with retention, as urban schools and schools with high percentages of minority students have high attrition rates (Shen, 1997; Shin, 1995; Stinebrickner, 1998, 1999), particularly among white teachers (Hanushek et al., 2004; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004) who tend to leave such settings as soon as other opportunities present themselves (Guarino et al., 2006). Interestingly, though, in urban settings teachers of color are more likely than white teachers to both take positions and stay in them long-term (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010; Adams, 1996; Ingersoll, 2001; Kirby et al., 1999).

One increasingly notable recruiting mechanism bringing new teachers into urban schools is the Teach For America program. This organization purposefully recruits competitive recent college graduates (that did not major in education) to commit to two years of teaching in high-risk, low-income settings. In doing so, the program is effectively bringing some of the populations least likely to teach (Ballou, 1996; Gitomer et al., 1999; Henke et al., 2000; Podgursky et al., 2004) into those classrooms from which most teachers are most likely to exit

(Hanushek et al., 2004; Lankford et al., 2002; Shen, 1997; Shin, 1995; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Stinebrickner, 1998, 1999).

Given the continuing and growing prominence of Teach For America (hereafter referred to as "TFA"), it is urgent that this organization's influence on teacher recruitment and retention be more fully explored in the educational literature. This is especially true given that TFA has been a particular source of contention for many scholars (see Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Heilig & Jez, 2010) due of its organizational model which, in part, only requires its new teachers (referred to by TFA as "corps members") to stay in the classroom for two years, rather than commit to teaching as a long-term profession[1]. While there are TFA teachers that remain in the classroom beyond this commitment, the literature focusing on TFA teacher recruitment and retention is, as of yet, virtually nonexistent.

In terms of teacher recruitment into TFA, this study is the first of its kind to analyze the TFA teacher recruitment process systematically to identify common characteristics of individuals entering and leaving this alternative certification program. With regards to teacher retention among participants of TFA, however, there are a few studies upon which the present article builds. Specifically, the most thorough and rigorous research to date is that which has been carried out by Donaldson and colleagues (Donaldson, 2008; Donaldson & Johnson, 2010, 2011; Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). Using data from longitudinal surveys conducted with three cohorts of TFA teachers (from 2000, 2001, and 2002), Donaldson and Johnson (2010, 2011) find that a majority (60.5%) of those surveyed stayed beyond their two-year commitment, but many fewer (14.8%) stayed in the classroom as teachers after five years (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011, p. 48). While (as previously mentioned) low retention for new teachers is common across all types of school settings and all new teacher subgroup populations (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), the long-

term retention of TFA corps members as classroom teachers documented by Donaldson and Johnson (2010, 2011) is significantly lower. That said, however, several subgroups within this larger sample of TFA corps members tended to leave less, particularly women and Black and Latino/a teachers (Donaldson, 2008; Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012) – a trend that is reflected in the general teacher retention literature (Ingersoll, 2001; Troen & Boles, 2003).

These quantitative studies have provided statistical insight into why TFA teachers leave the classroom, primarily citing career opportunities outside of education and administrative and support issues at the school level (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010, 2011). They also provide some introductory demographic insight into the types of people that become TFA teachers (albeit on the basis of data that is now more than 10 years old). However, no work yet has rigorously explored the personal characteristics and aspirations of those that become teachers through TFA. This study represents the first rigorous analysis of the personal and demographic characteristics that are typical of TFA recruits. Given the explicit effort of TFA to bring those high-performing undergraduates who tend to avoid teaching into the classroom, understanding the degree to which such applicants feel committed to classroom teaching and education in general is crucial to understanding teacher retention among TFA corps members.

Also, while the quantitative data used in these previous studies certainly provide a great deal of breadth in their coverage, including all TFA corps members in the respective years that were surveyed, they lack the depth of insight into corps members' personal stories, perceptions and motives that are made possible through more qualitative methods of inquiry. That is, qualitative methodologies such as interviews and participant observation allow the researcher "to understand the world on its own terms" (Riehl, 2001, p. 116), as participants are allowed to share their own experiences in their own words. While one recent study (Heineke & Cameron, 2013)

has utilized qualitative research within TFA, this is a relatively untouched area of inquiry within the larger literature. By conducting an ethnographic study including interviews with TFA corps members that joined TFA in the years 2010, 2011 and 2012, the present work fills this gap, specifically probing more deeply into current TFA corps members' perceptions of those personal characteristics and career aspirations most common among TFA corps members.

