

Corps Members' Perspectives of Teaching in a New Teach for America Region

Lorrei DiCamillo

Canisius College

Abstract

This qualitative study examined the perspectives of 14 Teach For America (TFA) Corps Members (CMs) in a city where there was no teacher shortage. CMs discussed the benefits and challenges of being in TFA. Benefits included serving others, developing leadership skills, and being part of a flexible organization. CMs also highlighted some of the challenges they encountered, such as being unprepared for full-time teaching, taking qualified teachers' jobs, and feeling unsupported by inexperienced TFA staff. The findings add to the discussion about whether or not TFA should expand to cities where there are no teacher shortages, and raise questions for policymakers, school districts, and TFA about how to support these new teachers.

Keywords: alternative teacher preparation programs; Teach for America; and teacher perspectives

Introduction

When Teach for America (TFA) began in 1989, founder Wendy Kopp envisioned sending energetic yet inexperienced corps members (CMs) to public schools in areas of the country that lacked licensed teachers (Kopp, 1989). But between 2008 and 2013, the recession caused 324,000 teaching positions in public school districts to be eliminated, so TFA recruits were sometimes sent to cities where there were no teacher shortages (Hootnick, 2014). As a result, some veteran teachers began losing their jobs to TFA CMs because CMs were less expensive for districts to hire (Ravitch, 2014). TFA has been repeatedly criticized by educators as well as its own alums, who argue the organization's growth has compromised its original mission (Barnum, 2013; Hootnick, 2014).

In 2013, TFA came to a city in New York where there were no teacher shortages except in adolescent special education and limited-English-proficiency classrooms. A teacher education program at Catholic College, a small, private college in the city, partnered with TFA to meet the needs of alternatively certified teachers in urban schools. Before beginning their coursework at the college, the CMs completed a five-week Summer Institute through TFA in a large city in a nearby state. The Institute was a combination of coursework and supervised teaching experiences in a summer school program for K-12 students. After the Institute, CMs were enrolled in a two-year Master's degree program for either Students with Disabilities (SWD) or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at the childhood or adolescent levels. CMs took approximately two courses per semester in these programs and were the teacher of record in their classrooms through a New York State Transitional B license. After completing coursework and passing all certification exams, CMs obtained a Master's degree and certification to teach in New York State.

As a Teacher Education Department faculty member and the TFA program coordinator for the college, I found that there were problems with the coursework and mentoring structures in the

graduate teacher preparation program for CMs. I decided that before I could make substantive changes to the program, I needed to study the partnership and interview CMs about their experiences in TFA and the college's graduate programs. This article discusses what I learned about CMs' experiences in TFA in a region where they were often not wanted or welcomed in the large public school district.

Conceptual Framework

This study used sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) as the conceptual framework. Sociocultural learning theory posits that teachers' learning is shaped by social and cultural contexts and experiences. Social and cultural factors, such as school context, mentor support, and interactions with colleagues and administrators influenced CMs' perspectives of their experiences in TFA and their learning experiences in the college's graduate program.

The lived experiences of teachers who are committed to urban teaching should be recognized and valued by education policymakers (Borrero, 2016). Most alternatively certified teachers in the United States work in urban classrooms (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). Thus, when university teacher education programs partner with alternative certification programs, like TFA, they must reflect on their programs to ensure their curriculum and experiences prepare teachers for state certification and teaching in an urban environment (Carter, Amrein-Beardsley, & Cooper Hansen, 2011; Heineke, Carter, Desimone, & Cameron, 2010).

This study adds to the personal stories of former CMs' experiences (Albina, 2012; Barnum, 2013; Diamond, 2012; Hootnick, 2014) and research about CMs views of Teach for America (Brewer, 2013, 2014; Veltri, 2008, 2010). As a former TFA CM, Brewer (2013) interviewed other CMs about their experiences and critically examined TFA's recruiting practices, interview process, and approach to pedagogy. Veltri (2008, 2010) conducted an eight-year qualitative study and examined how TFA teachers learn the complexities of the school, community, and teaching, and how they view their work and TFA's mission. Using the CMs narratives, she described the site-based realities and experiences involved in becoming a TFA teacher.

