

# "Oh, so you just want to teach?" An Autoethnographic Account of One Traditionally Trained Teacher in a TFA-hiring School

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Résumé de l'article

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## "Oh, so you just want to teach?" *An Autoethnographic Account of One Traditionally Trained Teacher in a TFA-hiring School*

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### Abstract

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## Introduction

Since the 1980s, schooling in the U.S. has been the target of neoliberal education reform efforts that aim to privatize public education based on the perceived advantages of the private sector, e.g. excellence, efficiency, and accountability (Spring, 2015). The introduction of these so-called market-based reforms, which embrace standards, high stakes accountability systems, and school choice policies, has resulted in increasing levels of competition throughout all levels of the education sector. In the case of teacher education, traditional, typically university-based, certification programs that favor extensive pre-service training are being forced to compete with alternative licensure pathways and private-sector preparation programs, like Teach For America (TFA)<sup>1</sup>, that embrace on-the-job training. In addition to fundamentally altering what it means to be a teacher (Aronson & Anderson, 2013), this sort of competition has resulted in the virtual destabilization of the teaching profession. That is, the introduction of market-based competition in teacher education has effectively undermined the power of teachers to mobilize around common issues/causes via a process of “divide and conquer.” With this paper, we explore various outcomes of this sort of competition structure via an autoethnographic analysis of one traditionally trained teacher’s experience working in an urban charter school with predominantly TFA-trained colleagues. To do so, we begin with a review of literature that highlights the research landscape’s hyper-focus on the experiences of TFA corps members (CMs) at the expense of other teachers, who/whose schools influence and are influenced by CMs. Next, we describe the theoretical work that has informed this study, most notably Thomas (2018), who uses sociocultural policy studies to describe the ways in which TFA CMs embodied controversial education policies, often to their detriment. We argue, here, that traditionally trained teachers working in TFA-hiring schools act as embodied beings, too, in part as the result of their frequent negative positioning in public discourse, i.e. being in opposition to education reform (Anderson, et al., 2015). We then outline our methodology, which we label autoethnography, after which we present our findings/analysis, focusing on the following thematic elements: 1) *Just* being a teacher; 2) Psychology of novice teachers; and 3) TFA clique. To conclude, we discuss various implications of this work for teacher education, as well as the teaching profession at large, paying particular attention to the ways in which neoliberal education reforms, including TFA, effectively incentivize the individualization of teaching (and learning), which exacerbates existing inequalities and destabilizes the profession.

## Review of Literature

The literature surrounding TFA encompasses quantitative, qualitative, and theoretical areas of inquiry (Anderson, 2020), though TFA characteristically highlights the quantitative data targeting its own perceived outcomes, particularly concerning student achievement (e.g., Boyd et al., 2006; Clark, et al., 2013; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2005; Glazerman, et al., 2006; Kane, et al., 2008; Xu et al., 2011), retention (e.g., Donaldson, 2008, 2012; Donaldson & Johnson, 2010, 2011), and its alumni impact (Higgins et al., 2011; McAdam & Brandt, 2009). The general consensus of this body of research is that novice TFA CMs typically perform about as good as or better than other similarly experienced educators, particularly in Math, with the caveat that certification status and preparation trajectory comparisons reveal a mixed picture. CMs also often stay in education-related careers, even at high levels, although the organization’s exceedingly high rates of attrition

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<sup>1</sup> Teach For America (TFA) is a private-sector teacher training/leadership organization that recruits, trains, and places its corps members (CMs) in low-income urban and rural schools for two years.

complicate its ability to produce more long-term, systemic change. To supplement this limited base of research, education researchers have advanced many theoretical and qualitative studies that have assessed, for example, the ideological underpinnings of TFA's organizational mission, the construction of the TFA model/brand in popular discourses, as well as the lived experiences and/or visions of TFA CMs themselves (Anderson, 2020). Importantly, these works are almost entirely absent from TFA's own internal review of literature, which ultimately amounts to what Anderson (2020) refers to as a "perversion of the research landscape, whether through sins of commission or omission, [that] has very real implications for those who do eventually enter the program (and the students they will teach)" (p. 7).

Importantly, TFA does not envision teaching as a long-term career; rather, teaching acts as a sort of "layover" on the path to a more meaningful and/or lucrative career at higher levels of school administration/leadership, charter school management, education policy, etc. (e.g., Anderson et al., 2022; Brewer et al., 2016; Cersonsky, 2013; Jacobsen & Linkow, 2014; Trujillo et al., 2017). For example, according to Anderson et al. (2022)

TFA's organizational mission statement (Teach For America, n.d.) does not include any reference to teachers or teaching but, rather, focuses on "leadership" as an artifact of TFA's nearly singular focus on moving CMs quickly into, and out of, the classroom to enter positions of political influence (Anderson, 2020; Cersonsky, 2013). (p. 4)

Anderson et al. (2022) go on to describe the symbolic and tangible effects that TFA CMs' movement outside of the classroom has on other teaching professionals in the buildings that hire its recruits, which are substantial. Additionally, White (2016) describes the ways in which these sorts of practices have even contributed to the displacement of Black teachers in urban communities, despite the program's own demographic diversity (which is still disproportionately white). The reality is that TFA CMs are leaving the classroom at high rates, a feature that is actively encouraged and facilitated by the organization itself. Certainly, this creates significant barriers to the establishment of a healthy faculty community, amongst other important school considerations, while at the same time demeaning the career work of long-term teachers.

