Teach For America Corps Maintenance Practices and Long-term Educational Change

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Teach For America Corps Maintenance Practices and Long-term Educational Change

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For Ellie

You came along on this journey
and made its completion that much sweeter.
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Abstract

Teach For America (TFA), a non-profit organization that recruits top-performing recent college graduates and professionals into two-year teaching commitments in low-income urban and rural public school districts, remains a hot topic of research and debate in the education sector. With this dissertation, I explore how TFA is actively preparing its recruits (via its pre- and in-service support practices) for long-term investments in educational change, both inside the classroom and beyond. I do so via interviews with five TFA alumni (four identified by TFA and one by social media) who are no more than three years removed from the program and who taught in one of two cities in a southeastern state. The interpretive work was informed by my commitments to postcritical ethnography, which seeks to interrogate contexts of power, while at the same time taking seriously issues associated with positionality, reflexivity, objectivity, and representation. The participants shared that educational inequity, service, and career uncertainty/exploration were motivating factors in their decisions to apply to TFA, thus suggesting that TFA has been successful in its attempts to attract service-minded individuals who might not have had an early interest in education. Regarding their pre-service training, the participants all spoke about its intensity, and some described feeling that their training was inadequate. This preparation was supplemented by in-service support and training that was typically provided by TFA staff, alumni, and fellow TFA recruits (as opposed to school-based supports), thus revealing a distinct level of TFA-based insularity. Regarding their post-service activities, all the participants remain in education in some capacity, something that is actively encouraged and facilitated by TFA. However, their continued involvement in education is typically beyond the original placement schools, thus suggesting that TFA and the placement schools could do more to keep corps members teaching in their placement schools, although this
is not their stated mission. Ultimately, these findings suggest that TFA might do well to provide
more training, over a longer period of time, in the regions and content areas in which recruits
will be teaching. Additionally, TFA (and placement schools) would do well to facilitate within-
school connections and supports.
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Chapter 1

Introduction\(^1\)

Teach For America (TFA), a non-profit organization that recruits top-performing\(^2\) recent college graduates and professionals into two-year teaching commitments in low-income urban and rural public school districts, remains a hot topic of research and debate in the education sector. Supporters of TFA have cited research relating to, for example, the program’s ability to recruit academically successful college graduates (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, & Wyckoff, 2007; Raymond & Fletcher, 2002), typically with extensive records of leadership (Farr, 2010/2011), and to produce comparable, or better, educational outcomes when compared with other similarly experienced teachers (Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004; Glazerman, Mayer, & Decker, 2006; Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001).\(^3\) They also cite the limitations of traditional teacher education programs (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998).

Critics of Teach For America, however, put forth evidence of the program’s deficiencies in such areas as teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Glazerman et al., 2006; Veltri, 2008, 2010), effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Vasquez Heilig, 2005; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Pilcher & Steele, 2005), and retention (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, Ronfeldt, & Wyckoff, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Mac Iver & Vaughn, 2007; Noell & Gansel, 2009). Critics also cite concerns for overall student devaluation and teacher deprofessionalization (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Veltri, 2008, 2010).


\(^2\) TFA boasts an average undergraduate GPA of 3.55 for its 2013 applicant pool.

\(^3\) These studies and those introduced below will be discussed in more detail in chapter two.
Although researchers have come to understand the challenges associated with making broad generalizations about TFA’s overall efficacy, many policymakers and other stakeholders continue to understand the organization in largely one-dimensional, and often ideologically based terms that position TFA as a sort of panacea for all the inequities that persist in our country’s schools.

Despite the reality that its recruits represent less than 0.3% of the U.S.’s nearly four million classroom teachers (NCES, 2013), the organization has achieved a kind of mythical status in popular and public discourses, representing not one of several policy options, but rather a sort of monolithic standard of reform. Often, this failure to adequately consider the layered complexities of the organization’s theoretical mission and practical application has resulted in decidedly negative outcomes for both students and teachers (e.g., Anderson, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Veltri, 2010).

With this dissertation, I explore one of those complexities by working to connect the persistence of TFA recruits in the education sector with the organization’s corps maintenance practices. Specifically, I am interested in the extent to which TFA is preparing its recruits to be “lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” (Teach For America, 2013a, p. 1). Although the organization consistently touts its desire to “create the systemic changes that will help end educational inequity,” in reality, teacher attrition remains a serious problem (Teach For America, 2013a, p. 1). In many ways, then, TFA’s concrete materiality may fall short of its goal of producing more long-term educational change, especially concerning the longevity of its recruits. In light of this inconsistency, my primary research question is: how is TFA preparing its corps members to be “lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” via its corps maintenance practices (Teach For America, 2013a, p. 1)?
With this chapter, I detail both the need and scope of the dissertation. I begin with a general discussion of the educational landscape, as well as Teach For America’s position within it in an effort both to introduce readers to the organization as it is often represented in public discourse and to outline the ways in which TFA aims to challenge the structures of inequality that disproportionately impact students of color and of poverty. In many ways, this discussion begins and ends with the persistent achievement gaps that manifest in our classrooms. As such, I work to set the stage for the introduction of TFA as an answer to these gaps by discussing how inequities persist in our nation’s schools, what we have done historically to address those inequities, and how, specifically, TFA fits into the broader picture of current education reform efforts. Next, I outline the conceptual underpinnings of the study, paying particular attention to Ladson-Billings’ (2006a) conception of the “education debt,” after which I explore just one factor that I believe may prevent the realization of TFA’s goal of ending educational inequity (teacher attrition) in both practical and moral terms. I then outline the overall purpose of this study, which includes the guiding research questions that it aims to answer, as well as a discussion of the study’s various limitations and assumptions. I conclude with a general summary of the study’s overall organization.

**Context: The Meteoric Rise of TFA**

**Inequitable Schooling**

The appropriate manner in which to address the inequities that persist in our country’s schools has enjoyed a long tradition of debate amongst policymakers and other stakeholders.

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The accountability systems called for by current, standards-based reforms\(^6\) have consistently revealed an “achievement gap” (or is it an education debt?\(^7\)) between White, predominantly middle-class students and their poor and/or non-white peers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Delpit, 1995). It would seem that, although our testing practices have indicated the presence of a gap, they have done little to correct it.

In fact, an expanding body of literature suggests that these practices have exacerbated the very inequalities that they were designed to mitigate (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). For example, tracing the history of student labeling and tracking, Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) argued that standards-based reform, as well as the tests required to measure proficiency, reflects just one recent example of what ultimately amounts to whitewashed standards that disguise inequitable practices.\(^8\) Unfortunately, the students targeted\(^9\) and labeled deficient by whitestream\(^10\) norms

\(^5\) My understanding of inequity is most closely reflected in Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities* (2012) and the Children’s Defense Fund’s *Cradle to Prison Pipeline* (2007). These texts document the raced and classed disparities that differentiate the educational environments of white, predominantly middle-class students from their poor and/or non-white peers.