This study focuses on the experiences of TFA participants in the city and county of Los Angeles, California. This was a conscious choice made for several reasons. First, Los Angeles is a large, urban area that is typical of most TFA corps members' experience[2]. Second, as TFA has had a placement office in Los Angeles since 1990, the local TFA program is one of TFA's oldest and most well-established. This minimizes the possibility of trends arising in the data that are attributable to the "growing pains" and early periods of rapid change typically associated with new nonprofits and nonprofit branch offices. Third, Los Angeles is one of TFA's largest placement regions, with around 300 new corps members arriving each year and around 1500 alumni in the region (Teach For America, 2013b)—this size provides this study with a significant pool of potential interviewees, who represent a wide diversity of personal backgrounds and classroom experiences.

The primary research questions guiding this study are two-fold: first, in a large urban school district like Los Angeles, what are the personal attributes and characteristics TFA corps members see as being most common among their colleagues? Second, what are the reasons TFA corps members give for having become urban school teachers through TFA? The answers to these questions provide insight into common characteristics of the type of teacher TFA recruits and their motives for joining. Having this insight can promote further understanding of TFA's role in teacher recruitment and retention in urban schools.

Within the 25 interviews that were conducted in this study, several key trends within participants' descriptions of "typical" TFA corps members are clearly noticeable. First, participants see themselves and their colleagues as being idealistic, relentless, intelligent, ambitious, and dedicated to ending educational inequality, all of which are characteristics TFA itself explicitly seeks out in its promotional materials. Furthermore, participants joined TFA as a way of "giving back" through urban education and as a way to push themselves to develop new skills in challenging situations. However, this study also finds that participants tend to come from privileged backgrounds in terms of race and social class, and most see their time teaching in urban schools through TFA as an interim period before embarking on their long-term career aspirations in which they can support themselves while doing something interesting and rewarding, rather than as an entry point into the teaching profession.

Method

The data for this article was collected through ethnographic interviews with former and current TFA corps members in Los Angeles, California. More specifically, open-ended interviews were conducted with 25 TFA teachers in their first, second and third years of teaching. These interviews focused on teachers' experiences with and perceptions of their placement schools, of teacher turnover within their schools and within TFA, and of their current career plans and the effect their TFA experience has had on such.

Participant Demographics

The 25 TFA teachers interviewed were drawn from the 2010, 2011, and 2012 cohorts of TFA teachers in Los Angeles: that is, all of the 25 teachers interviewed began the TFA program in one of those three years. We interviewed at least five teachers from each cohort. Given the relatively small size of this sample and the assurances of confidentiality provided to participants,

only broad demographic trends will be noted here. For the sake of said confidentiality, all participant names used herein are pseudonyms.

While the vast majority of these 25 teachers had little or no prior teaching experience before TFA, an unexpected number had prior teaching experience in public schools, both domestically in the U.S. and abroad. Among these 25 participants, several had unexpected difficulties with their school placements that led to deferrals of their teaching commitment, displacement from their original placement schools, and in some cases the choice to leave TFA and the teaching profession before the end of the two-year commitment. The sample included male and female teachers that represented a diversity of ages (several participants entered TFA in their late 20s and 30s) and racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Interview participants were recruited from graduate-level classes in Loyola Marymount University's School of Education, the official partner of TFA in Los Angeles[3]. Participants were offered a gift card or (in courses where instructors chose to offer it) course credit for their participation. As participation was entirely voluntary, our sample was limited to those TFA teachers that responded to emails advertising the study. That said, the positive response from potential interviewees was very strong—in particular, 100% of all second year corps members that were offered an opportunity to interview did participate.

Data Collection

We developed an open-ended interview protocol asking for teachers' impressions of the TFA school placement process, their placement schools, teacher retention among their TFA peers, the TFA two-year commitment, and the various training and professional development opportunities offered to them by TFA. The aim of these semi-structured interviews was for

participants to reflect on their TFA experience generally as well as their experiences with their placement schools, with a particular focus on how those experiences influenced their decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession after their two-year TFA commitment.

Participant interviews, on average, lasted approximately between one and two hours. However, several participants were eager to spend more time than originally allotted to share their experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded for themes by the authors. Throughout the article, individual interview citations can be identified by the participant pseudonym and date which follows them. For example, the citation (Brooks, 9/25) is referring to an interview conducted with a participant herein referred to by the last name Brooks on September 25th.

