# Teacher Identity Making, Shifting, and Resisting

## The Case of Two Former Teach for America Corps Members

**Lynnette Mawhinney & Carol R. Rinke**

## Abstract

This article explores the development of teaching identity among Teach for America (TFA) corps members through the use of storied experience. Grounded in a conceptual framework of intersectional identities, specifically Gee's notions of *institution-identity* and *affinity-identity*, we consider the storied experiences of two former classroom teachers (referred to as teacher leavers) who entered the profession through the TFA alternative certification pathway. Although both teacher leavers followed the TFA pathway into the classroom and ultimately left teaching, they constructed their identities in unique and at times opposing ways, with consequences for their ultimate career pathways. We consider issues of resistance and return in examining the implications of TFA's identity model on the teachers themselves and the larger teaching profession.

Lynnette Mawhinney is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Carol R. Rinke is an associate professor of education and assistant dean of the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York.
Email addresses: lynnette@uic.edu & carol.rinke@marist.edu
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## Introduction

As teacher educators, we are often consumed by the goal of teacher identity development. *Teacher identity*, defined as one seeing one's self as a teacher, is of primary concern because of its central role in mediating job satisfaction and long-term professional engagement (Day & Gu, 2010; Flores & Day, 2006). Moreover, as demonstrated by Schaefer, Downey, and Clandinin (2013), teacher identity can frame not only a life in teaching but also a life outside of the classroom. Teacher educators, therefore, hold a pedagogical responsibility to facilitate the development of teacher identity among future educators (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014).

To further unpack the vital link between teacher identity and teacher career development, we sought to capture the storied experiences of an often-silenced group within education: *teacher leavers* (Mawhinney & Rinke, 2018, 2019; Rinke & Mawhinney, 2017). We define teacher leavers as those educators who voluntarily elected to leave the profession prior to retirement. We sought to highlight the voices of former urban teachers through their own perspectives and experiences because, although much is understood about pre- and in-service teacher identity development, knowledge of teachers' perceptions of themselves and their careers virtually disappears once they leave a formal classroom position.

Within the sample of teacher leavers from across four U.S. regions, we included former teachers from traditional university-based teacher education programs as well as from alternative-route programs that follow an abbreviated model, such as Teach for America (TFA) or Teaching Fellows programs. The inclusion of alternate-route participants was essential, as 29% of teacher preparation programs in the United States rely on this model (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Identity development is a particularly complex issue for alternate-route teachers, who are not allotted the same time for pedagogical or professional preparation. Where traditional teacher education programs have a three-tiered identity development process beginning with preservice teachers, evolving into student teachers, and leading to in-service teachers, alternative-route programs like TFA must necessarily encompass all three identities simultaneously. If "novice teachers in particular face profound identity crises when transitioning from pre-service to in service contexts" (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014, p. 251), then this dynamic may be further complicated by alternative-route programs that merge these identities at the same time. Consequently, TFA corps members historically leave teaching at higher rates than traditionally prepared teachers (Costigan, 2005).

This article seeks to understand how two participants within our larger sample, Susan and Kaitlin,[1] made sense of their professional identities over time. Both Susan and Kaitlin were TFA corps members and earned their teacher certification through this program, thus their experiences and perspectives highlight the complexities that emerged during and following one specific alternative certification program. Whereas Kaitlin aligned herself and her identity strictly with TFA as an organiza-

tion, Susan intentionally shifted her identity away from TFA and toward being a teacher (Schaefer, 2013a).

## Programmatic Context

TFA was founded in 1990 by Wendy Kopp, based on an idea developed in her undergraduate senior thesis at Princeton University (Brewer, 2014; La Londe, Brewer, & Lubienski, 2015). The original intent was to "rescue and reform schools in America's urban education centers from what was deemed sub-par teaching and teacher training as a result of a national teacher shortage" (La Londe et al., 2015, p. 3). The initial program goals have evolved over time, and TFA's current mission is stated as follows:

> We're committed to expanding opportunities for children by effecting profound systemic change. We find, develop, and support a diverse network of leaders from classrooms, schools, and every sector and field in order to shape the broader system in which schools operate. (Teach for America [TFA], 2018)

Programmatically, TFA recruits undergraduate students from prestigious colleges across the United States to work in one of the 53 partner urban or rural communities (TFA, 2017c). TFA corps members (as participants are called) can work in any pre-K to 12th-grade classroom and across subject areas. Once accepted to the program, corps members make a 2-year commitment to teaching within their designated urban or rural community. Following a 5-week summer boot camp to learn teaching methodology, corps members are placed as the teacher of record in a classroom for 2 years. Brewer (2013, 2014), a TFA alumnus and current educational researcher, completed both a traditional education program and TFA's accelerated program. He noted receiving a total of 1,206 hours of preservice preparation in his traditional teacher education program, as compared to 145 hours of preparation with TFA (see Table 1).