\(^6\) E.g., NCLB

\(^7\) See Ladson-Billings’ (2006a) conception of the education debt below.

\(^8\) According to Deschenes et al. (2001), “testing was used not so much to diagnose specific learning problems and to devise appropriate learning strategies (surely valuable uses of the new technology of assessment) as to isolate the *ne’er-do-wells* from the mainstream of the graded school for the *normal* students” (p. 532; see also, Anders, 2011).

\(^9\) I use the term “targeted” here (as opposed to other commonly used terms like “minority” or “marginalized”) to refer to individuals and communities that have not simply been excluded from full participation in public discourse due to some perceived lack of knowledge, income, training, ability, and/or equipment, but have also been actively marginalized by larger social systems that maintain asymmetrical relations of power and dominance. In its most general iteration, the term refers to those student populations that Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, and Ortiz (2010) refer to as *historically underserved*, which describes individuals from “diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who have experienced sustained school failure over time” (pp. 279-278).

\(^10\) Following Urrieta (2010), I use the term “whitestream” in reference to “all schools from kindergarten through graduate school and to the official and unofficial texts used in U.S. schools
that are perpetuated in public schools are the same ones who typically experience the negative effects of inequitable schooling practices. Oakes (2005) describes the ways in which assumptions about the perceived limitations of targeted student populations (and their families) restrict their access to various educational, and ultimately socio-economic, advantages.

In addition, the same systems of tracking that were designed to mitigate the negative effects of the achievement gap resulted in the disproportionate placement of targeted student groups in “lower” academic tracks (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). As such, students of color and of poverty are most likely to experience the disadvantages of tracking (Farkas, 2003; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Oakes, 2005; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). For example, according to the Children’s Defense Fund (2007):

Black children are twice as likely as White children to be put in programs for mental retardation; almost twice as likely to be retained in a grade; three times as likely to be suspended; and 50% more likely to drop out of school. . . . Minority youth make up 39% of the juvenile population but are 60% of committed juveniles. (p. 38; See also, Delpit, 2012; Cummins, 2001)

Because levels of educational attainment are directly connected to students’ future economic, democratic, and social prospects (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996) and because targeted student groups overpopulate tracks labeled under-performing, the
raced and classed structures that stratify our society remain in tact. We know that students of color and of poverty are not receiving equitable educations, so why are we not actively prescribing alternative ways of assessing the inequities that persist in our country’s schools? On this point, I agree with Ladson-Billings (2006a), who “argues that a focus on the [achievement] gap is misplaced. Instead, we need to look at the ‘education debt’ that has accumulated over time. This debt comprises historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components” that function to perpetuate structures of inequality both inside and outside the classroom (p. 3). This understanding of the “education debt” serves as the impetus for this dissertation research.

**Neoliberal Reform**

To date and for the last thirty years, the primary answer to the inequalities associated with persistent “achievement gaps” have been the institution of market-based, neoliberal\(^{11}\) reforms that embrace the perceived advantages of school choice and market competition, charter schools, vouchers, standards, and consequential accountability systems. Certainly not without its critics (e.g., Ellison, 2012; Boyles, 2011), this reform movement has achieved an overwhelming degree of public legitimacy, largely through policymakers’ success in connecting educational under-performance with both globalization and, later, with concerns over public schools’ ability to establish more equitable educational environments (Ellison, 2012; Thayer-Bacon & Ellison, 2011).

**Progressive era.**

With the establishment of nearly universal public education in the mid-late-nineteenth century, reformers began to think seriously about what schools, as well as the system that

\(^{11}\) Neoliberalism is a late 20\(^{th}\) century global shift in political and economic ideology that calls for market-based state policies over those which promote the welfare state and government control of economic and social activities (See, e.g., Harvey, 2005).
administers them, should look like. The emergence of a newly developed canon of research and data that showcased the perceived advantages of child-centered learning and democratic education began to take hold in early twentieth century policy debates, thus setting the stage for a reform movement consistent with the dictates of what came to be regarded as progressive education. According to Labaree (2005), the progressive education movement was animated by two distinct factions: the pedagogical and administrative progressives.\textsuperscript{12} Whereas the pedagogical progressives emphasized specific teaching and learning practices based on the unique needs of the child, administrative progressives typically based their overall mission on social efficiency and the perceived advantages of a utilitarian system of education whose focus was largely geared towards school governance and the overarching goals/structure of curricula.

Though both factions shared several common commitments,\textsuperscript{13} the thrust of the conflict culminated in the overwhelming success of the administrative progressive agenda, largely as a result of its ability to appeal to elitist and utilitarian ideals. According to Labaree (2005):

\begin{quote}
Their [administrative progressives] reform message appealed to people in power. Business and political leaders were attracted to a mode of educational reform that promised to eliminate waste, to organize and manage schools more efficiently, to tailor
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} This distinction was first identified by David Tyack (1974) in his book \textit{One Best System: A history of American urban education}. Church and Sedlak (1976) use the terms conservative and liberal progressives, while Kliebard (1986) identifies three distinct groupings: social efficiency, child development and social reconstruction. Labaree (2005) positions the conservative and social efficiency groups with the administrative progressives, the liberal and social reconstructionist groups with the pedagogical progressives, and the child development group between the two.

\textsuperscript{13} E.g., a common dissatisfaction with the traditional discipline-based curriculum and a shared commitment to the dictates of developmentalism, an educational doctrine that advocates for the perceived advantages of differentiated educational activities based on students’ particular intellectual and social stages of development (Labaree, 2005).
instruction to the needs of employers, to Americanize the children of immigrants, and to
provide students with the skills and attitudes they would need to perform and to accept
their future roles in society. For people who could make these reforms happen, this was
the right message at the right time. Second, the utilitarian quality of the administrative
progressive agenda made it easier to sell than the romantic vision of their pedagogical
counterparts. They were offering a way to make schools work better in serving society’s
needs, whereas the pedagogical progressives were offering a way to make learning more
natural, more intrinsically engaging, more authentic. In a contest between utility and
romance, utility is usually going to win: it promises to give us something we need rather
than merely something we might like. (pp. 284-5).

As a result, the administrative progressive faction was able to achieve significant gains, most
notably the establishment of: 1) a more “efficient” curriculum emphasizing both vocational
training and a differentiated structure; and 2) the reorganization of school governance based on
the perceived advantages of centralization, corporatization and bureaucracy (Labaree, 2005).