The work outlined here contributes to this strand of research, in particular, by outlining the unique experiences of one such career-minded educator who worked with short-term TFA CMs. Additionally, it adds to the expanding body of qualitative literature that has the capacity to enrich our understanding of the TFA experience as a whole. Where this work is unique, however, is in its challenge to the dominant narrative surrounding TFA, which is hyper focused on the experiences, abilities, outcomes, etc. of TFA CMs themselves, not the qualitative experiences of professionals who work with, and alongside, them. As such, Gretchen's narrative acts as an important addition to the literature that effectively relates previously undetected pressures on the teaching profession as the result of TFA's introduction into the education landscape.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The examination of policy as a social practice allows for the uncovering of various manifestations of power (Levinson et al., 2009), which concomitantly creates space for nondominant narratives in the pursuit of a more socially just society. As per Levinson et al. (2009), policy can be understood as what defines reality and creates order:

On the one hand, the most immediate product of the policy process should be understood as a normative cultural discourse with positive and negative sanctions, that is, a set of statements about how things should or must be done, with corresponding inducements or punishments. (p. 770)

In this way, institutional structures and policies become texts that categorize and shape the individual experience, and vice versa. According to this conception, then, actors, even those not directly responsible for creating policy, participate in policy processes via social interactions that inform specific societal norms. These actors interpret policy (both correctly and incorrectly) based upon their individual social positions, the situations of which they are attempting to make sense, and various signals that can be perceived from the policy.

Sociocultural activity theory acknowledges that what matters most in policy interpretation is the past knowledge and beliefs an individual brings to the meaning-making process based on existing stimuli (Spillane et al., 2002), and it centers an individual's lived experience with policy (Anderson et al., 2022). This emphasizes policy interpretation, and ultimately embodiment, as an iterative practice and includes the impact or effects of individual sense-making. Policy embodiment, then, attempts to "people" policy via its emphasis on individuals themselves who act as representatives of specific policies (Thomas, 2018). Policymaking also involves the negotiation, by actors, of enacting, rejecting, or modifying such policies (Ozga, 2000).

Of concern to this paper, Thomas (2018) put forth one vision of policy embodiment via his examination of how alternatively licensed teachers, specifically TFA CMs, embody controversial policies by ignoring, or even actively hiding, their TFA status. It is important, however, to acknowledge that non-TFA teachers act as embodied beings, too, representing, at least in public discourse, policies that are perceivably "hostile" to change and innovation (Anderson et al., 2015). These non-TFA colleagues are beholden to the TFA policies introduced to their school spaces and experience the impact of the presence of TFA colleagues in their schools (Anderson et al., 2022). Additionally, sociocultural policy studies highlight how the introduction of TFA CMs, with alternative licensure, symbolize shifts in expectations of the profession and alter what it means to be an exemplary teacher (Holloway, 2021; Thomas & Lefebvre, 2020). In focusing on this novel perspective, the autoethnographic account presented here represents an important counternarrative to the literature, which characteristically focuses on the experiences of CMs, not the other individuals who interact with them in schools. Additionally, this approach expands our understanding of how policy is appropriated and acted upon in local contexts via autoethnographic discussions of the realities of teaching in a charter school staffed by majority alternatively licensed teachers, as well as how institutional structures ultimately impact teacher experience and practice.

## **Methodology, Methods, and Positionalities**

### *Autoethnography*

We label the research included herein an autoethnography to describe how one traditionally trained charter school teacher embodied education policy. In general, autoethnography can be defined as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 733). This methodology allows the author to use self-reflection and writing to explore the personal in connection to broader political, cultural, and social meaning. That is, autoethnography is an

embedded and embodied practice that is highly contextual. Additionally, autoethnography demands the intertwining of theory and story-- theories are not simply adopted for the purposes of "fitting" a story; rather, theory provides a language and framework for reflecting upon and analyzing experience (Jones, 2016). As such, autoethnography becomes a mechanism by which to illustrate the nuances of theory where the body is an agent in making meaning. In so doing, the personal becomes political, and the individual becomes an agent in interpreting and crafting knowledge. Similarly, Spry (2009) suggests that autoethnographic "story comes from a critically reflexive location where the autoethnographer seeks to construct a plural sense of self, a dialectic of copresence with others in the field of study concerning how bodies are read in various contexts of culture and power," (p. 604). As such, story permits researchers the reflexivity to think critically about power, to contextualize the personal, and to center their own epistemologies and ontologies, all necessary concomitants in the construction of meaning.

Autoethnography brings into view a rich diversity of voice and story, especially those representing marginalized experiences. Although "history" is hegemonic in that it is primarily written by the victors, autoethnography's capacity to link experience with institutions, and thus the personal with the political, foregrounds the perspectives of the oppressed and makes space for important analyses of existing power relations. Certainly, there is danger in the institutionalization of a single story, as those characteristically legitimate master narratives at the expense of marginal perspectives that are effectively disempowered and made illegitimate. In contrast, autoethnography's emphasis on multiple perspectives can increase understanding and empower (Jones, 2016), thus disrupting the status quo and, through disruption, restoring agency and dignity. Additionally, although autoethnography is inherently personal, its positioning is not authoritative; rather, it facilitates experiential meaning-making so as to "reveal the inherency, the seamlessness, the materiality of the personal and political, in a manner where we cannot tell where one ends and the other begins," (Spry, 2011, p. 502). Of course, one limitation of autoethnography is the reality that as soon as words hit paper, the story becomes a recollection of the past. Certainly truth is an evolving process, and what happens in the past mutates as the storyteller grows and reflects. Time will inevitably influence what becomes important in a story. However, this methodology is an appropriate conduit for Gretchen's story, as it has allowed her the space in which to express her own policy embodiment as a traditionally prepared charter school teacher, thus disrupting the master narrative surrounding TFA which is hyper-focused on the experiences/activities of recruits and CMs. As such, counternarrative is the medium by which to express her autoethnographic account.