Findings

The TFA Archetype: Idealistic, Relentless, Intelligent, Organized, and Committed

In these interviews, participants see themselves and their colleagues as embodying a number of the characteristics popularly associated with TFA corps members: being idealistic and energetic, pursuing results relentlessly and not giving up, being intelligent, professional and "high quality" applicants for whatever career they might pursue, and ambitiously aiming to do well in their work. Beyond this, these applicants also express that they joined TFA in part to push themselves by doing something hard and in part to "give back" by working against educational inequality. This section will document each of these trends as they arise in this study's interviews, and then show how the development of these characteristics is encouraged by TFA organizationally.

First, participants describe TFA corps members as being "very idealistic, very pumped up—they're very energetic" (Evans, 11/26). This is similar to how TFA corps members are

portrayed in TFA promotional materials[4], in which corps members are reputed as directing all of this energy into their classrooms, doing everything they can to improve their practice and their students' performance in spite of difficult circumstances. Many participants in this study describe TFA corps members similarly. As Mr. Richardson states, "They are some of the hardest working people that won't take no for an answer. They'll put everything above themselves" (11/21). Mr. Collins similarly notes, "Teach For America teachers are...driven students and adults who have high expectations for themselves, and therefore bring those high expectations to their work" (11/21).

According to several participants, this high level of personal dedication is also reflected in a high level of personal organization and a desire to maintain control of one's circumstances. One participant notes that she distinguishes herself from the typical corps member in this regard, saying that "I have felt like one strength of mine is my ability to … go with the flow, and I have had an easier time than other corps members who are like, I have to know, I have to make it happen!" (Wilson, 8/16). Again, this characteristic is one that TFA explicitly looks for in its applicants. Specifically, TFA states that it hopes applicants possess "superior organizational ability, including planning well and managing responsibilities effectively" (Teach For America, 2013c).

When asked to describe the common characteristics of TFA corps members, Ms. Parker goes further to say that most corps members see themselves as "Type A personalities," stating that a typical corps member is

> someone...who has a very um, domineering personality, and is just
> like a taskmaster and will just like, completely take control and
> like, take authority....I mean I hear people in TFA often describe
> themselves and other TFA corps members as quote-unquote "Type
> A personalities," whether or not that's appropriate or like, a
> justified label, is you know, outside of this question, but I think

that is a label that is often applied by TFA corps members to
themselves. (11/24)

Another participant notes that this penchant for organization as a common characteristic

of TFA corps members, one she describes seeing in her assigned TFA supervisor and coach

(known within TFA as managers of teacher leadership and development, or MTLDs):

> [My MTLD is] the poster child for TFA, she's on it, she has so
> many Google docs it's crazy, she has an answer for everything,
> she's a sweet person and a great teacher, she has a good heart, but
> there's a lot of pushing for me to do everything she wants and it's
> really conflicting, like I hear her saying she understands me but
> she's still asking for so much stuff that doesn't help me and that's
> where the conflict comes. (Adams, 10/3)

This MTLD's perceived need for organization has reached the point that it has become an

area of contention between her and Ms. Adams, who does not see herself as fitting this organized

and demanding stereotype of TFA teachers (Adams, 10/3). Thus, when Ms. Adams' MTLD

makes demands of her that satisfy the MTLD's own desire for organization and control, these

can seem arbitrary to Ms. Adams. While this vignette is anecdotal and cannot be seen as

emblematic of MTLDs or TFA corps members in general, it does reflect a general trend within

these interviews in which participants see TFA teachers and staff as desiring (sometimes

potentially excessive) level of organization and control in their work.

TFA corps members are also described by our participants as being intelligent,

professional and "high quality" workers. As Mr. Richardson states, TFA corps members are

"highly intelligent people who know how to get things done" (11/21). Ms. Evans similarly

asserts, "I have never in my life been as amazed with the caliber of professionals I've been

around....I can't tell you how many times I felt … that I was so lucky to be around such

professional, high-caliber, intelligent people" (11/26).

This observation again reflects TFA's stated goals in recruitment, as it aims to bring in applicants that demonstrate "strong achievement in academic, professional, extracurricular and/or volunteer settings" (Teach For America, 2013c). As a result of this recruitment focus, TFA corps members have typically experienced a great deal of success in their lives, notably by going to highly ranked universities and by demonstrating leadership in their communities. Ms. Baker, sharing sentiments and experiences that are relatively common among the participants in this study, states that "I was used to success, I was valedictorian" (10/18).