Today, the legacy of this “win” is still felt in U.S. classrooms. Although we talk about
schooling largely in terms commensurate with the dictates of pedagogical progressivism, the way
we “do” school reflects the success of the administrative progressives (Labaree, 2005). Social
efficiency discourses advocating for high standards and high-stakes, the same kinds of practices
that seek to institute external mechanisms of control on individual schools, continue to dominate
the reform landscape (Tyack, 1974; Labaree, 2005).14 Ultimately, the popularity of the

14 “Reform is moving in the direction of establishing rigorous academic frameworks for the
school curriculum, setting performance standards for students, and using high stakes testing to
motivate students to learn the curriculum and teachers to teach it” (Labaree, 2005, p. 277).
administrative progressive brand of schooling and school administration would set the stage for the sort of market-based reforms advocated by neoliberalism devotees, though with several key distinctions. Although the preference for external measures of accountability has remained relatively intact, the ways in which the current movement has won consent for its reforms, particularly its connection of globalization and economic competition with educational under-performance, distinguish it from its predecessors.

**Sputnik & Civil Rights eras.**

The external threat of Soviet dominance during the Cold War of the 1950s ushered in a new sort of reform based on the perceived technological and disciplinary under-performance of the U.S. educational system. During the Sputnik era, so named for the Soviet satellite whose launch triggered the Space Race, reformers critical of the purportedly compromised intellect, discipline and values of students produced by the progressive movement began to call for more rigorous academic standards and curricular changes, especially in the STEM fields, more teacher accountability and a return to more disciplined and patriotic methods of educational training (Tyack & Cuban, 1997). American youth were portrayed as being ill-equipped to carry the nation through the Soviet crisis, thus justifying the need for a serious educational intervention. Ultimately, this discursively constructed “crisis” would also function to legitimate the concerns of reformers who were then able to see their efforts come to fruition, a strategy that continues to be used to this day.

The Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 70s witnessed the pursuit of more equitable and heterogeneous educational practices designed to ameliorate the social ills inflicted on targeted groups. However, the ways in which schooling practices effectively maintained the status quo

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15 See discussion of the historical debt below.
would ultimately deliver the institution of public schooling up to the chopping block (Tyack; 1974; Tyack & Cuban, 1997). The American populace questioned the transformative potential of schools and became, in the process, increasingly disillusioned with their capacity to live up to changing public expectations. This newly framed “crisis” posed serious challenges to both the ideologies and practices of public education, thus setting the stage for a major turning point in educational reform as a whole that was based primarily on the establishment of more equitable institutions of learning (Tyack, 1974).

**Current era.**

In the 1980s, the political right sought to win approval for its mission primarily by connecting its preferred practices with American students’ perceived inability to compete in an increasingly globalized economy (e.g., *A Nation at Risk*). With the rise of the New Left in the 1990s, the language of the achievement gap\(^{16}\) was introduced into the reform vocabulary of popular discourse. The guiding logic was this: not only were public schools failing to produce economically viable students, but they were also failing to provide very specific student populations with equal educational opportunities, thus legitimating the need for some sort of policy intervention (read: neoliberal reform). In many ways, then, educational under-performance became not just a rhetorical tool used primarily to criticize public education on the basis of economic competition (although this is still here); rather, under-performance became explicitly connected with equity through a process that established a series of solutions that ultimately changed the problem as a whole (see, e.g., Thayer-Bacon & Ellison, 2011). Overall,

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\(^{16}\) Although conversations about the extent to which our schools are providing equitable educations are certainly not new (e.g. Civil Rights era; see Tyack, 1974; Tyack & Cuban, 1997), the specific language of the “achievement gap” began to animate the popular discourse of education reform in the 90s.
neoliberal reformers have been able to win approval for their mission by manufacturing a “crisis”\(^\text{17}\) in both economic and social justice terms.

**The Organization**

TFA represents just one potential “solution” to educational under-performance. Originating as the senior thesis of Princeton graduate Wendy Kopp in 1989, Teach For America seeks to “create the systemic changes that will help end educational inequity” both inside and outside the classroom, primarily through the development of a national teaching corps of high-performing recent college graduates and professionals, who have committed to teach for two years in hard-to-staff urban and rural public school districts (Teach For America, 2013a, p. 1). Following a rigorous admissions process, accepted applicants participate in a series of intensive pre-service activities: 1) thirty hours of independent work and experienced teacher observations; 2) a five-week training institute centered on practice teaching (summer school programs), veteran teacher feedback, and development (seminars and practice sessions); and 3) a regional orientation to their new schools and communities. Once they begin their service in the classroom, corps members receive additional and ongoing TFA-sponsored support, including annual observations and feedback from instructional coaches, customized teaching resources, and periodic content and grade-level learning team meetings,\(^\text{18}\) as well as various school-based

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\(^{17}\) Milton Friedman, in his canonical neoliberal text *Capitalism and Freedom*, describes the role of the “crisis” (and the neoliberal response to it) as follows: “There is enormous inertia—a tyranny of the status quo—in private and especially governmental arrangements. Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible become politically inevitable” (Friedman, 2002, xiii-xiv).

\(^{18}\) Typically, these groups meet every two months at TFA regional meetings.
professional development events, on the path to achieve full teacher certification\textsuperscript{19} (Teach For America, 2013a). In theory, these activities prepare corps members to “become lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” (Teach For America, 2013a, p. 1).

Beginning with only 500 corps members at its inception, TFA currently boasts a teaching force that is 11,000 strong, serving 750,000 students in 48 regions (Teach For America, 2013a). In many ways, this meteoric rise to prominence in the education sector reflects TFA’s ability to achieve an overwhelming degree of legitimacy in public discourse. In addition to its vast financial resources from numerous philanthropic and other sources, TFA has won endorsements from well respected academic and independent organizations that point to its accomplishments in student achievement outcomes (Teach For America, 2013a; Teach For America, 2013b; Teach For America, 2013d). What is more, the organization’s recruitment efforts reflect a commitment to leadership and academic excellence. A highly selective organization, TFA boasts an average undergraduate GPA of 3.55 for its 2013 applicant pool of 57,000 individuals, only 14% of whom was accepted (Teach For America, 2013a).