## *Methods*

Regarding specific methods, Gretchen generated a research journal that outlined her experiences working in a charter school with predominantly TFA colleagues. Within this journal, she relayed events, which were later anonymized, emotional ties to such events, past experiences, and general positional commitments. Once the reflective journal was generated, we subjected its contents to a process of coding, which utilized both *in vivo* and descriptive coding practices. *In vivo* codes include the direct language of the material to be analyzed, while descriptive codes generally refer to larger sociological understandings of the data, and so reflect the researchers' own commitments (Saldaña, 2009). Once the full journal was coded, the authors opted to break the stories up according to the dictates of thematic analysis (Glesne, 2007). While there are certainly advantages to maintaining the integrity of the story across the research, we found that the

experiences were characteristically presented separately, meaning simply that the analysis lended itself well to the segregation of ideas according to themes, which pay attention to “repeated words or phrases, case studies or evidence of answers to the research question/s which have been devised” (p. 32). These cycles of coding, and the taxonomic organization of data into common themes, reflect our general approach to the analysis and is consistent with the ways in which we represent the data. Regarding that final element, we opted to include vignettes of Gretchen’s story, which are characteristically followed by our analytical interpretation of the vignette’s contents. We do so in an effort to both showcase the story, as well as position it within the larger research and education reform landscape. Our goal, then, is to enrich the discourse surrounding both Teach For America and teacher education as a whole.

### *Professional Commitments & Responsibilities*

We came to this project as the result of our joint interest in creating more excellent and equitable schools via education policy, especially via teacher education. We believe in the transformative potential of schools, while also acknowledging that the institution itself, amongst others, is very often oppressive for targeted student/teacher populations and communities. Additionally, we collectively came to the topic of research as the result of our experience/expertise. For example, Ashlee, herself a former alternatively certified teacher (not TFA), has academic expertise in the larger landscape of teacher education, and especially how it is impacted by larger, neoliberal reform trajectories, with TFA representing one important manifestation of such reforms. Gretchen, on the other hand, is a traditionally certified former teacher, who has extensive, direct experience working in a charter school with TFA CMs. As such, our backgrounds provide dual understandings of TFA at both individual and institutional levels. Regarding the specific activities/contributions performed by each author, while Ashlee helped in the data analysis, writing, and editing, the majority of this study was contributed by Gretchen, who viscerally experienced the emotions associated with her professional work in the field. As the result of this embodied position, the narratives included herein are Gretchen’s alone, and so are represented in her first person voice.

### *Gretchen’s Positionality*

As with most things in my life, I took a circuitous route to the teaching profession. Despite having grown up in a family of educators (or perhaps because of it), becoming a teacher was the last choice on my future career path list. My father was a high school principal, while my mother was an elementary school teacher, and they both homeschooled me throughout elementary and middle schools. I received a Master of Arts in communication with a film and video production concentration and began teaching at the college level, while working in the television and film industry. Although I thought I would continue my work in the film industry, I quickly realized that I had a passion for teaching and, after teaching at the college level for many years, I realized I would have a bigger impact as an educator at a lower level. So, I completed my master’s in teaching at the ripe age of 29. While this is certainly not the traditional age to enter the field, as most of my colleagues were 21 or 22, I did take a traditional route to get there. I completed a two-year Master’s of Teaching degree in elementary education, having taken methods courses, reading intervention courses, and child psychology. I passed six different Praxis teaching exams. I completed a master’s thesis. I felt solid in the foundation I had built, and, most importantly, I had a calling for teaching to be my lifetime craft.

After teaching one year in an urban middle school in a Southern metro area of the United States, I found that I struggled with a lack of resources, collaboration, and professional development. So, I took a job teaching middle school reading at a highly regarded charter school in the same city. This school is a Title I charter middle school, where I taught four sections of sixth grade reading, averaging about 120 total students per semester. The school has existed for fifteen years, which is considered well-established for this city's charter schools. There are about 300 students at the middle school, and the majority of the student population is African-American. There are five core subject teachers per grade (reading, writing, math, science, and social studies); and music, physical education, and special education teachers serve all middle school students. Many of the faculty were TFA CMs, a population about whom I had little prior knowledge. While the building itself is in pristine condition, the atmosphere of the school is extremely rigid, and it has a strict student management system based on merits and demerits, as well as a large administrative team to manage student behavior. Many of the students have siblings who attend the high school, and the majority of students share a zip code with the school. This zip code is considered one of the most violent and economically depressed zip codes in the nation. Despite these challenges, I was eager to enter my new post, as I had heard many impressive things about the school, and I was looking forward to finally working with like-minded, equity-focused and student-centered educators.

Regarding my specific commitments as an educator, equity is a pillar of my beliefs. I have come to realize that, in order to provide equity, teachers need to be appropriately supported and informed. I have witnessed the impact that investments in equity-based professional development and coaching can have throughout all levels of the educational process. I also recognize that, at least initially, teachers are often ill-equipped to instructionally, emotionally, and culturally support students and families in ways that lead to student gains, especially in urban settings. Traditional teacher preparation programs and alternative licensure pathways, like TFA, characteristically focus on pedagogy, classroom management, and assessment, not on the kind of social foundations coursework that centers educational equity and/or social emotional learning. Unfortunately, many new teachers are placed in schools whose students most need educators equipped with this knowledge base.