**Table 1**
*Comparison of Traditional and TFA Teacher Preparation*

| | Preservice observation hours | Hours spent in classrooms as a student of methods | Hours spent in leading teaching role | Total preservice preparation hours |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Traditionally certified | 80 | 496 | 630 | 1,206 |
| TFA | 2 | 125 | 18 | 145 |

Note. Re-created from "Accelerated Burnout: How Teach for America's Academic Impact Model and Theoretical Culture of Accountability Can Foster Disillusionment Among Its Corps Members," by T. J. Brewer, *Educational Studies, 50*(3), 2014, p. 252.

For corps members, program benefits are many, including (a) housing and transportation coverage during the 5-week boot camp, (b) a salary ranging from $33,000 to $58,000 (location specific), (c) full health benefits, (d) 403(b) retirement benefits, (e) master's and teaching certification covered, and (f) possible student loan forgiveness (TFA, 2017b). Regarding these benefits, Maier (2012) noted,

> What is surprising is that this work is equated to volunteering and public service when they are asked to perform the same work and are paid the same amount as all 1st and 2nd year teachers in their respective districts. (pp. 16–17)

TFA has often been likened to the Peace Corps, as both maintain rigorous standards for admittance. Maier (2012) again noted that being a TFA corps member is "selective, high-status, and also networked. . . . [It] allows corps members to delay career decisions, and gives off the image of promoting social justice" (p. 13). Maier argued that TFA is frequently seen as "an initial rung in a more prestigious career ladder, not necessarily the career itself" (p. 19). Although the number of applications into TFA has fallen in recent years (Beard, 2016), the organization currently has 6,700 corps members and 50,000 alumni (TFA, 2017c). Moreover, the program has expanded internationally, with a sister program, Teach for All, currently operating in 46 different countries and on six continents (Teach for All, 2017).

In recent years, TFA has been the focus of both ideological debate and empirical research. The current research literature has explored TFA's teacher preparation (Carter et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Labaree, 2010; Veltrie, 2008), recruitment methods (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; Miner, 2010), teacher quality and effectiveness (Glazerman, Mayer, & Decker, 2006; Heilig, Cole, & Springel, 2010; Heilig & Jez, 2010; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; McAdam & Brandt, 2009; Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001; Xu, Hannaway, & Taylor, 2011), corps member experiences (Brewer, 2013, 2014), and political influences (Lahann & Reagan, 2011; La Londe et al., 2015). This article's intention is not to evaluate the program or its outcomes but rather to add to the research base through an exploration of identity development among former corps members and current teacher leavers.

## Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

In this study, we draw on the notion of identity as central to teachers' professional growth. Professional identity development has previously been conceptualized in terms of how individuals makes sense of themselves in context (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), and our work is grounded in an understanding that this process of identity development is also central to career development. In particular, we align ourselves with the work of Savickas et al. (2009), who proposed a "life-designing framework" in which "individuals progressively design and build their own lives, including their work careers" (p. 241). A life-designing approach conceptualizes in-

dividuals as active and empowered agents in constructing their own lives and careers and envisions career development as an identity-making process (Savickas, 2012).

Clandinin et al. (2015) took this understanding a step further to connect teacher identity development to the act of teachers leaving the classroom. In their work, the frequent phenomenon of early career attrition is understood as an identity-making process, in which teachers reconceptualize their identities outside of education. Others have reinforced the notion that identity development over time is connected to career attrition (e.g., Hochstetler, 2011; Olsen, 2008; Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012) and noted that both personal and professional histories mediate that identity-construction process (Flores & Day, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, we look more deeply into forms of identity, drawing on Gee's (2000) four-part conceptual framework, including (a) nature-identity, (b) institution-identity, (c) discourse-identity, and (d) affinity-identity. *Nature-identity* is "a state developed from forces in nature" (p. 100). This is an identity that is "recognized" by others as the "kind of person" they are (p. 102). Gee discusses how being an identical twin or a White woman would be the "kind of person" someone is dictated by nature to be. *Institution-identity*, "a position authorized by authorities within institutions" (p. 100), is considered "who I am" as an identity. Often this identity is set forth by an authority, such as a school board hiring someone as a teacher. *Discourse-identity* is an "individual trait recognized in the discourse/dialogue of/with 'rational' individuals" (p. 100). In essence, this identity is one that is individualized, such as a person being hilarious or passionate. This is dictated by how others "treat, talk about, and interact" with that person (p. 103). Lastly, *affinity-identity* comprises the "experiences shared in the practice of 'affinity groups'" (p. 100). In this case, an affinity group is an "allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices that provide each of the group's members with requisite experiences. The process through which this power works, then, is participation or sharing" (p. 105). An example would be a "Trekkie" (a person who attends Star Trek events) or an activist teacher (a person who is a member of the New York Collective of Radical Educators). When taking these four identities into consideration, Gee explains that each is not separate; rather, all are interrelated, adding to the various complexities of an individual's identity.