The Neoliberal Dream

Where TFA differs from other neoliberal reforms that favor market competition is its professed commitment to serving targeted student populations. According to Lahann & Reagan (2011), TFA’s appropriation of corporate culture in the pursuit of more equitable schooling

\textsuperscript{19} TFA teachers are issued alternative certifications by state licensure agencies that impose requirements specific to the states in which the recruits are placed. Although TFA advertises that its corps members will eventually achieve master’s degrees via their completion of the requisite coursework for full teacher certification, this is certainly not the case everywhere. For example, in North Carolina, TFA corps members have the option of working towards an MA degree, but this is not a requirement for alternative teacher licensure programs. What is more, should corps members decide to pursue an MA, they must do so at their own expense, as these sorts of programs are facilitated by partnerships with various colleges of education and are not paid for by the organization (TFA Eastern North Carolina regional office, January 2, 2013, personal communication). TFA’s website statements regarding the MA, then, are misleading at best.
practices reflect what they term *progressive neoliberalism*: “embracing neoliberalism’s focus on deregulation, business strategies, and the managerial culture of accountability, but working to fight inequity and to reform the systems that produced it” (p. 20). The explicitly neoliberal practices embraced by the organization include: 1) support for public-private partnerships; 2) the deregulation of teacher education through its advocacy for and status as an alternative to traditional teacher preparation programs (this also reflects the kind of market competition embraced by neoliberals); and 3) the use of corporatist language to describe its overall mission and function, as well as its “outcomes-based” approach (Lahann & Reagan, 2011).

However, TFA’s discursive and practical concern with the establishment of more equitable schools for our most “at-risk” youth reflect, for Lahann and Reagan, a distinct shift in TFA’s neoliberal agenda. They write:

Neoliberalism, as the critiques have shown, reinforces power structures by distributing resources to the highest bidder. However, as a progressive neoliberal organization, TFA intends to challenge that orthodoxy on its own terms by using business principles to benefit those groups who are the least well equipped for competition. Value is placed not on the process (market principles), but on the outcomes themselves (equitable education).

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20 Lahann & Reagan (2011) base their conclusions on the following five assumptions: “(1) public education, as it is currently constituted, reinforces social inequities by failing to provide an excellent education to all students; (2) public education can benefit from deregulating market reforms that reward the most efficient service providers, encourage innovation, and bridge the private and public spheres; (3), public education can benefit from the logic, technology, and strategy of business; (4), the market cannot be trusted to rectify inequity by itself, and instead positive action is required to offset historical disparities; and (5) public education is an arena for social activism in which actors can work both within and against the system for equitable ends” (pp. 13–4). They believe that progressivism and neoliberalism are most clearly divergent according to the last two assumptions, which are progressive in nature.

21 TFA places its corps members in the most under-served communities, as opposed to already high-performing schools.
Such a stance stands in stark contrast to neoliberal education policy such as NCLB, which aims to create a competitive environment, and then leave market principles to produce the results. Instead, TFA seeks to function as a form of market correction: the organization’s agenda is not to create or advocate for better systems of supply and demand, but to build a national movement to address systemic inequities in resource distribution which prevent those principles from operating fairly. Moreover, TFA’s progressive neoliberalism also challenges the traditional neoliberal understanding of self-interest by asking corps members to “commit” two years to teaching in urban and rural schools. This language runs contrary to the principles of neoliberalism in which individuals compete selfishly for their own good, while society benefits from their efforts. (Lahann & Reagan, 2011, p. 19)

Its stated commitment to equity, however, does little to challenge the systemic inequities that structure student outcomes. In fact, I argue that TFA’s mission rests on narratives of equity in order to attract dedicated young college graduates and professionals under the guise of social justice. On this point, I agree with Apple (2001), who contends that “the ‘helping’ language of schools at times makes it hard to see the very real hidden social effects of the social and psychological labels used by educators” (p. 261). Because it operates under the assumption that it is helping targeted children, TFA is able to assume a kind of altruistic authority that successfully legitimizes its commitments, despite the contested nature of its outcomes.

What is more, the organization’s overall approval in public discourse, as evidenced by its significant financial resources, academic endorsements, and substantial applicant pool, disguises the negative effects of its implementation. For example, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept
of symbolic violence (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977), I recently argued that TFA’s assumed legitimacy is the result of both the organization’s selectivity and immense financial backing, which was bolstered by its founder’s individual cultural, and so economic, capital, as well as its connection to “public service under the guise that her [Kopp’s] program would help to narrow, if not close, the achievement gap between high- and low-poverty students” (Anderson, 2013b, p. 12). For me, this process was largely arbitrary and functioned to validate what ultimately amounts to an inequitable agenda via the appropriation of social justice language. The reality is that TFA’s practical application has not been wholly consistent with its stated goals (e.g., the closure of achievement gaps), which leads me to believe that its commitment to equity may be little more than empty rhetoric designed to maintain the status quo.

The Problem: Long-term Educational Change & Teacher Attrition

In order to establish more excellent and equitable schools, it is important for policymakers to think about and actively commit to long-term, systemic change, which may mean looking beyond the classroom realities that impact children’s lives at the ways in which schools are positioned within the larger social world. Too often, the U.S. has revealed a tendency toward “quick-fix” policies that seek to remedy the deficiencies in previous designs without adequately considering the layered complexities of those policies (Anderson, 2014). In many ways, this has resulted in a virtual “orgy of reform” that has exacerbated existing inequalities (Schrag, 2010, p. 355). On this point, I agree with Groenke (2010), who writes:

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22 “For Bourdieu, cultural capital refers to forms of knowledge, skills, education and academic credentials, etc. which provide those who possess them with high status” (Anderson, 2013b, p. 12).
In contrast to the empty “equity” rhetoric used by federal policymakers to push dangerous neoliberal agendas, and the problematic ways this rhetoric shapes teachers’ and administrators’ work in schools, true educational equity interrogates institutional racism and classism (among other –isms) and strives to provide equitable access to rich, high-quality educational opportunities for all students, not just a select, privileged few.

(p. 85; see also, Darling-Hammond, 2007)

Of course, it is much easier to think in terms of the day-to-day classroom practices that impact student outcomes (which often rely on deficit models to explain why specific student populations are not achieving at levels commensurate with the standards that are perpetuated in public schools) than it is to acknowledge that society is not necessarily the fair and just place many educators believe it to be (Ladson-Billings, 2006b). However, the pursuit of a truly equitable educational system demands that we interrogate the systemic inequities that structure those outcomes and actively commit to educational change. I contend that part of this process is ensuring that all students have access to key educational resources, including high quality, committed teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2007). With this section, I outline one element (teacher attrition) that I believe impacts the realization of more long-term educational change, after which I work to position TFA as a short-term solution to larger societal problems that are exacerbated by teacher attrition.