## Findings

With the remainder of this paper, we detail the following thematic elements, paying particular attention to how these themes manifested in the personal narratives shared by Gretchen:

***Just being a teacher:*** describes Gretchen's experiences being *just* a teacher. Subthemes that were collapsed under this label include: (a) "*coming out*" as a *traditionally certified teacher*, which refers to the ways in which Gretchen often hid her status as a traditionally trained teacher; (b) *teaching as an experience*, which describes TFA's short term investments in teaching; (c) *just being a teacher*, which refers to Gretchen's feelings of inadequacy as the result of her intention to be a classroom teacher for the long haul; and (d) *supporting students*, which describes Gretchen's ability to more concretely support the work of her students as the result of her investment in teaching as a long-term career.

***Psychology of novice teachers:*** describes the often damaging psychological impact that inexperience can have on novice teachers. Subthemes that were collapsed



under this label include: (a) *feeling less than*, which refers to Gretchen's often negative experiences being a new teacher, which were compounded by her marginalized position as a traditionally trained teacher in a primarily TFA-hiring school; and (b) *being a novice TFA teacher*, which describes Gretchen's perception of the negative consequences of being an inexperienced TFA teacher, including the ways in which her perceptions changed as she became more confident in her own abilities.

To illustrate each of these themes, we include vignettes of Gretchen's story, which are accompanied by our own analysis of the happenings. We do so in an effort to better contextualize the autoethnographic accounts that we provide, while also situating the narratives within the larger literature on TFA, specifically, and teacher education, in general.

### *Just Being a Teacher*

**Gretchen's story: Coming "Out" as a traditionally certified teacher.** I began teaching at The School<sup>2</sup> on a steamy July day before students returned to campus. As part of my introduction to the school culture, I was required to attend a pre-service professional learning with my colleagues. I immediately filled with dread as we were instructed to rise from our seats and mingle about the cafeteria to high five a stranger and tell them our name, grade we were teaching, and the best part of our summer. I hate icebreaker activities. I stood awkwardly, avoiding eye contact and debating running to the bathroom. Before I could make my escape, however, I was approached by a veteran teacher of the school, who asked if I was a TFA corps member. I was a little bit surprised that this was the automatic assumption, and I quickly explained my journey to education. As another teacher joined our conversation echoing the assumption that I was TFA, I, annoyed, replied "No, I actually chose to make this my career and went back to school to get my teaching degree." The teacher with whom I was speaking replied "Oh" (dripping with snark) and went on to explain that how they<sup>3</sup> were utilizing the "experience" at the school to parlay themselves into a political career in education policy.

This vignette signals Gretchen's process of "coming out" as a traditionally certified teacher. First, she was assumed to be a TFA CM, likely as the result of her age and the sheer magnitude of CMs placed in her school.<sup>4</sup> This assumption effectively positioned her as a sort of outsider due to her pre-service training and long-term desire to be a teacher. Additionally, her colleague's reaction, which she perceived to be snarky and elitist, indicates the establishment of a distinct hierarchy, wherein TFA CMs perceivably understand themselves to be superior to their differently prepared colleagues. As the result of this interpersonal dynamic, Gretchen learned very early on that her background was not only atypical, but something of which to feel ashamed. As will be discussed in more detail below, the psychological impact of this positioning led Gretchen to essentially hide her status as a traditionally trained teacher in her efforts to avoid feeling inferior to her TFA counterparts.

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<sup>2</sup> "The School" is a pseudonym for the setting in my story.

<sup>3</sup> The use of gender neutral pronouns is intentional to protect the identities of other individuals referred to in my story.

<sup>4</sup> Corps members are characteristically young and over-represented in charter schools.

Certainly, this experience is similar to that of TFA CMs in traditional public schools (TPS) as outlined by Thomas (2018), who writes:

The CMs reported employing a variety of strategies to hide or mitigate their identification with alternative certification programs as a means of preventing criticism and ostracism from other teachers. One strategy, as alluded to above, involved simply trying to hide one's identity as a TFA teacher altogether. (p. 191)

Thomas (2018), here, discusses the ways in which TFA CMs working in TPS perceived themselves to embody controversial education policies (e.g., alternative licensure pathways), as the result of which they often actively hid their TFA status. Importantly, debates surrounding appropriate and effective licensure/preparation pathways are a point of contention in education circles. This reality ultimately politicizes a teacher's training, meaning simply that pre-service experiences can become controversial in specific contexts. In Thomas's (2018) research, TFA CMs were working in contexts that were largely populated by teachers who had likely experienced extensive pre-service training, making their own limited training atypical. In the case of Gretchen, whose background as a traditionally trained educator was unique in the context of a TFA-heavy school, she also felt herself to embody what amounted to a controversial experience in her school. For Gretchen, what it meant to be an exemplary teacher was skewed by the norm of limited training within the largely TFA-staffed institution (Holloway, 2021; Thomas & Lefebvre, 2020). Per sociocultural activity theory, Gretchen's peers acted as representatives of policies indicative of TFA (Thomas, 2018). Taken collectively, then, the introduction of programs like TFA and the accompanying political debates surrounding teacher preparation effectively pit teachers against one another, thus destabilizing the profession.