## Methodology

As previously noted, life histories and the act of telling one's storied experiences are critical, both conceptually and methodologically, to identity work (Chang-Kredi & Kingsley, 2014; Flores & Day, 2006). To fully capture the storied experiences of our teacher leavers, we utilized a professional life histories methodology, which focused specifically on the career aspirations, goals, and realities of a person's story, rather than attempting to capture a full life history narrative. This allowed us to conduct an in-depth exploration around one focal point (in this case, enter-

ing teaching, being a teacher, and leaving the profession) and foster reflection upon the multiple layers embedded within each participant's storied experiences. Rather than taking a technical question-and-answer approach, we encouraged participants to synthesize their educational backgrounds, life choices leading to the classroom, careers as teachers, and pathways out of the classroom into one story (Costigan, 2005). In essence, we used this methodology to understand, illustrate, and guide the participants to make their own meaning from their career choices (Atkinson, 1998).

Cross and Ndofirepi (2015) explained the power of the storied experience:

> Narrations of lived experiences offer opportunities to interpret the relations among past, present and projected events in teachers' lives, and in particular how they become teachers and remain teachers under unpredictable and changing circumstances. These include, for example, life history accounts, storytelling, and discourse analysis. (p. 99)

Foster's (1997) concept of life history research with teachers parallels Cross and Ndofirepi's (2015) by arguing that "life history research offers critical insights into larger social processes by connecting the lives to society" (p. vvxi). Goodson and Sikes (2001) used life history methodology as a way to encapsulate the career life-span, especially as teachers' stories are intertwined with their teaching approaches, philosophies, and pedagogical knowledge (see also Carter & Doyle, 1996; Clandinin, 1986). They continued by theorizing how life history research in educational spaces should be founded on three points of conceptual understanding:

> 1. It [life history method] explicitly recognizes that lives are not hermetically compartmentalized into, for example, the person we are at work (the professional self) and who we are at home (parent/child/partner selves), and that, consequently, anything which happens to us in one area of our lives potentially impacts upon and has implications for other areas too.
>
> 2. It acknowledges that there is a crucial interactive relationship between individuals' lives, their perceptions and experiences, and historical and social contexts and events.
>
> 3. It provides evidence to show how individuals negotiate their identities and, consequently, experience, create and make sense of the rules and roles of the social worlds in which they live. (p. 2)

The data collection and analysis processes were generated around these foundational concepts as we encouraged participants to make meaning from their contextualized experiences.

### *Data Collection*

The process of identifying former teachers posed a unique challenge, as teacher leavers quickly become disconnected from their networks once they leave the field (Rinke & Mawhinney, 2017). Thus we used snowball sampling as the recommended

approach for "hidden" populations (Browne, 2005). We recruited participants through our social networks, Listservs, and social media outlets. Specifically, we aimed to identify teacher leavers from all four regions of the United States (East, Midwest, South, and West) who met the following criteria: (a) left teaching prior to retirement, (b) taught for at least 1 year within a public school, and (c) taught in secondary science or English (language arts) classrooms. Our last discipline-specific criterion was based on the finding that secondary science teachers expressed higher levels of dissatisfaction with the profession (Ingersoll, 2003a) and were more likely to leave teaching to pursue the more prestigious and lucrative career alternatives available with a science degree (Hoyle, 2001; Murnane & Olsen, 1990). Furthermore, research has shown that English teachers struggle with significantly higher workloads than do teachers in other subject areas (Hancock & Scherff, 2010), owing to the large amount of student writing demanded in the subject area.

Once we had identified participants, we conducted interviews with a common semistructured protocol lasting between 75 and 90 minutes. As professional life histories focus on one particular area of a person's life, it is considered standard to complete the interview within one sitting, with follow-up for minor areas of clarification as needed. The interviews themselves were conducted face-to-face if the participant was located within a 1.5-hour drive from one of the researchers. If this was not the case, interviews were conducted over Skype or telephone. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and member checked by participants.

### *Data Analysis*

Transcripts were coded individually using intersectionality between within- and cross-participant analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, data were separated into participants' professional life phases. Second, data were categorized using a coding process for each phase that encompassed meaning making, identity development, emotions, interpersonal interactions, and societal interactions. Eventually, we identified 27 a priori codes, organizing the chronology of professional life history events and the participants' interpretation of the events. Third, researchers came together to refine the coding process and generate initial themes. This process also led to the development of emergent codes, particularly with respect to the participants' perceived purpose and goals, for a total of 44 distinct codes. Finally, we reanalyzed the data using emergent codes, and the alternatively trained subgroup became an area of focus. Throughout the process, researchers maintained a focus on the life-constructing framework (Savickas, 2012) in which participants were seen as active agents in making meaning of their lives, which, in turn, shaped their career pathways.