Method

I conducted a yearlong qualitative study from September of 2016 to May of 2017 where I investigated the following questions: (a) How do TFA CMs perceive their experiences in TFA? and (b) How do TFA CMs perceive their learning in Catholic College's graduate teacher education program? This article focuses on the first research question (and first four interview questions) about CM's experiences in TFA in a new region. The name of the college as well as the names of CMs are pseudonyms.

I emailed the 39 CMs in the college's graduate program and asked if they wanted to participate in an individual interview to help me understand their experiences in TFA and their graduate education program. Fourteen CMs agreed to a 45-minute interview. Eight CMs were female and six CMs were male. All CMs were recent college graduates and ranged in age from 22 to 25-years-old. Eight of the 14 CMs were in their second year of the program, while six CMs were in their first year. The CMs interviewed were reflective of the larger group of CMs in the new region; 11 identified as White, one as African American, and two as Latina. CMs were asked why they joined TFA, what their TFA experience was like, what they enjoyed about TFA, and

what, if anything, they thought could be improved by TFA. They were also asked five additional questions about their experiences in the college's graduate education program (see Appendix A).

Data analysis began immediately and continued throughout the research process. Interview transcripts were read and reread to get a sense of CMs responses. Next, transcripts were coded based on initial themes and patterns. For example, some themes that developed from the interviews with CMs were that TFA was helping them develop leadership skills and serve others. Additionally, the CMs discussed challenges they were experiencing in TFA, such as being unprepared by the Summer Institute to teach full-time. I continued my analysis of the transcripts by member checking and checking for confirming and disconfirming evidence (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006), which helped me determine final themes.

Findings

The themes discussed in this section came from interview questions about CMs' experiences in their first and/or second years of the program. During interviews, CMs discussed both the benefits and challenges of being TFA teachers.

Benefits of Being TFA Teachers

Serving others. Many of the CMs I interviewed said they liked TFA's dedication to serving others, especially children in low socioeconomic status urban schools. Caitlin explained she liked the way the organization recruited teachers:

I like the way they find teachers because it's a very extensive interviewing process...they find people interested in social justice and community service; so that helps in the classroom. It allows you to teach kids differently in that everyone [teachers and students] respects each other.

Neal discussed how the idea of teaching as service drew him to TFA:

I like the focus on underserved schools...it is something I've been interested in since high school. I saw it as a good way to do some volunteer work...essentially some community service type of thing; while also getting some good experience of being in charge, taking control of my classroom, and then getting into science literacy, which is also my passion.

Some candidates brought up teaching in TFA as a way to work for equality in society. For example, Anna said she liked being surrounded by CMs who were "equally passionate about education" and "believe in the social justice mission and in eliminating inequality." She cautioned that CMs should also be critical when examining inequalities:

I think that people who join TFA see education as the great equalizer...but there are so many different types of inequality, like economic inequality, racial inequality, and gender inequality. To simplify it and say that if we just have good teachers we can end educational inequality...I think that is not realistic.

Clearly, the idea of serving others and addressing inequities, which many corps members had learned about in high school and college, was viewed as a benefit by the CMs interviewed. The TFA program encouraged CMs' view of teaching as service and helped them make sense of their experiences through this lens. Yet, as Veltri (2008) points out, "TFA's 'mission' in poor urban and rural schools embraces a business model with a brand, image, and culture designed to attract candidates for a finite commitment" (p. 536). Thus, when CMs view teaching as simply a two-year service commitment rather than a potential career, the schools that employ them do not gain

teachers who will remain in teaching and provide consistency for the students and family they serve.

Developing leadership skills. Since 2011, TFA founder Wendy Kopp has asserted that TFA's central mission is to develop leadership skills in recent college graduates. According to Hootnick (2014), TFA's long-term goal is to "build a force of leaders who will go on to influential public and private sector careers supporting TFA's education reform initiatives" (para. 22). Thus, it was not surprising that many of the CMs said they liked that they were developing leadership skills by teaching. David explained, "Being in TFA has not been easy, but I had supports and I've taken advantage of that because TFA is looking for leadership skills and I have them and I love challenges. So for me, I have loved this experience." Likewise, Adam said he was not sure if he would stay in teaching after his two years as a CM, but he had learned much from the experience: "I picked up a lot of people skills and relationship skills and they're transferable. That's what I like about TFA – it's an emphasis not just on teaching...the nuts and bolts of education...but on leadership."

