

Teachers, Traditions, and Transformation: Keynote Address Delivered at the 9th Annual Master's Capstone Conference for the Urban Teacher Master's and Certification Program at the University of Pennsylvania on 29 April 2014

John F. Smith, III, Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellow

Introduction

An alumnus of both Teach For America and the master's program in urban education at the University of Pennsylvania, I delivered the following address on April 29, 2014, to teachers in the 2013 and 2014 cohorts of Teach For America in Philadelphia. Program organizers invited me to provide remarks during the capstone event and to respond to the evening's theme: "Teachers, Traditions, and Transformation." The address below includes only two content edits, both additions to the seventh paragraph, in the form of an introductory phrase about privilege and a sentence about collective action. Otherwise, the text is as it was for the evening's event.

Address

Thank you for inviting me to speak tonight. I say as often as possible to anyone who will listen: Teach For America helped me enter the classroom; the University of Pennsylvania helped me realize that I wanted to stay. It is a true joy for me to be a practicing classroom teacher and come to campus where I can study and share my practice and my questions with peers.

Tonight's theme is "Teachers, Tradition, and Transformation." What an incredible journey you have to look back on, especially that light-year leap you made between last school year and this one. Certainly, I have witnessed, as a colleague and an instructor in this program, some of the transformations you have undergone. Congratulations on all of your achievements in and out of the classroom. Tonight, though, I am talking to the teacher part of you. It may seem strange that I say this. However, I say this because the teacher part of you may only be part of who you are and how you see yourself. And indeed, based on my experience, I am not sure there is the proper emphasis in the Teach For America experience on talking to teachers, about teaching, toward the end of what most of us in the corps refer to as "the two-year commitment."

When I think back to the beginning of my own journey, TFA staff members, shiny selection materials, and celebratory press releases called me a "corps member." I contrast the use of "corps member" with my intentional decision to talk to the teacher part of you tonight. Early on in 2007 when I first moved to Philadelphia, I rejected the label of "corps member." Maybe I just wanted to be contrarian. Maybe I wanted to acknowledge that I was in the family business because both of my parents are teachers. And maybe I resisted the term "corps member" because, before I stepped into a middle school science classroom, I was a student of politics and communication. My ears in my early years with Teach For America were attuned to what appeared to me to be an intentional, institutional distinction being made between teachers and corps members. The consequences of calling me a "corps member" instead of a "teacher," in my mind, were uncomfortably clear. "Corps member" served as a moniker for an exclusive club of which a select group were a part, it rejected the label of teacher that has been beaten and battered in the public sphere over the years, and it had the potential to distance so many of us from the notion that we are, or should be for our students, full-fledged, functioning teachers.

I am not suggesting there is one person, somewhere along the Teach For America administrative ladder, who insidiously creates labels to drive thinking like some figure in an Orwell novel. No, I am Teach For America. You are Teach For America. I am suggesting, instead, that organizational mindsets and culture can be shaped when a group chooses to use one word in place of another. And in this case, I believe our use of "corps member" influences how we—a collective TFA "we"—see our work. I will simply point out here that, in contrast to the TFA label, your students and mine refer to us as teachers and never as corps members. That students called you "teacher" is something that I hope you will hold most dear and draw upon most deeply after these two years. And the organizers of tonight's event who set the theme and guiding question seem to be urging you to do this as well.

My comments tonight are not intended to draw a distinction between those of you who will be returning to a classroom next year and those who will be seeking a career in the courtroom, boardroom, or operating room—even if I do think that the term “corps member” makes the transition out of the classroom easier. Tonight is a celebration of your commitment to educational equity and the work you have done to earn certifications and master’s degrees in the field of education. I have said it in my opening and I reiterate it here: I see you all as teachers now and always. And I hope you will see this, too, even though the language we use may interfere.

To counteract any sense of negativity that I may have injected into the room here, I do want to take time to point out an area where I think my—and I think I can say our—experience with Teach For America has been so beneficial and meaningful. First, I am humbled and heartened by the vast quantity of quality individuals whom I have met over the years through this program. I have met impressive people whom I am honored to call colleagues and friends. Second, these individuals are not just confidants and colleagues, but they also serve as models of dedicated classroom facilitators and fighters for social justice. Teach For America is often criticized for a reliance upon and worship of superhero teachers. I think this particular criticism is misguided. Our schools can use more superhero teachers. And our schools and administrators should be more supportive of teachers so that more teachers can flex their superhero muscles.

Critics of the superhero teacher myth have found fault with *Waiting for Superman* (2010) and larger-than-life figures like Morgan Freeman in *Lean on Me* (1989), Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds* (1995), or Hilary Swank in *Freedom Writers* (2007). While I agree with a critique of the superhero teacher myth that relates to issues of privilege and will address this in a moment, I think there is something to be said for teachers who exhibit a dedication to their students that often goes above and beyond typical expectations. I think of my parents, whom I have already mentioned are lifelong educators. My mom went back to school to earn her teacher certification in special education while raising three young children. I remember Saturday evenings when my mom would take us to her school to transform the visitor’s locker room in the gymnasium into a classroom for preschool students in a self-contained special education grouping. The locker room, with our hard work, was complete with a race track for tricycles and a puppet playhouse for teaching students how to count and recognize their colors. The school administration did not see fit to provide a suitable space for my mother’s students with special needs. So, she transformed it. My mom is a superhero teacher. Yes, collective action is needed to address systemic issues that adversely affect our schools, but in the moment my mom did what was best for her students as a teacher should.