### *Participant Overview*

The study identified 25 teacher leavers from 14 different states across the nation, providing geographic and contextual diversity within urban schools. In order not to

fall into the "definitional gap" surrounding the word *urban* in the literature (Irby, 2015; Milner, 2012; Milner & Lomotey, 2013), we used Milner's (2012) typology of urban education. All 25 teachers taught within an urban-intensive school (schools situated within large urban metroplexes), an urban-emergent school (schools within small cities under a population of 1 million), or an urban-characteristic school (schools experiencing increases with challenges associated with the urban context; Milner, 2012).

The overall population of the larger study reflected the predominantly White and female teaching force in the country (Papay, 2007), with 84% female and 68% White. Fifty-six percent of the teacher leavers were trained through traditional teacher education programs, whereas the 44% remaining had attended alternative-route programs (e.g. TFA, Teaching Fellows, or another alternative-route program).

Among the teacher leavers from alternative-route programs, there were three primary models included. The largest representation was from TFA, with 54% of the alternative-route group, followed by 36% from geographic-specific Teaching Fellows programs and 9% from the university-based alternative teacher certification model. The teacher leavers in the alternative-route group taught, on average, for 6 years, twice the national average of 3 years (Ingersoll, 2003b) for urban teachers. When further segmented, the TFA group stayed an average of 4.2 years in teaching.

From the larger alternative-route group, 45% currently remain in education-related fields (e.g., community education) or in nonteaching roles within education (e.g., administration). The most interesting finding is that an additional 45% of the teacher leavers decided to return to their original career paths. This article focuses on this intriguing group of alternative-route participants who returned to an earlier profession. Specifically, this article focuses on 2 of the 25 participants (see Table 2), Susan and Kaitlin, both White women who taught within urban-intensive schools (Milner, 2012), Susan on the East Coast and Kaitlin on the West Coast. Together they represent the various stories outlined in the alternative-route pool of participants. Moreover, because we use life history as a methodology, we present each case study in full to honor each participant's voice and experience. In the discussion and implications section, we spend time looking across both case studies in relation to Gee's (2000) conceptual framework.

**Table 2**
*Participant Overview*

| | *Gender* | *Race/ ethnicity* | *Years taught* | *Subject taught* | *Current field* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Susan | Female | White | 6 | English | Nonprofit |
| Kaitlin | Female | White | 2 | Special education | Politics |

Note. Nature-Identity Institution-Identity (prior) □ Institution-Identity (now).

## Susan's Storied Experience

### *Beginning the Program: A Means to an End*

As an undergraduate, Susan was highly committed to community work. She attended an urban Catholic university where she partnered with a nun on community work in an impoverished neighboring city. Susan was committed to this city of Hamilton and ran a program during her summers "that cared for children who had been victims of violent trauma." Upon graduation, Susan realized that her goal was

> to find ways to deepen my relationship and contribution to positivity in [Hamilton]. . . . Maybe I have some skills but if anything in my college life had taught me, it was like, hey, practice humility and acknowledge that when you're working in a community that's not your own you likely don't have nearly as much to offer as you might think. So take a step back.

Susan decided she wanted to find a job that would allow her to do meaningful work in this same city. She wanted to find a path where she could "be a foot soldier. Do something useful and learn from, continue to learn from the community that's around you"; she decided to look for a hands-on community role. Susan further explained,

> I found tremendous strength and tremendous resilience and power in moms, dads, grandparents, extended kinship networks in [Hamilton] that I was like huh. I was like this place has a really shitty reputation and it does not match at all to my experience. I am curious about this and deeply moved by this. What's my in? How do I get to continue to learn this? . . . Teacher felt like a meaningful in.

This realization led Susan to apply to TFA. But she applied only to the Hamilton corps, as her primary commitment was to making a difference within that city. And, Susan mentioned, at that point in time, TFA "had a name for themselves, not the way they do today, like, so hoity-toity." In short, Susan explained that "[in] TFA, I was just looking for a means to my own end."

After Susan was accepted to TFA, a hiring freeze was instituted in Hamilton—the city budget was frozen and taken over by the state. The neighborhood schools were not permitted to hire; only the charter schools were hiring. Susan went on two "really tragic interviews" with charter schools, but "it was a disaster, because I knew, charter isn't the solution. School choice movement doesn't make sense as a sustainable choice for communities, especially communities that are underresourced. We're just creating more artificial cleavages within an already struggling system."