**Gretchen's story: Teaching as an experience.** As I became acquainted with my TFA colleagues, I found that viewing teaching as an "experience" was the norm. Aside from one of my TFA colleagues, none had intentions to continue teaching. Being a teacher for two years was almost likened to an internship or travel abroad experience--it allowed them to get a taste of what education is like in an underserved community, which would then give them credence and expertise for a career in education policy, law, non-profit work, or school leadership. This sort of sentiment always seemed so odd to me, considering I was barely able to figure out how to understand academic standards within my first two years of teaching, and it took me three years before I felt like I knew how to effectively teach and manage a classroom of 25 students.

Here, Gretchen describes the ways in which the TFA CMs with whom she worked rarely envisioned teaching as a long-term career choice; rather, they characteristically equated teaching with a sort of "experience" that they would be able to leverage on the path to a more lucrative and/or fulfilling career. This sort of mindset, in addition to the harmful psychological effects that it caused Gretchen, as she often felt "less than" her TFA peers, is consistent with critiques often leveled against the organization relating to its short-term and deprofessionalizing status. It also demonstrates, on a macro level, how the TFA policies were expected to be the norm and shaped the school experience, for both TFA and non-TFA educators. According to these critiques, TFA's emphasis on on-the-job training effectively assumes that leadership experience/potential will trump extensive pre-service training, which also effectively deprofessionalizes teaching as a whole. Similarly, the costs of TFA's high rates of attrition are significant (Anderson, 2019):

TFA fails to adequately address the economic, socio-political, and moral components of the [education] debt, in part as a result of the high attrition rates of its teachers. Economically, the organization's high attrition rates suggest that districts must constantly invest in replenishing its staff, which may exacerbate already poor fiscal situations, at least initially, and preclude the establishment of institutional expertise amongst school faculty and the facilitation of long-term connections between students and teachers. Socio-politically, when recruits leave their placement schools, they take with them the experience and knowledge that they have acquired, thus exposing students to a constant flux of often under-prepared and inexperienced teachers. Additionally, when corps members locate change beyond the actors who have the most intimate knowledge of the issues facing our schools, long-term change becomes jeopardized. Morally, it is important to point out that, when students do not receive their fair share of quality teachers who are committed to teaching for the long haul, they are not receiving equitable educations. (p. 15)

Additionally, when the impetus of a TFA CM's career path exists beyond the level of the classroom, students are effectively demeaned. That is, the onus of change and transformation is placed on the CMs themselves, not the students whom they are supposed to be "helping" (see also, Anderson, 2019). This orientation away from students themselves would prove problematic for Gretchen, whose understanding of what it means to be a teacher is explicitly tied to students, families, and communities.

**Gretchen's story: Just being a teacher.** Although I knew I made a calculated, informed decision to enter teaching, I began to question myself. Was it bad that I just wanted to be a teacher and stay in the same school, form relationships with families, and feel like I did my job well? Was I dumb? I thought I was smart and that I had rich life experiences that equipped me to be a good teacher, but maybe I was wrong. As the summer after my first year approached, I began to look for professional development opportunities, because I felt that just being a teacher simply wasn't enough. When I went to my administration to ask for professional development, I was told that the available opportunities were already filled, because the school worked with the local TFA chapter for leadership opportunities. I took a traditional route to education, and my students had good test scores; yet, I was not being funneled into leadership. I felt inferior, because my hopes and dreams were to just be a teacher. I began to question my own efficacy. Why wasn't I being supported when I wanted to be a permanent part of the school community? Wouldn't it make sense to support teachers who wanted to stay in the school, rather than create a manufacturing plant for future school leaders and lawyers?

The inadequacy that Gretchen felt as the result of her desire to just be a teacher is indicative of TFA's larger narrative, which suggests that teaching as a standalone career and long-term investment is somehow less than other careers (e.g., work in education policy, school administration, law, etc.). Importantly, this narrative dismisses the very real effort and care that it takes to be a teacher, which ultimately deprofessionalizes teaching as a whole. What is more, this narrative effectively demeans teachers who do pursue extensive training and who aim to teach for the long haul, which introduces mistrust into the profession and inhibits opportunities for meaningful collaboration. Certainly, this negatively impacts students and schools. Similarly,

Gretchen's feelings of inadequacy led her to feel that she was in competition with her TFA colleagues, because the charter school's policies, rooted in TFA policies, created an institutional structure where her experience was not the norm. The school administration, while not directly responsible for creating TFA policy, promoted these policies through social interactions to create an institutional norm. This caused Gretchen to interpret her social position within the school as insufficient based upon signals perceived from policy. As noted above, this sort of competition structure, which the introduction of programs like TFA promotes, also functions to destabilize the profession, which undoubtedly has lasting, negative consequences for the whole of the education sector.

**Gretchen's story: Supporting students.** I noticed that students and families began to resent TFA teachers, and I found myself quickly creeping into that camp. I devoted myself to my instruction and supporting students outside of the classroom. I created clubs and academic programs. Students started asking me if I would come to their graduations—of course I would be there. I started to notice that parents treated me differently, too. If parents had questions or a situation with one of my TFA colleagues, they would call me. When I encouraged them to reach out to the actual teacher, they would reply that it was easier to talk to me because I had time for them and/or because I knew their family. Although I often felt like I had no idea what I was doing, I did feel confident that I was good at knowing my students and families.