In a similar vein, a common term participants use to describe TFA corps members is "ambitious" (Collins, 11/21). Ms. Brown notes this ambition when describing the type of applications TFA receives, calling TFA applicants "high quality," "those who have a plan, an ulterior plan outside TFA....I think it's really pretty incredible when you have a lawyer who's fighting for rights and doctors working in urban areas that are attuned to issues they learned in TFA. Those are the quality of applicants and alumni we get in TFA" (9/20). This ambition to enter lucrative and well-respected careers is reflected in the career ambitions of this study's participants, which include law school (Baker, 10/18; Brooks, 10/1; Collins, 11/21; Jones, 9/10; Roberts, 10/25), medical school (Johnson, 8/23), engineering (Walker, 9/12), and private equity (Hill, 9/20; Smith, 9/16).

Perhaps as a result of commonly having such driven, ambitious personalities, many participants seek out challenging situations that push them to learn new skills and expand their abilities. As several corps members state, this is partially what drew them to TFA:

> You know there was also a part of me that wanted a challenge, I was looking for something that would push me, I was looking for something that would force me to build a new skill set, different from the skills that I already had as someone who had been in college for the last four years. (Collins, 11/21)

> I wanted to do something difficult, that would give me purpose. I
> was looking for purpose in my life and teaching in low-income
> schools would be so difficult and yet so rewarding that I applied.
> (Brooks, 10/1)

Those that entered TFA seeking such a challenge certainly seem to have found it, based upon the difficult circumstances described by the 25 participants in this study. As Ms. Brown (a TFA corps member in her second year of teaching) states, "[TFA] was exactly what I needed, I needed to work really hard, and have high expectations, and that's the experience that we got" (9/20). While several participants also note this as a source of frustration, as many corps members experienced failure for the first time in their under-resourced classrooms (Baker, 10/18; Evans, 11/26), it was also a part of the appeal of TFA for individuals like Mr. Collins, Mr. Brooks and Ms. Brown.

It is interesting to note that TFA organizationally presents its corps members as having these same attributes, and sets an organizational priority to encourage their development. On its website (Teach For America, 2013c), TFA describes the characteristics it looks for in applicants, and they reflect many of the same attributes described above: "a commitment to do whatever it takes," "perseverance in the face of challenges," "superior organizational ability, including planning well and managing responsibilities effectively." Not only are these attributes that TFA looks for in potential candidates, but the development of these same attributes is pushed through TFA's training efforts, as Ms. Wilson describes:

> TFA gives you the skills and mindset needed to do what you need
> to wherever you are. They taught us planning skills, organization,
> professional skills, with a huge push in the beginning. And just the
> mindsets: never give up, relentless pursuit of results, always try to
> do things better. They really instill that reflection is important. So
> you're always trying to do it better, always looking for what went
> well and doing that consistently. So those skills will be critical for
> any challenge. (8/16)

One similarity seen across all of the participants in this study is their commitment to the mission of Teach For America that "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education" (Teach For America, 2013d). For some participants, their interest in education developed long before joining TFA (Harris, 8/30; Smith, 9/16), and they see TFA as a pathway into teaching rather than a step towards their future career in another sector (Carter, 10/24; Davis, 9/17; Morris, 9/27; Nelson, 11/8; Parker, 11/24). For others, teaching is simply one way to do "something important" with their lives after graduation from college. As Mr. Richardson states, "After college, I knew I wanted to work, get certified in something, and do post-grad service which comes with a sense of pride, and TFA was considered one of those top organizations to do that with" (11/21). In the words of Mr. Brooks, "I was looking for something internally rewarding to do after graduation, but I didn't know what" (10/1).

Whatever their long-term career plans, a commonly stated reason for joining TFA is that it presents an opportunity to "give back" and "make a difference." In the words of several participants,

> A desire to serve, that's sort of what motivates me...a desire to serve, a desire to give back, a desire to help others. (Collins, 11/21)

> [When I was told] about TFA … that really appealed to me, I've always been the kind of person who, if I can give back, I really want to. (Johnson, 8/23)

> I remember hearing about TFA a long time ago, and thought it was something interesting, a way to give back a little. (Taylor, 10/20)

> Teaching seemed like, hey I'll be with a younger crowd, I can get my ideas out there, I can make a difference. (Walker, 9/12)

> I attribute it a lot to my experience as an undergrad TA. I had tried a lot of different internships in college and hadn't found one that made me feel I was making a difference until I discovered TFA. (Lewis, 9/12)