Three interviewees also discussed that they planned to stay in TFA as leaders once their two years of teaching were finished. As Ava remarked, "I am inspired every day to be a leader within our community." Similar to viewing teaching as service, some CMs discussed teaching as leadership development. The TFA community seemed to assist CMs in making sense of their teaching experiences by relating them to experiences they would encounter as future leaders.

Being part of a flexible organization. Several CMs brought up that they thought the local TFA office, which was underfunded and understaffed during its first three years, was flexible with them and their needs. Sadie commented, "They take criticism well...they are open to change." Likewise, David explained:

I like that TFA is new here so they have been open to new ideas about making the experience better for us. I appreciate that...that they're relentless in the pursuit of being better, which is one of our corps values. So, they demonstrate all of our values really well. Bethany said she had several concerns and brought them to her Manager of Teacher Leadership and Development (MTLD). The MTLD then assisted her in creating a Corps Member Advisory Board, where she served as a leader. She explained, "So, I like TFA, that they're constantly trying to improve because they are new to [the region]." She added that she planned to become a TFA leader in the future.

There were three interviewees who said the TFA staff was not flexible and focused more on the challenges they encountered as TFA teachers. The next section discusses their concerns as well as concerns that several other CMs brought up during interviews.

Challenges Encountered in TFA

Inadequate preparation before teaching. All of the CMs interviewed described the Summer Institute as a very intense, exhausting experience where they were teaching and attending professional development workshops into the evenings and on weekends. Brewer (2013) discussed a Summer Institute in a southern state where "staff coordinate a hazing event in which staff members scold and ridicule corps members" (p. 8). In contrast to Brewer's (2013) account, none of the CMs interviewed said they were hazed, and four CMs thought parts of the Institute were helpful to their growth as a new teacher.

All of the CMs interviewed stated that the Summer Institute did not prepare them for the realities of full-time teaching. One of the main reasons it was not as helpful as it could have been is that the CMs did not know what they would be teaching yet. As Anna explained, “My placement in Institute was in a first grade and my position now is eighth grade reading.” Diana said that the Summer Institute did not prepare her for teaching because it focused on “identity work,” which she explained was examining her own background and privilege as a White American. She continued by saying, “Although it [identity work] is a great practice, it provided little of the foundation I needed to be successful my first few months as a teacher.”

James said the Summer Institute did help him learn more about classroom management, but he wanted additional instruction on methods: “We never got to learn how to incorporate strategies...how to teach English or social studies...there was a big focus on classroom culture.” Likewise, Caitlin said the Summer Institute was “frustrating”:

For Literacy, you only taught one standard a day, and if you failed, they [TFA staff] wouldn't let you revisit it. So, for the entire Summer [Institute] they [TFA staff] wanted you to do 20 different standards, which is not realistic...they just need the data and to give you the experience teaching, but it didn't make any sense. I was like, ‘You're not helping the kids. If they can't read the book the day before then they're not going to be able to read it independently.’

While the CMs had different problems with the Summer Institute, all agreed it was not enough time to develop the knowledge and skills needed to become strong first-year teachers. Their learning was influenced by interactions with their students, mentor teachers, and administrators at their school sites. This finding is consistent with other studies (Veltri, 2008, 2010; Brewer, 2013) and reports from former TFA teachers (Albina, 2012; Barnum, 2013; Diamond, 2012). As Albina (2012), a former TFA teacher, explained, “I needed time to absorb, make sense of, and find ways to implement my own budding ideas about teaching” (p. 71). The CMs in this study also brought up that they wished they had more time to observe and reflect on classroom teaching and learning before assuming the role of a lead teacher.