As I became more immersed in the community, I started to become resentful that I was the only teacher attending student sporting events, going to church services, or attending concerts. This was the fun part of teaching! Why weren't my TFA colleagues also getting to see these talented kids outside of the classroom? These same teachers loved to advertise their cute door decorations, the worksheets they created, their op/ed pieces for education blogs, or how much they loved their "babies" on social media; yet, I was the only one showing up to parades at eight on a Saturday morning when they were at their education leadership professional developments. I began to grow militant in my commitment to my personal professional development. I did not need leadership development, I needed to be a part of my students' lives. I did not need to spend my Saturdays discussing the achievement gap or going through the motions of unpacking my privilege backpack with a journey line, I needed to show up for students and just be a good human in their lives. I resolved to hold hard and fast to my beliefs about what it means to be an educator. In fact, I worked hard for my credentials. I went through two years of schooling, passed multiple qualifying exams, and most importantly had actually had a job before entering the teaching field. I had life experience. I had lived in other countries. I had experienced loss. Even though it felt like my professional world did not see it, I was qualified and good.

Although I was not the typical teacher at The School and was labeled "combative" because I would fight for what I thought was best for students, I was somehow hired as a school leader. In my new post, I was more forthcoming about my status as a traditionally trained teacher, and I took special interest in fostering other teachers like myself. I also had the curtain pulled back, so to speak, as to the TFA coaches and leadership opportunities I was so envious of previously. I realized that these

coaches were parroting sexy phrases from the latest fad teaching book and that these educational leadership summits were largely just TFA meet and greets. While many TFA CMs went on to lead failing charter schools that quickly closed, I was a real teacher—I finally started to have this confidence.

With this section, Gretchen outlines her activities beyond the walls of the classroom and how those allowed her to connect more explicitly with both her students and their families/communities, something which TFA CMs did not seem to prioritize. Additionally, she describes the resentment that she (and the families with whom she worked) began to feel as the result of this noninvolvement. Importantly, much of this resentment stemmed from her perceived inadequacy as a novice teacher. That is, Gretchen often felt “less than” her TFA peers, who routinely participated in leadership trainings and professional development, which she notes seemed to take precedent over establishing concrete ties with the communities that they were supposed to be serving. According to sociocultural activity theory, Gretchen’s past experience and beliefs allowed her to make meaning and resist the institutional policies and remain rooted in her beliefs in educational practice (Spillane et al., 2002). As she continued her teaching career, she began to feel more confident in her priorities and commitments to supporting students and families, which ultimately resulted in her “lifting the veil” and sense-making, so to speak, on TFA’s larger mission and intentions. As noted above, TFA as an institution is explicitly geared towards the attrition of its CMs outside of the classroom, which certainly has negative consequences for multiple stakeholders (Anderson, 2019). What Gretchen’s story provides, then, is an important example of how TFA’s mission can engender distrust/low expectations not only amongst other, differently prepared teachers in the building, but also amongst students and families. This story also highlights how neoliberal competition structures, introduced by TFA policies, disincentivize teachers from collaborating with one another. Gretchen became committed to her own form of practice and professional development. Additionally, TFA as an organization is entirely dependent on on-the-job training as the result of the limited pre-service preparation experiences that it offers. This in-service training, however, as well as the leadership programming/professional development that CMs often experience and the overall thrust of its initiatives beyond the level of the classroom, effectively sets its CMs up for limited school involvement. As indicated in Gretchen’s narrative, this positioning breeds resentment amongst stakeholders, which ultimately destabilizes the teaching profession as a whole.

### *Psychology of Novice Teachers*

**Gretchen’s story: Feeling less than.** My feelings of inadequacy sent me into an anxiety-induced spiral that impacted both my professional and personal life. Professionally, I felt like I was behind and desperately needed to catch up to my TFA colleagues. I was also struggling to recognize the triumphs I was having in my own classroom. I had a student move from below grade level to above grade level in reading that year, but I couldn’t live in that success; instead, I dwelled on how I could spin that achievement into a bullet point on a resume so that I might gain access to an exclusive educational leadership club in which, it seemed, all my TFA colleagues had membership. I was 30 years old, and I felt like maybe I was not cut out for the field of education. I knew I could do the teaching part, but maybe I did not have the drive and network to be a mover and shaker in the world of education. As these feelings persisted, my personal life also suffered. I never saw my partner.

I was not working out, and I was subsisting on a diet of coffee and Adderall. I started to question why my second year of teaching, when I had the planning and management part down, was feeling overwhelmingly more challenging than my first.

The School itself seemed to confirm my feelings of inadequacy. Although I received a national honor for teaching, the school neither celebrated nor recognized this accomplishment. In fact, the school made me use a personal day to attend the award ceremony. Meanwhile, a TFA colleague, who was suddenly leaving the school to work for an education think tank, was heralded in staff meetings, featured in the school newsletter, and interviewed by local television stations. The school even made a marketing video featuring another TFA colleague who was selected for a TFA leadership summit. After establishing a pattern of speaking up in meetings and/or asking questions, which I often did, because I saw my TFA colleagues doing the same and thought this might be a way to get noticed, I was pulled aside by an administrator, who told me that my tone came off as combative, made some people uncomfortable, and that I should think before I speak. I immediately felt awful and wanted to correct this impression. I replayed the meeting in my head and could not fathom what I may have done to be labeled combative--did I just completely lack self-awareness? I was working so hard to compete with my TFA colleagues, to be noticed by my administration, and to be a good teacher, but nothing seemed to be working. I felt hopelessly inadequate. In the end, this interaction was a tipping point that caused me to question everything about myself. Although I was certainly open to feedback, I had never previously received feedback of this kind from a superior. I got the distinct impression that I was to be seen and not heard, so I began to conform to this expectation.