> Everything they said resonated with me, to have a big impact, and maybe I won't be in the classroom forever, but it wasn't a resume booster, I really wanted to make a difference in education. (Davis, 9/17)

More specifically, some participants that came from working-class backgrounds themselves state that they were particularly drawn to the opportunity to work in low-income communities (Jones, 9/10; Martin, 9/10; Williams, 9/10). As Ms. Harris puts it,

> My own personal background played a role, too. You see, my mother was born in Korea, my father left when I was young and my mom was not a fluent English speaker. So starting when I was in middle school my mom worked at the Olive Garden for 10 years, she worked so hard to provide for us, and doing well in school was always a priority. My success is due to my mom's hard work and teachers doing a good job for me, so I was lucky to be a product of a good education. So when my mom died I was angry and depressed and when I thought about education, I thought I could be a positive influence, that there was hope and I wanted to be a part of the solution and help people benefit the way I did from education. (8/30)

Whatever their personal background, the rhetoric expressed by participants regarding the urgency of ending educational inequality in the U.S. closely parallels the organizational rhetoric of TFA itself. TFA asserts that "All kids—no matter where they live, how much money their parents make, or what their skin color is—deserve access to a great education" (Teach For America, 2013d). This sentiment, expressed repeatedly and with great urgency on TFA's website, is similarly ubiquitous in participant responses in this study:

> I believe in everything that Teach For America stands for. I believe that educational equality should exist in the United States, regardless of what community you were raised in. I do not believe that the community you were raised in should determine the type of quality of education that you receive, and I believe that Teach For America's values are very closely aligned to my own values as a person and an educator. (Evans, 11/26)

> I was definitely invested in the achievement gap, it personally—it personally upset me. I have relatives who are teachers, and

through their experience I've seen what education and inequity look like, and that's troubling, so again, I felt like I, I had worked with kids in the past, in various settings, so I want to dedicate, you know at least a part of my life, to helping with, to closing the achievement gap. (Roberts, 10/25)

I wanted to be part of an organization that is united as a whole to address educational inequality. (Parker, 11/24)

I think that what unites Teach For America teachers is the idea that education is, if not the best way than one of the best ways to help improve the opportunities that people are given in life, to help improve their upward social mobility. (Collins, 11/21)

Honestly, [what brought me in] was TFA's message. basically the harsh reality as they presented it, how it related to me, like, I'm a woman of color, this could have been me, it was my mom, and somehow I escaped this, and when I started to think about how this is happening to so many children I was speechless, so seeing it in my own family and an organization that was putting to words what happened to my own family, so it was time to take a step back from all the privilege that happened to me educationally and give something back. (Hill, 9/20)

In conclusion, those that choose to enter TFA share many of the characteristics that TFA makes clear it is looking for: they are idealistic, organized, ambitious, and eager to push their personal growth in challenging situations. Above and beyond that, however, they are also committed to working towards the reduction of educational inequity in the U.S., though as this next section will show, that commitment may not extend beyond the short-term.

Beyond the Archetype: Reasons for Joining TFA

Up to this point, the common characteristics of TFA corps members shared by participants in this study tend to mirror those described by TFA organizationally: corps members are idealistic, relentless in their pursuit of results, intelligent, well-organized, and committed to ending educational inequity. However, there are many common characteristics and motivations that were shared by participants in this study that add nuance and complexity to this perhaps

idealized picture of the typical TFA corps member. Namely, the majority of participants in this

study continue to come from privileged backgrounds in terms of race and social class, and most

of them enter TFA as an interim job while thinking through their long-term career goals.

First, most participants in this study (64% or 16 out of 25) are white and describe

themselves as coming from middle- or upper-class backgrounds[5]. Of the nine participants that

are teachers of color, six of those individuals also self-identify as coming from middle- or upper-

class homes, meaning that only 12% of the participants in this study (3 of 25) come from a racial

and socioeconomic background that mirrors the low-income communities of color in which TFA

teachers work.