Taking qualified teachers' jobs. Since there was not a teacher shortage in the city where this study takes place, there were several teacher layoffs in 2013 and 2014 to make room for the new TFA teachers. The strong teachers union in the district found out about the reason behind some of the layoffs, and contacted the local newspaper, which published an article about TFA coming to the city and taking certified teachers' jobs. Following the publication of the article, the local TFA leaders asked CMs not to self-identify at their schools – to say they were new teachers, but not to reveal that they were part of the TFA program. This caused anxiety among many of the CMs, who felt a sense of guilt that they were replacing qualified teachers. For example, Anna related:

I feel morally wrong doing TFA just because a lot of the people I love and respect who are working on educational issues, like in [nearby city] despise TFA. I think there is this message being sent that a young college graduate with the right mindset can do your job better than you can...I feel that is incredibly insulting to teachers who spend years learning...a direct message that they [TFA] send is there's a shortage of teachers and we're filling this pipeline...but ultimately I think the implicit message is that there are a lot of bad teachers out there who are not doing their jobs and that is why our urban schools are failing...I don't agree with that.

Another CM, James, reflected on how “there is a lot of ill will toward us [TFA teachers] and some teachers want nothing to do with us.” He said his team at his school knows he is part of TFA and told him, “We should hate you but you do your job and do it well.” James related that when he brought this up with the local TFA staff, they told him he was not taking teachers’ jobs,

But I’m like there are teachers who have been subbing in this district for four years and can’t land a position and they are more than qualified. A lot of the teachers I work with say we [CMs] are not qualified and I agree with that.

Anna and James’ comments revealed the guilt and tensions some CMs felt about being part of a program in a city where there was no teacher shortage. Additionally, they seemed to receive mixed messages from TFA staff about a perceived teacher shortage. These CMs’ views were shaped by their interactions with TFA staff as well as experiences with other teachers at their school sites.

Inexperienced TFA staff. As discussed in other articles (Barnum, 2013; Brewer, 2014), some of the people who work for TFA in the role of advisors, coaches, curriculum specialists, and professional development leaders, are former corps members who only taught in TFA for a short time and would not be considered veteran teachers or skilled mentor teachers. Barnum (2013), a former TFA teacher, described a time during his first year of teaching when his MTLT “appeared in my classroom with no warning...only to sweep out, fifteen minutes later, after leaving a post-it note that said something along the lines of, ‘Keep up the great work!’” (para. 14).

In the city where this study took place, there was only one full-time TFA staff member supporting the 39 CMs. She had taught for two years in TFA before becoming a TFA staff member. There was one other woman (also a former TFA CM) who assisted her, but she lived an hour away and was not available to meet with CMs on a regular basis. The college where the CMs were taking graduate courses also assigned CMs mentors (clinical faculty who were veteran teachers), but they were told by the local TFA staff that they could not do classroom observations and could only assist CMs if the CMs reached out for support via email.

During interviews, all of the CMs brought up that they needed experienced, qualified, and consistent TFA mentors, who could help them with the daily challenges they encountered as new teachers. Caitlin explained how she invited her TFA MTLT into her 6th grade classroom to watch a lesson in a class she was struggling with, hoping to get feedback about what she could do to improve her teaching. She said the MTLT did not know how to answer her questions and then told her to “make sure you have student work hanging on the wall.” Caitlin related:

I flipped out because that was my feedback. It was irrelevant. And my classroom last year was covered in student work. The feedback the MTLT gave me was not helping me become a better teacher. I believe that student work should be on the walls, but that feedback is not helping me.

Pilar shared that she felt unsupported her first year teaching in a bilingual classroom: “There was no one Spanish speaking on TFA staff, so when they would go into my classroom, they told me some things, but I still had to figure out how to adapt it to Spanish speaking students.” She said TFA contacted their national office and sent a coach to help her, “but when I got done with the management, then the teaching part started.” She said she realized, “I don’t have teaching down, I don’t know the curriculum, I don’t know how to do this and you’re not helping me find stuff...so my management went down again.” Eventually, Pilar was removed from her classroom by the school principal and put in a non-bilingual classroom.