Susan began her time in TFA within the context of the hiring freeze. She discovered that although Hamilton did not have any positions, the neighboring Garden Brooks did have some placements. By chance, Susan had completed some of her undergraduate work in Garden Brooks as well. She explained,

> Ultimately no one really understood if the ban gonna get lifted and it didn't. So the first day of school came and went. And the second week of school rolls around and the TFA program management said, "Look, we're not gonna be able to get you and probably 15 other corps members any placement in [Hamilton]. You can take a placement in [Garden Brooks] or you can reapply to TFA next year." I was like, oh hell no. So I went to [Garden Brooks].

### *Identity Games: How Not to Be Outed*

Susan made the move to the Garden Brooks TFA program. She explained that Garden Brooks "is a much bigger community and not one that I had ever really had any interest in, but again it wasn't about building the TFA community it was about building skills and having resources to go seek out and be of use to a different community that did have meaning to me."

Usually, TFA will put four or five clusters of corps members together in one school. But, since Susan entered a school after the academic year began, she happened to be placed at a school by herself. She preferred this setup so that she would not be "outed" as a TFA corps member to her colleagues. During Susan's second year at the school,

> a friend of mine who had also come over from [Hamilton] was working for TFA in the summer and rostering and called me. He was like, "Hey they're gonna place a corps member at your school." I was like, "No. They can't do that. They're gonna out me!" . . . I don't know how much people knew or didn't know but I wanted nothing, nothing to do with that. I was like, "Delete that spreadsheet. Get me out of there! If you're my friend at all please, please, please find that kid somewhere else to work!" . . . He deleted the line on the Excel spreadsheet.

Susan's friend saved her from being outed through the stroke of a keyboard. But Susan's fears continued:

> I just didn't want that [to be outed] because I thought . . . it would make it harder to have a genuine experience of inclusion and I didn't want this big name behind me, coloring how people saw my commitment to the school community. People were like, "TFA has revolving doors isn't it." I'm like, "Yeah." I don't want people to see me and think that I am like doing this flaky thing on my way to becoming a senator or a CEO of whatever.

Susan employed two primary strategies to maintain her anonymity and hide her affiliation with TFA. First, she never mentioned TFA by name. Susan had to be inventive with language around her colleagues. She would explain to colleagues, "I would be like, 'Oh I'm in a teaching program.' I wouldn't even call it [by name]." Her second strategy was to lie about her TFA supervisor who came to conduct the required classroom observations. When an outsider came to visit Susan's classroom, she noted that her colleagues would say, "They'd be like, 'Who's that lady who comes to your classroom sometimes?' I'm like, 'Oh I don't have all my certs. It's

for my teaching program. She's observing me for my teaching program.' They're like, 'That's cool.'" Susan's plan kept her TFA affiliation under cover.

### *Coming to Terms With TFA*

Susan managed to keep her identity as a TFA corps member under wraps for quite a few years. Even after Susan completed her 2-year contract as a TFA corps member, she continued to teach within the same neighborhood for a total of 6 years. Susan finally decided to out herself after about 4 years. She realized, "I think eventually I was just like OK with it enough." But this was after Susan had built a reputation as a hard worker with her colleagues:

> I think it was because I showed [my colleagues] I'm working so hard. . . . I earned my keep, not because I had any good ideas or had classroom management that was worth spit at all, at first. But it was like, "Oh really, you need 37 information packets collated so we can do this. I'll make the crap. I'll make all that stuff so that we can do it."

Aside from helping colleagues and doing grunt work, Susan would also spend extra hours with students:

> I found other ways where I could actually help. Oh, the nice girls who need help memorizing their speech and it's just gonna take hours and hours, I'll work with them and then we'll have a better talent show. Those kinds of things and gradually over time, I had something to offer more and more students. . . . I think my colleagues saw that and they were like, all right. She's making an effort and she's working.

In the end, Susan realized she did not have to worry about her affiliation with TFA. She explained, "It was just about finding a way to ingratiate myself and have something to bring to that team. That's how I learned."

### *Moving On*

Susan's identity was encapsulated in seeing herself as a community activist and "foot solider." This idea of connecting deeply with and further engaging in a community was always at the forefront of her mind. She explained, "My attitude has always been that my vocation and my profession are in transforming communities the way they want." Her curiosity around how to support communities started to grow around issues of homelessness. Susan shared,

> For a time while I was teaching, mostly in my second and third year teaching, I did some really preliminary research into what it would look like to pilot an open homeless shelter independently for people who are actively using drugs and alcohol.