Several participants noted this privilege among corps members. When asked to describe

common characteristics of Teach For America corps members, Ms. Parker describes a "typical"

corps member as

> Absolutely someone from like, a high profile school....I think a lot
> of TFA corps members still do come from like, higher-ranking
> schools, and I did go to a very, uh, good college, so in that way I fit
> the bill. I um, also think that a lot of TFA corps members are still
> white, and I'm white, so in that way I fit the bill, too. (11/24)

Ms. Evans, a self-identified Latina, notes that this commonality of privilege among corps

members can lead to problematic identities within the classroom:

> I think a lot of people in Teach For America, some of them do not,
> I don't know, I feel like they have not been exposed to the
> difficulties that a lot of our students have been exposed to, so they
> find it kind of awkward, or difficult, they have the kind of attitude
> that they're like a missionary, and they're out there to save
> people....like they were coming in to save these poor kids....that
> they're here as missionaries to save the kids for two years. (Evans,
> 11/26)

To be fair to the data, it is important to note that this is a perception that several

participants say TFA is aware of and attempting to counter. As Ms. Parker notes, "more and

more I see TFA as pushing for, it seems to me like, pushing for more diversity in the corps, and I think that changes the kind of schools that people come from, and the kinds of backgrounds that people come from, and in turn the kinds of experiences and like leadership methods that people have" (11/24). That said, the commonality of participant responses noting that most corps members continue to be White and/or high-income (Evans, 11/26; Monson, 8/18; Morris, 9/27; Parker, 11/24; Smith, 9/16), as well as the demographics of this study's population itself, show that this change seems to be happening slowly, and that the stereotype of TFA corps members as being high-income and/or White continues to be supported empirically, at least within this population.

Another common idea shared by participants in this study is that their two years teaching through TFA are serving as an interim time in which they can think about and prepare for their future careers[6]. 68% (or 17 of 25) of participants saw teaching as a time to think about their careers rather than their long-term career. This number is not too surprising when TFA explicitly states that they expect their alumni to work in multiple sectors, since quality classroom teaching is "not enough to close the achievement gap" (Teach For America, 2013e). This sentiment is reflected in the comments of several participants (Brooks, 10/1; Wilson, 8/16). As Mr. Brooks clearly states,

> The mission of TFA is not to create lifelong teachers, it took me awhile to accept that, that two years wasn't enough....TFA is interested in systematic change by any means possible, that you'll stay in the cause, invested in closing the achievement gap through other means....The achievement gap, TFA knows this, it won't close by just our two years in the classroom, the problem is changed by bigger macro-level work. So TFA has that right, if you see it that way, because corps members just experience education and go on to be senators, businessmen, and that's how it will change. (10/1)

In the words of many participants, TFA is appealing because it is "something different" that they can do while working out their long-term goals after college. As Mr. Roberts states, "It was something to do for the next two years, rather than go straight to law school or grad school" (10/25). Many other participants expressed similar sentiments:

> I taught labs for undergrads and a lot of my older friends applied to the program and I heard about their experiences, and I guess you could say my 4 years wore me out, 21 credits a semester, and I think I needed something different. (Johnson, 8/23)

> I was looking all over, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Education, public policy, some way I could help people, and when someone told me about TFA, I could learn more about students, and how it impacted neighborhoods, and education in general, it felt like everything I wanted to do all in one organization. (Martin, 9/10)

> At first I was trying to do anything but a corporate job. My senior year I had a horrible experience in a consulting group...so I decided I needed to go completely away from corporate to find something better for me. So at that time I didn't want to work for a business. I had a couple advisors saying I should look into education because they thought I'd be good at it....So it really wasn't intentional to apply to TFA it was more in terms of what I didn't want to do (work for a corporate). (Clark, 9/12)

> I decided to join for a number of reasons, one being I didn't want to go to grad school ever, let alone right away....So teaching seemed like, hey I'll be with a younger crowd....I can make a difference and if it doesn't work out I could still do what I was planning on long-term, no harm no foul. (Walker, 9/12)

Due to this transitional and temporary nature of their TFA teaching commitment, many participants are particularly drawn to TFA because it places them directly in the classroom without a need for extensive pre-service training. In their own words, participants appreciate that TFA is something you can do "right out of college" (Johnson, 8/23; Jones, 9/10), without having to go through an extra two or three years of training and student teaching to get certification (Lewis, 9/12; Morris, 9/27; Smith, 9/16; Williams, 9/10).