Teacher attrition continues to be a serious concern in the U.S., especially for targeted student populations. Although teacher experience has been shown to produce positive

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23 I recognize that schools, in general, are one of many social systems that impact student lives. On this point, my views are most closely aligned with Anyon (2005), who details the systemic nature of inequality in the U.S and how that inequality structures student outcomes.
outcomes for students (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Murnane & Phillips, 1981; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 1998), many new teachers leave the profession before the effects of this experience may be realized. This is especially true for students of color and of poverty, who are disproportionately impacted by teacher attrition. For example, Planty, Hussar, Snyder, Provasnik, Kena, Dinkes, KewalRamani, and Kemp (2008) find that, whereas fourteen percent of teachers in low-poverty settings leave their schools every year, a percentage that is already high among new teachers, twenty-one percent of teachers in high-poverty settings leave their schools annually. Because novice teachers typically fill these vacancies, students, especially those in low-income settings, often experience a stream of inexperienced teachers (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Lankford, Loeb, & Wykoff, 2002; Mayer, Mullens, & Moore, 2000; Murnane & Phillips, 1981; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 1998) who may be less effective than other more experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). For example, Mayer et al. (2000) find that “the highest-poverty schools and schools with the highest concentrations of minority students had nearly double the proportion of inexperienced teachers (those with three or fewer years of experience) than schools with the lowest poverty (20 versus 11 percent) and lowest concentration of minority students (21 versus 10 percent)” (p. iv). For Donaldson and Johnson (2011), “this revolving door transfer of teachers from the schools that most need skilled, experienced teachers remains a serious problem” (p. 6). This is a reality that is both practically unsustainable and morally unacceptable.

TFA claims that it prepares recruits to “become lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” (Teach For America, 2013a, p. 1). This often means work outside the

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24 In these instances, “positive outcomes” is referencing student test score data and its connection with teacher efficacy. Although I do not proscribe to the belief that test data is the best indicator of student achievement, it, nevertheless, is a valuable source of information that is highly relevant in the current policy landscape.
classroom via a network of alumni who may or may not continue their work in the education sector. In fact, TFA rates of attrition are consistently high (e.g., Boyd et al., 2009; Mac Iver & Vaughn, 2007; Noell & Gansel, 2009). Because experience has been shown to produce positive outcomes for both TFA and non-TFA teachers alike (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010), TFA’s low retention rates suggest that the organization’s leaders might not stay in teaching long enough to reap the benefits that such experience may offer. As such, its overall theoretical mission may be shortsighted.

TFA explicitly markets itself as an organization capable of placing high quality educators into two-year service commitments in high-need and traditionally hard-to-staff urban and rural

25 According to Kopp (2011), “Our goal isn’t actually to get our people to stay longer than two years, but rather to provide excellent, committed teachers for two years and to build a force of leaders who will work for fundamental change from within education and from positions of influence in every other sector. We know Teach For America shapes the career paths of corps members, as evidenced by the fact that 60% of our alumni are working full time within education and that many more are working to take the pressure off of schools by improving the quality of health and social services in low-income communities. We think this is important because achieving educational excellence and equity will require long-term, sustained leadership within education. At the same time though, we think it’s critical that many of our corps members do enter other sectors, taking with them the commitment and insight that comes from their Teach For America experience so that they can work for the kind of changes in policy and public opinion that are necessary for ed reform to take hold” (as quoted in Tilson, 2011, para. 5).

26 A more detailed discussion of the research relating to TFA’s patterns of retention will be provided in chapter two.

27 According to Vasquez Heilig & Jez (2010), “most studies find that the relatively few TFA teachers who stay long enough to become fully credentialed (typically after two years) appear to do about as well as other similarly experienced credentialed teachers in teaching reading; they do as well as, and sometimes better than, that comparison group in teaching mathematics. However, since more than 50% of TFA teachers leave after two years, and more than 80% leave after three years, it is impossible to know whether these more positive findings for experienced recruits result from additional training and experience or from attrition of TFA teachers who may be less effective” (Executive Summary, para. 4).

28 According to Vasquez Heilig & Jez (2010), “the evidence suggests that districts may benefit from using TFA personnel to fill teacher shortages when the available labor pool consists of temporary or substitute teachers or other novice alternatively and provisionally certified teachers likely to leave in a few years. Nevertheless, if educational leaders plan to use TFA teachers as a solution to the problem of shortages, they should be prepared for constant attrition and the associated costs of ongoing recruitment and training” (Executive Summary, para. 7).
areas. As such, high rates of attrition are to be expected. However, the consequences of teacher attrition, I think, warrant more serious consideration. To be fair, the organization suggests that systemic change does not necessarily require long-term classroom service; rather, classroom teaching will provide two years of experience, which may ultimately provide recruits with a better understanding and deeper concern for the daily realities of the classroom so that they can then contribute more meaningfully towards educational policy, both within the education sector and beyond.

Teacher attrition, then, becomes little more than collateral damage in the preparation of a decision-making elite. However, this approach is largely shortsighted in that it focuses more on the context of the school, not the systemic nature of inequality and how it manifests in educational settings. With the remainder of this chapter, I discuss these concerns through the lens of Ladson-Billings’ (2006a) conception of the “education debt,” paying particular attention to how TFA’s rates of attrition may hinder its ability to produce more long-term educational change. I also problematize the inherent elitism that the organization ultimately espouses and how this mindset may function to deprofessionalize teaching.

Assessing the “Education Debt”

With her American Educational Research Association presidential address, From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools, Ladson-Billings (2006a) challenges the discourse of the “achievement gap” and the ways it has been used to describe the test score gap that exists between white, predominantly middle-class students and their poor and/or non-white peers. For Ladson-Billings “this all-out focus on the

29 The ways in which this particular approach challenges the professionalization of teaching will be taken up later in chapter five.
‘Achievement Gap’ moves us toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem” (p. 4) which manifests: 1) historically in the inequitable practices that have traditionally targeted students of color and of poverty (e.g., Anderson, 1989; Fultz, 1995; Tyack, 2004); 2) economically both in the funding disparities that disproportionately impact schools serving large populations of targeted student groups and in the wealth disparities that have accumulated between, for example, Whites and Blacks; 3) sociopolitically in the extent to which communities of color have been excluded from the democratic process; and 4) morally in our\textsuperscript{30} approval (whether intentional or otherwise) of practices that are overwhelmingly inconsistent with what we know to be right and just. In order to establish more equitable outcomes for targeted student groups, we must actively commit to addressing this debt, in all its manifestations.

**TFA and the “Education Debt”**

TFA represents, at least in theory, just one potential avenue by which to address the sorts of concerns that Ladson-Billings describes. However, the ways in which TFA aims to establish more equitable schooling environments and the specific practices that it espouses, particularly as they pertain to the persistence of its recruits in the education sector, present a serious challenge to the organization’s ability to create more long-term, systemic change. It would seem that what TFA says it does is not entirely consistent with the data that have attempted to assess its outcomes for targeted student groups.