During her research, Susan discovered three places in the city that already did this kind of work. This movement out of schools and into other areas of social services

came from her view of herself not as a teacher but instead as a community activist. Susan posited,

> Again, my whole attitude is what do I see that a community is looking for and can I plug in? So I'm, like, OK, educational inequity seemed like an easy entry point perhaps and a meaningful entry point. But there's also other social problems that are kind of fascinating and really urgently need work. . . . But, we could say flip the same thing on its side it would be like, what is the most pressing need? Even looking at basic, basic, basic needs. So more basic than education is, do you have a place to stay? Do you have shelter? That really intrigued me, and I went huh.

Eventually, Susan connected with one of the three organizations that supported the homeless in Garden Brooks. Over the next couple of years, she volunteered and connected with the individuals in the organization to make sure they did not have a "deficit mindset to thinking about making a contribution to a community." For instance, the organization's mission was very broad: "to end homelessness and interrupting the cycle of poverty in [Garden Brooks]. So I'm like, 'Huh, that's really broad. Are they full of shit, or are they really doing that?'" Susan realized the organization did practice what it preached and made "a proactive contribution to public dialogue and decision-making," and she wanted in.

Susan decided that her sixth year of teaching was going to be her last, as the school district was positioning to close her school and lay off all teachers. Rather than pursue another teaching job, Susan decided she wanted to work for the homeless organization. Susan had already started to make connections at the organization as a volunteer. Furthermore, she told everyone, including her colleagues, about her plan. But Susan was realistic:

> I also acknowledged to myself and anyone else who would listen to me, like well in advance [about the plan]. This might be a terrible, terrible idea and I'm gonna keep all my teaching stuff and I might get 1 year out, 2 years out, 5 years out and put my tail right between my legs and go right back to my classroom where I belong.

This career change also required a large cut in her annual salary. Specifically, she went from "making 70 grand a year [as a teacher]. The first year out [of teaching], I made less than 40 grand." Susan carefully prepared for this financial change. The money was never her priority; instead, her priority was making sure that all aspects of her community activist identity were satisfied. For Susan, this was an issue about "peace of mind" and not looking back at her life and asking the question, "Should I be doing this other thing? Is my contribution actually something else? Because I was at the point where teaching felt good, but I wanted to make a contribution that seemed great."

## Kaitlin's Storied Experience

### *Seeking Prestige and Service*

Kaitlin, like Susan, went into teaching through the TFA program. Kaitlin received her undergraduate degrees in sociology and public service. Upon graduation, Kaitlin explained her next steps:

> I was looking for some sort of volunteer or a job in a nonprofit or something that offered me more experience in communities that I wanted to serve in, in doing the community development work. And so I applied to TFA, I knew that it was like a prestigious program, and I knew that it was gonna provide me with that opportunity and be structured and supportive.

Owing to the prestige of the program, Kaitlin was very excited to enter TFA. Automatically, she was placed as a special education teacher. She reported, "I didn't know at all what that meant but I was excited to get in. I think it was exciting to know that I had a job in March and that it was a field that I was really passionate about learning about."

Even though Kaitlin was entering a program that, in theory, was designed to develop teachers, she acknowledged that even at the beginning, she did not know if teaching was going to be a long-term career path:

> I don't know if I ever started Teach for America thinking that I would be there forever, but I was very intrigued by it as a form of service. I knew I wanted to serve in some capacity, so I found it to be a job that required a lot of service and it was also very fulfilling.

This idea of service, for Kaitlin, came with the concept of trying to improve the ills of society. She explained that coming into TFA was about "becoming more and more familiar with how poor education was leading to major societal challenges. And so I wanted to try to address that for my own students and helping them improving their skills." This was furthered by the cultural context of TFA. Kaitlin explained that programmatically, "Teach for America is extremely goal focused and you're very much bought in to that culture, that you need to improve your students' reading scores, you need to help them attain a bunch of skills."

### *Corps Members Identifying as Leavers*

Kaitlin's foray into teaching was quickly met with struggles. She frankly stated, "This is a pretty impossible job." She continued to explain, "I didn't see it [the job] getting more sustainable. I didn't see it getting more fulfilling, and I didn't necessarily know that I was providing the students with the education that they deserved." As a TFA corps member, Kaitlin had committed to stay on the job for 2 years and resolved to come back to fulfill her second year:

> Well, I had wanted to stay [in the job]—I knew that I had made some progress and I had started my second year saying I really want to continue and I really want to give this a shot. I know how important this work is for, again, I think that educational inequality is the biggest issue in our society and I want to be a part of it. I want to stick it out.

Even though Kaitlin intended to continue on the job, the challenges were unrelenting:

> I continued to really struggle even into my second year to balance everything, to feel successful, it ensured that each student was challenged, to manage behavior, all these things that were continuing to be really, really harmful—or challenging and I didn't think were really benefiting the students to the degree they could.