Another aspect of TFA that makes it appealing to many participants is that teaching

offers a higher salary compared to other similar post-college employment opportunities that

"give back" after graduation[7]. For some, the assured paycheck was a significant part of their

decision:

> I did TFA to get home to LA, I didn't feel comfortable quitting my
> job on the East coast without another job....It didn't spring fully
> from an ideal situation. (Taylor, 10/20)

> There are personal benefits that I saw....it would provide me with
> an income in an economy that is still, you know, recovering.
> (Roberts, 10/25)

For others, the appeal to do work in social justice was strong, but much more justifiable

with a guaranteed income:

> I really wanted to work in social justice, I worked in the
> immigration movement and labor movement, I worked in those
> areas in college, and realized it's really hard to make a living in
> social justice work and maintain a school/life balance. So when I
> heard of TFA, and AmeriCorps money, and that you make a decent
> living, I thought it would be perfect. (Wilson, 8/16)

> I wanted to join TFA because I, towards the second half of my um,
> undergraduate, I started to think that teaching would be an option,
> but I know as far as financially teachers don't necessarily make a
> lot of money, so I wasn't focused on making that my major, I
> always had wanted to do business, just to have that to fall back on.
> But I kind of always was going back and forward with myself,
> whether I wanted to do nonprofit type of work, or whether I
> wanted to work in education, or you know I worked for the human
> and health services of Berkeley, so I was kind of torn between the
> two paths, that path and the making money path, being in business,
> being in marketing and that kind of thing. And I figured that if I
> did go into education, I would want to do it with a recognized
> organization. And you know, being the first person to graduate
> college in my family, it just seemed like better than average, more
> support, and um, not the conventional way to go about teaching.
> (Smith, 9/16)

> I'd heard about it from another student and the way he sold it was
> they can pay for your masters or pay your loans back, so that was

> #1 and the second thing was I'd always mentored and tutored and
> my mom was a principal and I saw that same path for me and
> thought I could get my loans paid off or get a masters for free....I
> already wanted to do it, and then from what I heard from my friend
> about the loans and AmeriCorps money and I thought I'm in.
> (Monson, 8/18)

These details provide some nuance into motivations for recent college graduates to apply to and enter TFA: while most express a commitment to work that furthers social justice, particularly in education, another significant part of the appeal seems to be the opportunity to earn a decent salary and do something interesting for a few years before settling on one's true career.

Discussion

These findings present the first nuanced examination of TFA teacher recruitment. This study interviewed 25 TFA corps members in Los Angeles to assess how they perceive themselves in terms of both their personal and demographic characteristics and their motivations for joining. The intention of doing so in this study was to determine commonalities among this highly-recruited subset of the teaching population that enters urban school districts like Los Angeles each year. Such an ethnographic analysis of the characteristics of teachers that are recruited into the profession by TFA has not been undertaken beforehand in the educational research literature.

This study has shown that, from the perspective of corps members in the 2010, 2011, and 2012 cohorts in Los Angeles, TFA is indeed attracting a common set of teachers into low-income urban classrooms. That is, TFA is recruiting a fairly consistent type of teacher: idealistic, intelligent, well-organized, dedicated and ambitious recent college graduates that performed well in their academic careers and are committed to reducing educational inequality. As previous research has shown, such high-achieving college graduates, particularly those that come from

backgrounds of socioeconomic privilege, tend not to enter the teaching profession (Ballou, 1996; Gitomer et al., 1999; Henke et al., 2000; Levin, 1985; Podgursky et al., 2004). This is especially true for low-income urban schools (Hanushek et al., 2004; Lankford et al., 2002; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In this area of teacher recruitment in urban schools, then, TFA does seem to be having an impact in terms of the supply of new teachers, as they are bringing into the classroom those types of teachers who have previously avoided entering the profession altogether.

On the other hand, this impact in teacher recruitment does not seem to be mirrored in teacher retention, as the participants in this study predominantly view teaching as a short-term engagement per the teaching contract put forth by TFA. That is, as seen in this study's findings, most participants perceive teaching as something that provides a sustainable salary but that simultaneously affords them an opportunity to "give back" for a limited time while considering more long-term career options. Once that time commitment with TFA is completed, however, most participants in this study shared that their plans are to go on to work in a more lucrative, more highly esteemed career track (like law, medicine, or engineering).

That said, this intended departure from the classroom after the 2-year teaching commitment is in line with TFA's organizational mission. Per the rhetoric of TFA, it is not recruiting teachers to remain in teaching as a long-term career goal (Teach For America, 2013a). Instead, TFA makes it quite clear that it is recruiting individuals for a short-term commitment to the classroom (though perhaps a longer commitment to improving educational access and equity). Thus, the short-term commitments of TFA teachers are not necessarily due to any degree of disconnect between TFA teachers and TFA as an organization, where we might hypothetically see TFA teachers departing from the program early as a result of poor fit. Rather, in considering issues pertaining to TFA teacher retention in urban schools, the findings in this study suggest that

short-term teaching commitments are an inherent part of TFA's organizational model and that is consequently reflected in the types of teachers it recruits into its program. In short, TFA short-term teacher retention appears to not be an issue from the perspective of TFA.