One morning as I showered before work, I immediately felt sick due to the old familiar sensation of a panic attack. I had not experienced one of those since leaving an abusive relationship years ago. My body froze. I could not think. I could not move. I just let the water pour over me. I would experience these panic attacks frequently over the next two months, as the result of which my partner begged me to make a change, to leave school at school. Searching for control in my life, I began to fall back into old habits. Having battled bulimia as a teen and young adult, I started to long for the euphoria I once experienced with this disease. One evening, as I stood over the toilet contemplating vomiting, I had a wakeup call and realized I needed help. Thankfully, I was able to find a psychologist, who helped me over the course of the next year to identify medications that might help me mediate the anxiety that plagued me due to the school and my incessant, gnawing need to catch up to my TFA colleagues.

Here, Gretchen outlines the extreme psychological toll that teaching, and especially her need to compete with her TFA peers, took on her professional and personal life. For her, the school climate and administration, which seemingly privileged the experiences/preparation of TFA CMs over those of traditionally trained educators, contributed significantly to her profound sense of inadequacy and the resulting psychological events that would figure prominently in her recollection of her time at the school. This experience is also indicative of the introduction of policies that force non-TFA teachers to conform to deprofessionalizing TFA policies, and incites

feelings of inadequacy based upon policy perceptions. Although the pressures of teaching in the early years are certainly not unique to Gretchen, this narrative provides an important perspective regarding the ways in which those pressures can become amplified by a school culture that seemingly plays favorites, the ultimate outcome of which is the establishment of unhealthy competition structures. Certainly, this sort of culture is indicative of larger debates in teacher education that characteristically pit teachers against one another, which inevitably destabilizes the profession and, in so doing, precludes opportunities for lasting, systemic change. As such, we see how larger, neoliberal trends that favor, and are in fact based on, such competitive environments are detrimental to both teachers and, ultimately, students.

**Gretchen's story: Being a novice TFA teacher.** My confidence began to grow, and so did my empathy for some of the TFA teachers with whom I worked. I began to realize that the daily meetings with their TFA coach was doing little to improve their practice and/or help them put out the immediate fires in their classrooms that would inevitably arise—what those meetings did was suck up valuable planning time. I also felt like TFA was setting up many of its corps members to be unsuccessful. One particular CM struggled in their first year. The six weeks of training, during which time they taught a handful of high school students calculus, did little to prepare them for middle school math. When their coach would visit, they would tell them to be resilient, that they were doing equity work, but they never gave them the tools to actually do the work. I was beginning to see cracks in the façade—the receipts were out! More and more I saw this CM starting to question the TFA policies that I assumed all members had tattooed on themselves. I saw this teacher's mental health begin to deteriorate. They were not happy professionally or personally, and, when they reached out for help, they were told to follow the system and be resilient. Although I felt isolated as the result of my traditional preparation, I at least had the life experience and support to know when to seek out professional mental help, and I knew there was a way out if teaching was not for me. I was not working as an indentured servant for an organization.

In addition to recognizing the psychological toll that teaching in the early years was taking on her own mental health, Gretchen also acknowledges the challenges faced by the TFA CMs with whom she worked. For one corps member in particular, those challenges were compounded by both the extensive on-the-job training and professional development that is demanded by a program such as TFA, as well as the often mission-centric (as opposed to practical) and unhelpful support by their academic coach. These sorts of challenges have been documented in the literature on TFA. For example, Matsui (2015), based on qualitative data from thirteen TFA CMs in Philadelphia, presents a powerful counternarrative of the TFA experience, which highlights the many stressors that surfaced due to the CMs' limited pre-service training and in-service support, which, for some, resulted in weight fluctuations, alcohol abuse, and/or the need for psychiatric services. Taken collectively, then, this narrative points to the ways in which TFA CMs' pre-service preparation and in-service expectations might compound what is, for most novice teachers, an already challenging classroom initiation experience. Certainly, too, the outcomes of such an approach to teacher preparation indicate that TFA's deprofessionalizing mission can be harmful to its own CMs, as well as the other educators who work with, and alongside them, and from a policy perspective sets back progress in the field (Brewer et al., 2016). Gretchen found herself operating as an embodied being, who experienced the effects of her TFA colleagues' insufficient training, but put in labor to support these colleagues, thereby enabling the continuation of TFA policies

(Anderson et al., 2022). These are palpable effects of policy that are experienced by all educators, regardless of status.

## Discussion & Conclusions

In her first year at The School, Gretchen recognized her own policy embodiment as a traditionally licensed teacher and began to interpret the cultural and social impact of her presence. Because her training was atypical in The School, she often felt that her identity, which was wrapped up in her experiences, and so influenced by her preparation, was somewhat fractured. In negotiating her identity at The School, parts of it split off due to being made to feel less than, and these new identities threatened her core identity. She never had the opportunity to develop her own teacher identity because The School groomed her to absorb the identity that it privileged. From the very beginning, her status as a traditional teacher was both magnified and questioned. She certainly did not feel herself to be part of a teaching community; on the contrary, Gretchen felt like a sort of outsider who was being actively othered as the result of her training background. As such, her presence within the institutional confines of The School serves as a powerful counter narrative to that experienced by her TFA colleagues.

What is more, her existence at the margins of what was the typical experience at The School left her feeling inadequate, even ashamed, in comparison to her TFA colleagues. She began to question both her beliefs about teaching and learning, as well as her identity as an educator, which became intimately connected to her position in relation to the TFA teachers with whom she worked. This concern with her comparative positioning largely manifested in Gretchen feeling that not only was her training inadequate, but her desire to be *just* a teacher would not earn her the requisite *bona fides* in the field of education. Her TFA colleagues had organizational support, leadership opportunities, coaches, and future plans that largely existed beyond the level of individual classrooms, while Gretchen did not, which made her feel like a less competent educator.