This was complicated by the fact that fellow TFA corps members and her teaching colleagues automatically viewed TFA teachers as teacher leavers. Within the TFA organization, Kaitlin explained that

> TFA gives you this guise that you're only there for 2 years, and I think if I had been better at it or learned faster, I would have made it my career, and I really have no ties to the organization.

Kaitlin shared that everyone would just automatically ask, "What are you doing next year?" She was truly taken aback by this norm. She commented, "I think it was very standard [to ask the question]. It was this terrible question where you see someone from TFA and you'd say what are you doing next year?" She went on to critique this practice:

> And I would be like, the question shouldn't be that. It's like it should be focused on how are the children or something not setting the bar and the expectation that we're all walking out of this and that this is just 2 years.

Although Kaitlin said she was not a "super critic," she did say that when it came to TFA, "I don't think that they're focused enough on the long term, which was getting a really high-quality teacher force in the country, versus giving people this short-term opportunity."

Despite her discomfort with the short-term perspective, eventually Kaitlin too decided to leave teaching. She explained,

> I left because I wasn't very good and I hadn't figured out some of these systems within 2 years, which I know is not a ton of time, and—but I felt it was both on myself and then I didn't think the structure [of the school] was gonna serve those students well in that environment with one special ed teacher.

Furthermore, she equated her experience to lagging behind in a race:

> I felt like I was sprinting behind something that I really needed to learn and had tons of pressure from my students or Teach for America. It was like how are you meeting your goals and myself . . . not really grasping it until it was too late.

### *Moving On*

Eventually Kaitlin too decided that she was leaving teaching when she was confronted by a colleague:

> A colleague was taking this form around that said are you leaving, and I just signed it one day. It was probably April. I had thought about it and I was mentally at that level, I wasn't physically ready to do it. It felt a little bit impulsive, but it was the right thing to do and inevitably, our system was so terrible that they had sort of reserved these slots for other teaching programs versus again a teacher like this one.

Although Kaitlin's decision was spontaneous, it was not easy: "I kind of battled with that situation, where I wasn't necessarily exactly ready to leave my position and didn't know what it meant to sign on that line—that I would be withdrawn from the school district." However, Kaitlin eventually made peace with her decision to leave:

> I think it was the right thing to do. I'm not sure if I was really cut out for it. I was intellectually stimulated by a lot of other things than teaching. . . . And I definitely had regrets. I mean, I was here for 2 years, why didn't it get better or you know, could have made more progress or done things differently, but I was definitely mostly at peace.

Kaitlin then transitioned to working for an educational philanthropy foundation and later to managing the city council campaign for a local politician.

## Discussion and Implications

Susan and Kaitlin both came to TFA with the hope and promise of doing "good work" within a community. As White women (nature-identity), they both sought out opportunities to provide service to marginalized communities. Their missions ultimately aligned with TFA's focus on educational inequity, and this drew them into this particular organization. Yet, right from the start, both developed very different approaches to constructing their identities. Upon acceptance, both Susan and Kaitlin were considered TFA corps members through both an institution-identity and affinity-identity. However, Kaitlin embraced the TFA corps member identity, viewing it as filled with prestige and purpose, whereas Susan explicitly resisted it. At no time did Susan refer to herself as a TFA corps member, as she wanted her institution-identity to be "teacher" and her affinity-identity to be "foot soldier."

Essentially, Susan's resistance to being known, called, or labeled as a TFA corps member resulted in identification not as a TFA corps member but instead as a teacher. This private form of resistance was revealed only in semantics, but this subtlety belied a deeper agency by which Susan shaped her own identity (Glazer, 2018). Ironically, it was resistance that led to Susan's identification as a teacher (Figure 1). This might account for the fact that Susan stayed in teaching for 6 years, almost twice the national average for an urban teacher (Ingersoll, 2003b). It was

only due to district circumstance that she decided to explore other opportunities as a "foot soldier" within the community. Even in her new position, Susan was not opposed to someday returning to the classroom. Essentially, Susan's active resistance to identifying as a TFA corps member enabled her instead to identify as a teacher.