Hence, these findings have several policy implications. First, if policymakers desire to diversify the pool of potential teachers that are recruited into urban schools, and specifically hope to bring in the types of high-achieving undergraduates from privileged backgrounds that tend to avoid the teaching profession, then the expansion or support of TFA could be one means of pursuing that goal. Second, there were several overlying perceived attributes of the work environment itself that attracted TFA teachers into the classroom. For instance, teaching was appealing because it was perceived as an opportunity to give back to the community but also an opportunity to push oneself in a fast-paced, highly-organized working environment. Hence, attracting high-quality teachers to urban schools may require the creation of "type-A" working environments. The caveat, however, is that these teachers only perceived this working environment to be a short-term arrangement.

Third, this view of education in which classroom teaching is seen as a short-term commitment that precedes one's long-term career (expressed by many corps members in this study) implies that caution should be taken in using TFA as a mechanism that promotes the long-term retention of teachers. From the perspective of TFA teachers and TFA as an organization, there appears to be a strong alignment in terms its members' career goals. That is, TFA teachers are being recruited explicitly with the expectation that teaching is short-term commitment. As mentioned, this may contribute to the type of person attracted to the TFA program. This does imply, though, that TFA teacher turnover should be expected in urban schools. Consequently, issues pertaining to teacher retention may be arising due to a disconnect between urban schools

that understandably desire long-term commitments from their teachers and programs like TFA

which recruit teachers explicitly for a short-term commitment.

Ultimately, TFA continues to play a significant role in recruiting young, energetic,

entrepreneurial teachers to the most under-served, high-poverty schools in urban areas like Los

Angeles. TFA as an organization, among others, believes that this group of teachers possesses

key characteristics that have been previously supported as impactful on student outcomes

(Ehrenberg & Brewer, 1994, 1995). Indeed, the perceived characteristics of these teachers align

with the characteristics that TFA upholds as critical to classroom success. Thus, as urban schools

continue to under-perform, understanding how to not only recruit but then also *retain* high

quality teachers continues to be a critical step for future research.

Conclusion

This study has contributed unique knowledge into TFA corps members' personal

characteristics in order to gain greater insight as to who joins TFA and why. More specifically,

this study has shown that the personal characteristics embodied by TFA teachers align quite

closely to the characteristics of teachers that TFA (as an organization) actively pursues in its

recruitment of new members. Moreover, the motivations for joining TFA as a way to join a

short-term commitment to give back to the community are common among TFA members in this

sample. Again, this aligns closely with the mission of TFA as an organization. Thus, there are

common patterns exhibited in who is recruited into urban schools through TFA. That said, how

to retain these teachers after their two-year TFA commitment is a question that can only be

answered through further inquiry.

The limitations of this study can serve as a springboard for future research. A first

limitation is that the sample of interviewees included current TFA teachers and very recent

alumni (i.e. those in their third year of teaching, one year beyond their TFA 2-year commitment). Hence, from the collected data, it is only possible to get a sense of issues facing current teachers. Future research can collect data from a larger segment of alumni of the TFA program. This would provide additional insight from those individuals who have participated *and* departed from the TFA program. In doing so, it will be possible to examine the characteristics of those teachers who left after the two-year commitment and those who decided to continue for a longer period of time post-TFA.

A second related limitation is that this study primarily interviewed teachers with regard to their perceptions of themselves and their own motivations to join TFA. Future research may entail collecting data from other members of school environments, such as administrators. Having the perspective of administrators on TFA teachers would provide an opportunity to aggregate data sources and develop a more rounded sense of the role of TFA in recruiting highly qualified teachers to urban schools and any mechanisms in place to attempt to retain them.

Finally, there are many advantages to exploring the role of TFA teachers within a single, large urban district environment like Los Angeles that is served by a single, large TFA branch site. That being said, differential results and interpretations may arise from the examination of other school systems affiliated with other TFA regional branches. A research extension, thus, is that the methods employed in this study could be implemented to collect data from other urban regions in which TFA places teachers to assess the generalizability of the new findings emanating from this study.

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