Ultimately, these understandings resulted in Gretchen often negotiating, even hiding, her status as a traditionally licensed educator to avoid uncomfortable, even demeaning, questioning. In fact, she began to organize her life, both in and out of school, in such a way that she would avoid interactions with her TFA colleagues altogether. Almost to a fault, she began to invest herself solely in her students, ignoring opportunities for collaboration with her colleagues and missing opportunities to grow and learn from other teachers. Of course, the ultimate outcome of these activities was the destabilization of the school community and Gretchen's larger disinvestment from the life of the school. Certainly, this is indicative of the larger phenomenon of competition and field destabilization created by neoliberal reform movements as a whole, which includes the introduction of programs like TFA. That is, when traditional preparation programs are compelled to compete with alternative licensure programs like TFA, hierarchical structures are formed. Importantly, these structures are scaffolded by education reform debates that inevitably pit teachers against one another. For example, TFA offers prospective CMs what Labaree (2010) refers to as a "win-win option" (p. 48): TFA CMs are able to both do good (via working with low-income students) and do well (via gaining prestige and career potential), which sets up asymmetrical relations of dominance between themselves and their traditionally licensed peers.<sup>5</sup> Taken together,

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<sup>5</sup> Labaree (2010) writes, "By becoming corps members, they can do good and do well at the same time. Teacher education (TE) programs are in a hopeless position in trying to compete with TFA for prospective students. They cannot provide students with the opportunity to do well, because they can offer none of the exclusiveness and



then, these hierarchical competition structures function to destabilize the profession as a whole, which is certainly harmful to both teachers, who inevitably entertain negative comparisons as we see with Gretchen, and students alike, whose educators are disincentivized from collaborating with one another.

It is important to point out, too, that this study highlights the potential negative impacts of TFA's high rates of attrition. Gretchen largely understood her TFA colleagues' motivations as being primarily directed at cultivating an experience that they would eventually be able to parlay into future careers beyond the classroom walls. Not only does this orientation have real consequences for students, who are then exposed to a sort of revolving door of inexperienced teachers not invested in teaching for the long haul, but the profession as a whole becomes largely deprofessionalized via the organization's orientation away from the classroom itself. That is, teaching becomes a sort of stepping stone on the path to a more meaningful, impactful, and/or lucrative career, which effectively undermines the motivations of those, like Gretchen, for whom teaching is a long-term investment. As one final point regarding the dangers of attrition, in equating teaching with an experience that can be leveraged for future career opportunities, students are inevitably demeaned. That is, the locus of educational change becomes embedded within the CMs themselves, not the students who should be the primary target of transformation. Gretchen certainly recognized this concern and, in turn, actively invested in the lives of her students, something she notes was neither a priority for her TFA colleagues, nor was it encouraged and/or facilitated by her administration.

An additional finding that this study produced involves the role of schools, themselves, in supporting the sorts of competition structures described above. Certainly, both Gretchen and her TFA colleagues wanted to do well by students and their families. However, The School perpetuated divisions between traditionally licensed teachers and their TFA counterparts by creating a space where being alternatively licensed was deeply intertwined with the larger culture of the school. It was the TFA teachers who were pushed into professional development, leadership opportunities, and selected to lead whole school learning. The TFA teachers were permitted private time within school hours to meet with their coaches and received more classroom observations. Despite the reality that they were all working at the same school, some teachers were granted exclusivity, and some were not. What is more, in the absence of school professional learning communities, teachers did not have structured time to collaborate on how to meet school goals. Finally, The School's leadership characteristically employed the same language and discourses as that exhibited by TFA teachers when discussing students and teacher career trajectories. The ultimate outcome of these features of The School was the establishment of a school culture that not only reflected a pedagogy in close alignment with TFA's mission (Horn, 2011; 2016), but also actively marginalized any contrasting experience, which certainly facilitated the construction of unhealthy hierarchical structures.

As one final point, the absence of authentic social relations, which was actively crafted by the administration, inhibited Gretchen and her colleagues from developing a sense of identity as educators. Schools must provide caring, supportive, and collaborative mentoring for teachers in

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cachet that comes from being accepted as a TFA corps member. TE has always offered students the chance to do good, but this prospect is less entrancing when they realize that TFA's escape clause allows graduates to do good without major personal sacrifice. More than that, it promises to be a great career booster that will pay off handsomely in future income and prestige. In short, the competition between TFA and TE is a case of "heads they win, tails we lose" (p. 48).

order to foster identity development and advance practice. The administration of The School, however, promoted what amounted to fractured identities-- a loss of personal, core identity-- in order to maintain control over its teachers. Those who conformed to The School's expectations (TFA) were rewarded, while those who did not were ignored. This sort of orientation, however, prevents meaningful consensus-building, disempowers teachers, and in so doing inhibits transformational change. Jean Anyon (2014) describes the ways in which collective engagement can empower social movements and facilitate agency. When teachers mobilize collectively to challenge systems of oppression in schools, they effectively advocate for themselves, press their claims, and disrupt existing power structures. Should schools really be the transformational institutions that they so often claim, they must create the conditions for meaningful social relations that lead to teacher identity formation and collaboration. Rather than fracturing the identities of teachers via, for example, the introduction of competition, schools need to look inward to dismantle the patriarchal and neoliberal structures embedded in these institutions. With more collective social action teaching could become more professionalized, and more teachers might remain in the field as just a teacher.

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