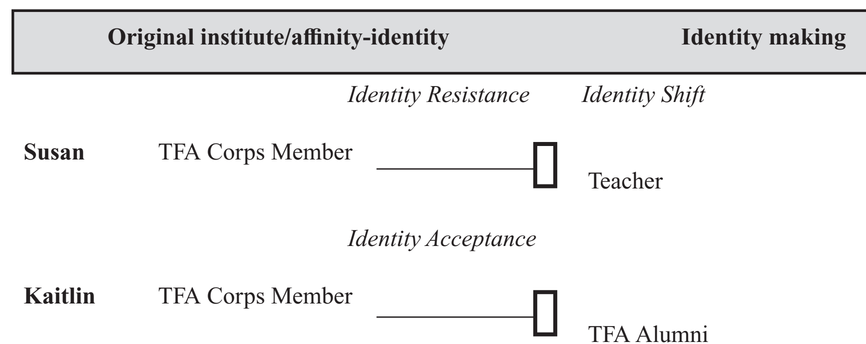
Conversely, Kaitlin embraced the institution-identity and affinity-identity of a TFA corps member. There were times of tension, as when Kaitlin discovered the accepted norm of TFA corps members leaving following their 2-year commitments. But Kaitlin continued to accept the identity of a TFA corps member and adopt the accepted TFA model of 2 years in the classroom. Kaitlin's identity as a TFA corps member ultimately underwent what Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) referred to as *praxis shock*. She was confronted by the realities and expectations of a teacher, and since she did not see herself as a teacher, Kaitlin struggled to construct a professional identity (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Kaitlin instead adapted "strategic compliance" in terms of the program's expectations and identity making (Flores & Day, 2006; Schaefer, 2013a). Schaefer explained that

> alternative programs such as Teach for America and Teach First in the UK offer different routes into education. The multiplicity of teacher education programs offered makes it difficult to generalize how teacher education shapes beginning teachers' experiences from different institutions. (p. 265)

He argued that, at the end of the day, beginning teacher attrition involves identity making and identity shifting. Susan's and Kaitlin's storied experiences show how, in these cases, the adoption of or resistance to identifying as a corps member shaped their career paths and illustrated the ways in which individuals negotiate their professional lives through those understandings (Savickas, 2012).

Organizationally, TFA promotes both an institute-identity and an affinity-identity among its members by identifying them as corps members rather than as

**Figure 1**
*Participant Model of identity Development*



teachers or some variation thereof (e.g., preservice teacher, novice teacher). Thus, although corps members do teach students in a classroom, they are not designated "teachers." Instead, the mission to promote educational equity appears to outweigh the focus on instruction by highlighting corps members as leaders rather than as teachers. For example, on its homepage, TFA defines itself as "a diverse network of leaders who confront educational inequity through teaching, and work with unwavering commitment from every sector of society to create a nation free from this injustice."[2] After the program is over, the members' institution-identity and affinity-identity shift to TFA alumni, "whether they stay in the classroom or pursue a different career,"[3] rather than to the identity of a classroom teacher.

To change that, TFA could begin calling its members "teachers" to emphasize the fundamental nature of their day-to-day work. Adopting language that identifies individuals as teachers, rather than as corps members, might facilitate an identity shift that could influence individuals' career paths toward greater longevity in the classroom. We know from previous research that career development generally and early career attrition in particular are identity-making processes (Clandinin et al., 2015; Schaefer, 2013b). A simple change in language from "corps member" to "teacher" might support the development of a teaching identity as one of many steps toward reducing teacher attrition. Although this singular term does not encapsulate every aspect of a person's identity, identity language is vital to understanding our societal roles, and the modification of this identity language may encourage those teachers to reconceptualize their roles and remain in schools.

Changing the language and, ultimately, the identification with teaching could be positive not only for TFA corps members but for the teaching profession overall. Maier (2012) noted that TFA provides a "selective, high-status, and also networked" (p. 13) career opportunity for its members. In essence, it is the nature of belonging to this empowered and interconnected group that gives TFA its strength, rather than the structure of the organization, the training, or the placements themselves. By identifying more directly with teaching, rather than amorphous social justice or equity themes, TFA might be able to use its power to raise the prestige of teachers in urban communities across the United States and internationally. Many voices have called for greater respect and status for teachers (e.g., Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Drudy, Martin, Woods, & O'Flynn, 2005; National Education Association, 2003), something that TFA corps members currently possess. By lending the selective, prestigious, and networked nature of its community to the larger teaching profession, TFA may be able to demonstrate its respect for teachers and the education profession more broadly.

Likewise, teacher educators may be able to learn from TFA's methods to create a similarly selective, prestigious, and networked community within their own programs. Although numerous education policies have endeavored to raise the status of teaching through high-stakes credentialing tests, entrance requirements, and performance assessments (Zeichner, 2003), teaching today struggles with the

same low status it did a generation ago (Hargreaves, 2009). Teacher educators can use some of the selective and networked methods from TFA to facilitate an institution-identity and affinity-identity among preservice teachers that promote pride in the work and connection to the field over time. In this way, traditional preparation programs and alternative preparation programs can work collaboratively to share strengths and methods in the quest to foster teaching identities that will sustain and center educators over time.

## Notes

[1] Names of all study places and participants are pseudonyms.

[2] See https://www.teachforamerica.org/

[3] See https://www.teachforamerica.org/

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