\textsuperscript{30} I use the term “our” to reflect my agreement with Ladson-Billings, who points out that “we want people to take personal responsibility for their behavior, personal responsibility for their health care, personal responsibility for their welfare, and personal responsibility for their education. However, in democratic nations, that personal responsibility must be coupled with social responsibility” (2006a, p. 8).
Historical Debt\textsuperscript{31}

Concluding that the segregation of educational resources provided to Black and White students was inherently unequal, \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} (1954) set the stage for the provision of equal access to key educational opportunities for all students, regardless of race and/or ethnicity. Although it rightly addressed the inherent inequalities of segregation, this landmark legislation also resulted in the ultimate loss of many Black teachers. Black students were compelled to integrate into White schools as a result of the presumably substandard resources provided by their previously segregated facilities, a move that would ultimately contribute to the discursive construction of Black schools, and the teachers and students who populated them, as inherently lacking\textsuperscript{32} (which, itself, sets up an asymmetrical relation of dominance\textsuperscript{33}). This sort of external, top-down intervention typically occurred at the expense of Black teachers who were currently practicing, and so would function to undermine what was at one time considered a “stable, high-status profession for the African American middle class” (Ladson-Billings, 2005, p. 2; see also Giddings, 1984). Although about 50% of Black

\textsuperscript{31} For the sake of consistency, my argument will follow Ladson-Billings’ (2006a) organization of the components of the educational debt: 1) historical; 2) economic; 3) sociopolitical; and 4) moral.

\textsuperscript{32} The ways in which Black teachers and Black schools were targeted as a result of their perceived inadequacy in the aftermath of the Brown decision represents a long and complicated history that has been animated, in part, by what Fultz (1995) identifies as: 1) racist underdevelopment, wherein “a confluence of factors, set in motion by state-sanctioned racism and discrimination, worked in concert to undermine the delivery of educational services to African American children and their families. As a result, African American teaching staffs and classrooms suffered in myriad ways” (p. 406); 2) unrealistic expectations placed upon Black teachers; and 3) “the demands of a mounting African American protest movement which often inadvertently slighted the contributions and accomplishments of African American teachers in order to emphasize the discriminatory neglect and impoverishment of African American education generally,” (p. 421).

\textsuperscript{33} See, e.g., hooks (1994) who writes: “that shift from beloved, all-black schools to white schools where black students were always seen as interlopers, as not really belonging, taught me the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination” (p. 4).
professionals were teachers prior to this legislation, in the nearly twenty years following the ruling almost 40,000 Black educators in seventeen Southern states found themselves without jobs (Evans & Leonard, 2013; Fine, 2004; Irvine, 2002; Madkins, 2011; Tillman, 2004).

Teacher shortages, especially in areas serving large populations of targeted student groups, would remain a serious concern well into the present, thus creating a need for programs like TFA, which was designed to mitigate the harmful effects of these shortages by recruiting individuals into two-year service commitments. At least initially, these efforts seemed to be successful. For example, according to Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2006) in their study of New York teachers, alternatively licensed educators, including TFA teachers, often took positions in traditionally hard-to-staff high-poverty schools or those that had previously been filled by uncertified teachers. Today, however, these shortages are not necessarily being addressed by TFA recruits. In fact, an expanding body of literature points to the placement of TFA teachers outside high-needs areas (Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010), and even to the replacement of veteran teachers by TFA corps members (Miner, 2010). In this way, the organization’s practical materiality may be inconsistent with its stated goals.

An Economic Concern

TFA’s rates of attrition are particularly troubling when coupled with the financial investments in its recruits that are committed by school districts. Finder’s fees, mentoring/induction and professional development investments, as well as taxpayer dollars through AmeriCorps and other federal programs, are going to TFA to fund teachers who, more often than not, are leaving their original placement schools, if not the profession altogether. In many ways, then, the urban and rural school districts that hire TFA recruits may not be reaping the long-term benefits that the program aims to provide. With this section, I outline the public
investments in TFA corps members in an effort to challenge the viability of the program as an acceptable and financially feasible alternative to other licensure options.

Although alternative licensing programs are typically cheaper for individual teachers, the debt burden for the training and support that these teachers receive proportionately falls on other constituencies, including federal, state, and local governments. TFA is no exception. In fact, 29% of the organization’s 2011 annual operating budget was supplied by public funds via local, state, and federal grants, contracts, and fees (Teach For America, 2012a). For example, TFA was recently awarded a $50 million “scale up” grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Investing in Innovation competition to be paid over four years (Teach For America, 2012c). TFA also receives substantial support from AmeriCorps, a federally funded national service organization, in the form of, among other things, financial incentives that serve as powerful recruitment tools for potential corps members. The AmeriCorps education award provides up to $11,100 to TFA recruits ($5,500 for each year of service), which can be used towards student loan repayment and/or future education expenses.

In addition, TFA advertises loan forbearance/paid interest (100% financed by AmeriCorps) for two years of the recruits’ commitments (Teach For America, 2012b). In many ways, then, the AmeriCorps stipend, as well as the paid interest on qualifying student loans, serves as a federally funded “signing bonus” for corps members whose long-term aspirations might not necessarily include teaching (Veltri, 2010, p. 23). Overall, these sorts of investments

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34 In their study of New York teachers, Boyd et al. (2009) found that the financial burdens of alternative pathways into the teaching profession were “substantially less for the individual teacher than the costs of traditional university-based teacher preparation” because the teacher pays less for coursework and is able to work while completing training. However, this also meant increased costs for the city, because districts subsidize the ongoing training of TFA teachers.

35 Certain graduate schools also offer to double the AmeriCorps award, even if the graduate degree is achieved in an area outside of education (Veltri, 2010).
come at a significant public cost, often at the expense of other qualified programs, and so have relevance to policymakers seeking to produce optimal outcomes in the strategic distribution of public resources.

State governments and local school districts, too, have a stake in TFA’s financing with tax dollars. First, TFA receives “finders’ fees” of up to $5,000 from local districts for each recruit who is hired (Veltri, 2010; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010). However, districts continue to maintain human resource departments for other new hires, meaning that they must essentially pay twice for new teachers—the “outsourced costs” of TFA-sponsored recruitment and training, as well as the in-house costs accrued by other district teachers hired (Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2010). This also means that districts would spend more for TFA teachers than the local, state, and federal funds allocated to the organization. When coupled with the already significant financial resources that districts invest in new hires via mentoring/induction, orientation, and professional development programs, the financial costs of TFA attrition are compounded.

In their study of five school districts representing a range of communities, Barnes, Crowe, and Schaefer (2007), found that the actual costs of teacher turnover were substantial, ranging from about $4,000 annually for each teacher leaver in a small, rural district to more than $17,000 in a large, urban district (See also, Breaux & Long, 2003). Because TFA teachers are much more likely than non-TFA teachers to leave their original placement schools and districts (Boyd

36 These estimates include investments in recruitment, hiring incentives, administrative processing, training for new hires (orientation), training for first-time teachers (induction), training for all teachers (professional development), and transfer costs.