Several of the CMs interviewed commented that they knew the local TFA staff was particularly inexperienced and the office was underfunded and understaffed compared to other

regions where TFA existed. Some CMs had friends or acquaintances who had been TFA teachers in other cities. For example, James knew a man who had been a TFA teacher in an east coast region, and when he told the man about his experiences,

He was shocked...he said they have one MTLT for every seven CMs. They make good money so they're not going anywhere...they know their stuff...they were teachers for 10-15 years and a lot of them were TFA alums...they know the districts and what they are teaching.

As James' comments illustrate, the lack of experienced TFA staff seemed unique to this new TFA region. The CMs descriptions of their mentoring in TFA illustrate how their interactions with TFA staff influenced their thinking about good mentoring for new teachers.

Discussion

Interviews with CMs in a new TFA region revealed they saw benefits and challenges to being TFA teachers. Some of the themes found in this study were consistent with other research studies, such as CMs views' of teaching as service (Veltri, 2008) and their lack of preparation to teach (Albina, 2012; Barnum, 2013; Brewer, 2013). Yet this research also revealed unique perspectives, for example CMs' views about developing leadership skills, being part of a flexible organization, and taking qualified teachers' jobs.

The CMs interviewed liked that they were serving others, especially poor children in "low-performing" public schools, and developing their leadership skills for future jobs. They also enjoyed being part of a new organization where the TFA staff member valued their perspectives and worked to make the program stronger for them. CMs spent more time discussing the many challenges they faced as new teachers in the alternative certification program. They did not think the Summer Institute prepared them for the rigors of full-time teaching and said they needed more mentoring from experienced TFA staff. Additionally, CMs felt guilty about taking jobs from certified teachers.

Implications and Conclusion

This study highlights some of the experiences and perceptions of a group of teachers who were placed in a region where teacher shortages were not widespread. These findings are limited in that they are a single case of a small TFA program where I, as program advisor, conducted the interviews. Yet, despite these limitations, the findings add to the discussion about whether TFA should expand to cities where there are no teacher shortages (Barnum, 2013; Hootnick, 2014; Ravitch, 2014) and raise questions for policymakers who push for alternative certification programs, school districts and universities who partner with alternatively certified teaching programs, and TFA. Should TFA expand to cities where teacher shortages do not exist? Should TFA teachers, many of whom leave after two years, take certified teachers jobs? If CMs are unsupported by experienced, knowledgeable mentors, how can they become stronger teachers? How does the lack of support that CMs receive influence their teaching and students' learning? These questions are important for all stakeholders to discuss and for future research.

The CMs views about their experiences in TFA illustrated their learning was shaped by social and cultural contexts and experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). CMs' experiences of being part of a TFA program in a new region, along with their experiences with the students they taught, the mentors who supported them, and teachers and administrators they came into contact with,

influenced their thinking and development. Teacher educators and policymakers should consider the views of these CMs as they work to make alternative certification programs stronger. For example, CMs' views about needing additional mentoring support should provoke conversations among TFA, school leaders, and university preparation programs. The three organizations should combine financial resources to support these new teachers in a comprehensive way. Teacher preparation programs should also work to ensure their curriculum is relevant and meaningful for CMs since they often feel unprepared for the realities of first-year teaching in urban schools.

Based on their review of the existing research studies about TFA, Vasquez Heilig and Jez (2014) made several recommendations to school districts in regards to hiring through TFA. They recommend that districts only hire TFA teachers when the alternative hiring pool consists of uncertified, emergency, or substitute teachers. Additionally, Vasquez Heilig and Jez (2014) assert that districts should require TFA teachers to receive additional in-service professional development based on supported best practices. The perspectives of teachers in this study support their recommendations; many of the CMs interviewed said they wished they had been placed in other regions where there were teacher shortages and an established TFA program with adequate supports.

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Appendix A

1. Why did you join TFA?
2. How long have you been teaching in TFA?
3. What has the TFA experience been like for you?
4. What do you like about being in TFA?
5. What do you feel could be improved by TFA?
6. What has your experience in Catholic College's graduate education program been like?
7. What courses and instructors have been helpful to your learning?
8. What improvements could Catholic College make to the graduate education program that you are enrolled in?
9. Is your Catholic College mentor helpful? Please explain your relationship with her or him.
10. What do you think of the TFA/Catholic College partnership? Do you think it is a collaborative relationship?