I have interacted with so many individuals in TFA who might never have considered teaching or education. And now they are superheroes in their own rights. I see some faces in the crowd tonight. These individuals are now investing their expertise and talent into classrooms with young minds in Philadelphia and beyond. I submit tonight that the profession is strengthened by the addition of teachers through Teach For America like you who persevere to make possible the learning opportunities their students deserve. In this way, you have transformed the lives of students and the city for the better.

In celebrating the super achievements of those among you and in clinging to models of superhuman teachers, we must temper our excitement with equal parts humility and vigilance. The success of so many in this room is a double-edged sword that might well cut a division between our small crop of educators and the larger group of teachers who work in classrooms down the hall from us or in schools down the street. In those classrooms and school communities, there are similarly committed educators who equally care about students and educational equity. They just didn’t get here like we got here. On the surface, we know this. But because of the experiences and connections you share as teachers in this program and the language we’ve used to describe ourselves, it may be easy to think that the city’s educational struggles stem from a dearth of committed teachers and that only our addition as a corps of teachers will solve the city’s ills.

However, it has become clear to me as I have joined teacher networks beyond TFA and worked in traditional public schools that there are a number of teachers who share my commitment and who outstrip me in their knowledge of practice, community, and content. Indeed, there are fabulous teachers from schools that have been shuttered or shifted to charter management. We cannot ignore that, as teachers through Teach For America, our very presence has influenced the educational landscape of the city and facilitated the upheaval of school communities, seniority, and pay scales. No, our presence did not do this singlehandedly. A number of actors, including policymakers and taxpayers as well as union leaders and members, have contributed to these changes. This is a transformation to which tonight’s theme also refers. Some may celebrate the great shifts; others actively protest. What cannot and must not be lost in the chaos and the criticism, or even the celebration, is that you and I are part of a larger tradition of teachers who have long been committed to educational excellence and equity. Again, I am speaking to the part of you here that has been and will always be a teacher, and I am trying to caution against any feelings that we—as a collective TFA alumni group—might have that we are separate from and not responsible for and accountable to the broader community of educators. It is also a call for each of you, whether you remain in teaching or not, to embrace the traditions that have guided great teachers long before Wendy Kopp wrote a thesis at Princeton.

The last topic of transformation and issue of tradition that I hope to address tonight relates to our students. It is the stated purpose of TFA to engage individuals in education such that they become catalysts for change and transformation in and out of the classroom. This often requires a personal, inner transformation of how teachers in this program view students and the communities they teach in. This is often no easy transformation.

For instance, in the hustle and bustle of day-to-day lesson planning, meeting the demands of administrators, and completing last-

minute grad school papers, we might not undertake the process of coming to grips with our own privilege and power, whether it be because of our backgrounds or simply because of our positions as teachers. This process looks different for each teacher and is often—at least we hope—facilitated and informed by experiences here at Penn. Unlearning racism, taking an actively antisexist stance, and coming to terms with one's own biases and experiences with class are part of this process. Moreover, it may be quite easy to reinforce ideas conditioned within us about our students through our interactions. There have been days when I attributed the disengagement of a student to what I perceive to be his own problems or personality. I have to check myself: Often a student is an engaged member of another classroom or a space beyond the school. What is it then about the classroom I have created with my students or my body language or my actual language that has engendered the disengagement? Indeed, it may well be that defiance may be a student's safest and surest course of action in a school system that has all too often reinforced society's narrative of otherness and deficit.

I implore you not to leave your time in the classroom and think that the failure of education resides in our students and the communities they come from. The currents of culture—a culture that reifies race, gender, and class—are strong. I have often found that my role is sometimes less about shaping students' views of education and more about shaping the views of others, often those in positions of privilege, about my students. This may be easier to agree to resist while we sit comfortably in this room. But in the heat of a moment in the classroom next week or in seemingly less heated conversations with people who are not teachers but who want to talk about education, please remember what you have truly learned about each individual student as a teacher. The deficit is not in our students but in how teachers, schools, and society choose to see our students. The deficit is often ours.

In closing, I am hopeful tonight, despite the tone I have taken at times here, that the tradition of teaching in Philadelphia will be strengthened as you embrace your identities as teachers. And I am hopeful tonight that you and I can be part of transforming the conversation in a way that honors Philadelphia students, communities, and educators.

JOHN F. SMITH, III is currently serving as an Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellow in Washington, DC, and is a teacher consultant with the Philadelphia Writing Project. Trey began his career as an educator in North Philadelphia in 2007 through the Teach For America program at Morrison Elementary, teaching seventh and eighth grade science and social studies, and later joined the faculty at Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School as science department chair. He has a Master of Science in Education from the University of Pennsylvania, is enrolled in Penn's Master of Environmental Studies program, and earned dual bachelor's degrees from Louisiana State University in political science and communication studies.

REFERENCES:

Chilcott, L. (Producer) & Guggenheim, D. (Director). (2010). *Waiting for superman* [motion picture]. United States: Paramount Vantage.

Sher, S. (Producer) & LaGravanesse, R. (Director). (2007). *Freedom writers* [motion picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.

Simpson, D. & Bruckheimer, J. (Producers), & Smith, J. (Director). (1995). *Dangerous minds* [motion picture]. United States: Warner Brothers.

Twain, N. (Producer) & Avilsden, J. G. (Director). (1989). *Lean on Me* [motion picture]. United States: Warner Brothers.

Copyright 2015 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL: <http://www.urbanedjournal.org/archive/volume-12-issue-1-spring-2015/teachers-traditions-and-transformation-keynote-address-deliver>