37 According to Barnes et al. (2007), “costs of turnover can be easily misinterpreted. A high cost per turnover is not necessarily bad, and a low cost per turnover is not necessarily good. A district that invests heavily in teacher training and support will probably have a high cost per turnover—even when the investment lowers its overall turnover rate and, we hope, its total turnover costs. This is due to the fact that the investments in teaching quality add to the total costs of turnover while also reducing the number of turnovers” (p. 82).
et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Mac Iver, & Vaughn, 2007; Noell & Gansel, 2009), if not the profession altogether, the schools that hire them are particularly vulnerable to these sorts of wasted investments. On this point, I agree with Barnes et al. (2007), who contend that:

Low performing schools rarely close the student achievement gap because they never close the teaching quality gap—they are constantly rebuilding their staff. An inordinate amount of their capital—both human and financial—is consumed by the constant process of hiring and replacing beginning teachers who leave before they have mastered the ability to create a successful learning culture for their students. (p. 4)

As a result, the loss of TFA teachers due to attrition is particularly damaging in that it is primarily the districts (and so, ultimately the taxpayers) that must bear the financial responsibility both for the costs of attrition and for the recruitment, hiring, and training of replacement teachers. Unfortunately, the schools that hire TFA teachers are the same ones that serve student populations who most need quality and long-term solutions.

A Sociopolitical Concern

In a recent article (Anderson, 2013a), I argued that TFA’s consistent use of deficit-informed language to describe the students, families, and communities who experience its corps members prevents the actualization of its mission to mitigate the structures of inequality that persist in our country’s schools. This practice of “blaming the victim,” wherein students (as well

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38 The following discussions borrow from what was first published as: Anderson, A. (2013a). Teach for America and the dangers of deficit thinking. *Critical Education, 4*(11), 28-47.
as families and communities) become targeted and blamed for externally identified inequalities of intellectual competence, motivation, behaviors, and/or cultural differences, ultimately lets the systemic inequities that inform student outcomes off the hook. In many ways, this sort of deficit thinking contributes to the sort of sociopolitical component of the educational debt by excluding families and communities of color from the decision-making processes that inform their students’ access to high quality educational resources. For example, in their national study of kindergarteners, West, Denton, and Reaney (2001) found that the teachers of targeted student groups had a tendency to blame parents for what they perceived to be the inadequate preparation of their children for school.

Additionally, when a student’s perceived deficiencies are presumed the result of parental and/or communal noninvolvement in or antipathy towards their child’s education, his/her background is also targeted (Betsinger, García, & Guerra, 2001; Oakes, 2005). This form of deficit thinking is especially dangerous. Brantlinger (1985) documents the long-term resentment felt by low-income parents when their students experienced the application of disparaging labels, rejection, and alienation from “respectable kids.” On this point, I agree with Ladson-Billings (2006a) who contends that:

Each effort we make toward improving education is counterbalanced by the ongoing and mounting debt that we have accumulated. That debt service manifests itself in the distrust and suspicion about what schools can and will do in communities serving the poor and children of color . . . The magnitude of the education debt erodes that trust [between communities of color and schools] and represents a portion of the debt service
that teachers and administrators pay each year against what they might rightfully invest in helping students advance academically. (p. 9)

Although teacher attitudes are more directly related to student achievement than facilities or funding (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2004), Cummins (2001) argues it is much safer to blame students and families for academic under-performance than to locate and place the blame with the inequitable distribution of resources and educational opportunities. Ultimately, deficit thinking lets the system off the hook, allowing educators to treat difference as deficit instead of prescribing alternative ways to help students learn and to address systemic inequity.

In contrast to deficit-informed educational practices, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) has the capacity to support a more empowered and equitable form of learning for all students, regardless of individual backgrounds. Based on her study of eight successful teachers of African-American students, Ladson-Billings (1995b) defines CRP as a “theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). This model embraces three key goals that have animated her CRP framework: 1) academic success, wherein students are able to demonstrate academic competence through learning (although not at the expense of their cultural identities); 2) cultural competence, wherein the curricular and pedagogical decisions made by teachers are

39 The benefits of culturally relevant teaching and curricular practices, as well as culturally sensitive interpersonal dynamics, have been extensively documented (e.g., Brown, 2003; Civil & Kahn, 2001; Conrad, Gong, & Sipp, 2004; Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Goodwin, 2002; Laughter & Adams, 2012; Michie, 1999; Morrison, 2002; Olsen, 1997).

40 Ladson-Billings (2006b) does not equate learning with standardized test performance, but rather sees it as what “students actually know and are able to do as a result of pedagogical interactions with skilled teachers” (p. 34).
designed to maintain, not undermine, a student’s cultural integrity; and 3) sociopolitical consciousness, which seeks to transcend the tendency towards equating schooling with individual achievement and, instead, provide opportunities for students to “develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 162). For Ladson-Billings (2006b), the goal of instilling in students a sociopolitical consciousness is particularly challenging in that many teachers lack their own, and so may find it difficult to incorporate sociopolitical issues into their classroom praxis. This is a skill that can be cultivated only with time, experience, and careful reflection.

The ways in which TFA’s rates of attrition present a significant challenge to this final sociopolitical element are twofold. First, when recruits leave their original placement schools, if not the profession altogether, they take with them the time and effort invested in the development of the sorts of competencies that Ladson-Billings suggests. In so doing, the students who populate these schools are consistently exposed to new supplies of teachers who may not have had opportunities to meaningfully engage with issues of diversity and who have potentially been fed on a healthy dose of deficit-informed rhetoric. Secondly, the organization contends that its recruits’ experiences within schools for their two-year service commitments can be parlayed into

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41 Different from remaining sensitive to and/or understanding the cultures of targeted student groups, this commitment demands that teachers help “students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture” (Ladson-Billings, 2006b, p. 36; See also, Sleeter, 2012)
42 I do not mean to suggest that sociopolitical consciousness is the inevitable concomitant of teaching in a school that serves students of color and of poverty; on the contrary, this is a skill that requires extensive and active engagement with difficult sociopolitical issues. However, experience with diversity is a significant factor in the development of more inclusive multicultural learning for prospective teachers. For example, Garmon (2001) contends that prospective teachers’ responses to diversity are directly connected to both personal dispositions, as well as individual experiences (see also, Greene, 1992).
other arenas that have the capacity to impact the education sector on a larger scale, i.e. policy, administration, non-profit work, etc. In many ways, this understanding of long-term change is consistent with the sort of top-down model of education reform that has been the subject of much recent critique. For example, in a recent paper that investigated the discursive construction of teacher and student subjectivities via a critical discourse analysis of select popular political and governmental texts, my colleagues and I found that, typically, teachers and students were not only excluded from the policy conversation regarding the form and substance of public schooling, but were actively marginalized (Anderson, Aronson, Ellison, & Fairchild, Under Review). When the impetus for educational reform rests not with the actors who have the most intimate knowledge of the issues facing our schools, efforts to produce more systemic and long-term change can become jeopardized. This particular understanding of educational change, I think, simply recreates existing structures of inequality that function to maintain the status quo.

A Moral Concern

There is more to the moral argument being made here, as well. TFA explicitly caters to individuals who may not be interested in a long-term career in education, as evidenced by its two-year service commitment. In fact, TFA goes so far as to advertise its graduate school and employer partnerships as follows:

As a Teach For America corps member, you’ll develop strengths that are critical to being a successful teacher in a low-income community. These skills are also essential to leadership across many other professions and sectors. We see our corps members’ talent and resolve play out in the classroom and beyond, and so do the exceptional graduate
schools and employers that actively recruit second-year corps members and alumni. (Teach For America, 2013b, para. 1)

This sort of recruitment technique is presumably geared towards those individuals who might not otherwise consider teaching as a profession. But, do we really want individuals who see teaching as a layover on the way to another more fulfilling career responsible for our most under-served student populations? This sort of thinking is particularly troubling. If targeted students are not receiving their share of quality teachers wanting to be there for the long haul (as often happens in low-poverty districts\(^43\)), are they really receiving an equitable education?

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the extent to which TFA is committing to long-term educational change through its corps maintenance practices. Although it consistently touts its desire to “create the systemic changes that will help end educational inequity,” the data, especially concerning teacher attrition, suggest that the organization’s practical application may fall short of its stated goals. With this study, then, I explore the concrete materiality of TFA’s mission by detailing the ways in which the organization is actively preparing its recruits for long-term investments in educational change, both inside the classroom and beyond. I do so through a postcritical ethnographic analysis of the corps experiences of former TFA recruits who are no more than three years removed from the program and whose service was carried out in a

\(^{43}\) The research suggests that there is an inequitable distribution of teacher experience and/or skills between low- and high-poverty schools animated, in particular, by the over-representation of under-certified teachers in low-income and/or high-minority schools (Ingersoll, 2004). This element will be expanded in chapter two.
southeastern state that is currently highlighted in the popular discourse of education reform.\textsuperscript{44} Specifically, I investigate the organization’s pre- and in-service support practices and the extent to which they prepare recruits for a long-term commitment to educational change. The research questions that will guide this dissertation include the following:

1. How are corps members maintained throughout their two-year commitments?
2. What sorts of pre- and in-service support practices do corps members experience?
3. What happens after a corps member’s commitment is satisfied, i.e. post-service plans?
4. For what sorts of post-service careers related to education (and otherwise) do recruits feel prepared?
5. What qualities and/or experiences do “lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” possess and/or pursue and how do TFA’s corps maintenance practices reflect that commitment?

Although many studies have detailed the organization’s measured outcomes in terms of student achievement, retention, teacher quality, etc., none has examined this connection as far as I am aware. Although this analysis represents just one of several aspects that impact the overall efficacy of the organization’s implementation, it does provide one example of the kinds of nuanced understandings about specific elements of teacher education, whether TFA or otherwise, for which I advocate.

\textsuperscript{44} This decision was made in an effort to capture common curricular and state-specific experiences.
Positionality & Critique

In many ways, my story is a lot like those of the individuals whom I interviewed. I had achieved numerous academic successes, having graduated *magna cum laude* with a bachelor’s degree in Classics and Anthropology and a master's degree in Classical Languages. Although I had thought about teaching as a potential career, those thoughts were never very intentional as my plans had always included a Ph.D. Because I loved learning and was passionate about my subject matter, I kept going to school. Only when I was unable to attend a doctoral program in Classics due to financial constraints did I begin to think about the sorts of jobs that my degrees would get me. I quickly realized that those jobs were few, so I started looking for Latin teaching positions and was hired under an alternative licensure program at a public high school in South Carolina. However, I experienced no formal teacher training until December of that first year. As such, I was completely unprepared for the challenges that I faced that first semester. Although I made it work and was viewed as successful by many of my colleagues and administrators, I knew that my lack of adequate training limited my capacity to reach those students who both needed and deserved an expert teacher. I felt that I had been set up to fail.

I am certain that I would have experienced more positive outcomes had I been exposed to more formal training, not only in terms of instructional strategies, curricular resources, and classroom management, but also in the ways in which I might reach those students whose backgrounds differed from my own. I attended high school at a small, private, predominantly White and upper-middle-class suburban school, so my knowledge of other types of learners was limited. When I began teaching, my approach was to mimic the ways that I was taught by my own teachers. I had experienced positive outcomes from these strategies, so I assumed that they

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45 I am raced White, and so privileged, gendered female, and so targeted, and classed with limited material wealth despite status through education.
would be useful in my classroom as well. However, this approach effectively limited my capacity to reach a diverse population of students whose backgrounds and learning styles required strategies that differed from what I had experienced and attempted to convey. The school where I taught was large, public, racially diverse, high poverty, and urban, so I found that there was a significant disconnect between my own perceptions of what teaching should look like and what the students expected and needed. Although I achieved some significant gains, I really wished that I had been exposed to more training in how to establish a more inclusive classroom environment, particularly in light of the significant diversity that our country enjoys. I operate under the assumption that, if we are not giving our teachers the opportunities to learn how to navigate the student diversities represented in the classroom, then we run the risk of alienating targeted student groups.

I also believe that teacher continuity is a significant contributor to positive student outcomes. I was the third Latin teacher in my school in as many years. As such, my students, especially those who were taking advanced levels of Latin, had to continuously readjust to new teaching styles at the same time that they were learning new content. Additionally, I had little knowledge of my students’ backgrounds, where they excelled, and where they struggled, nor did I have the training and/or resources to know where to look to find this information. I felt extremely isolated and disheartened by the sub-standard teaching that I knew my students were receiving. Once I received additional training that December and had a semester of teaching behind me, my practice vastly improved. However, I found out in March that my position would be eliminated as a result of budget cuts. I remember one of my students on the last day of class telling me goodbye and that he would likely never see me again. I really did not have a response, because I knew he was right, and that realization was devastating. I had built
relationships with my students and my colleagues, and I knew that the sense of community that we had established would be undermined by my departure. In the years that have followed, I have reflected much on my experiences in the classroom. Not only did I feel like I had been set up to fail by my lack of adequate training, but I also realized that the overall lack of continuity that my students experienced negatively impacted their learning. As such, I think it is exceedingly important to prepare teachers for the inevitable challenges of the first years and, just as important, to keep them there.

These experiences and understandings have all conditioned my development of this study, as well as my analyses and interpretations of the data. Because I experienced what I believed to be negative outcomes from my first teaching commitment, my perceptions of TFA’s mission reflect those experiences. I worry about the amount of training that TFA recruits experience, and I think that its high rates of attrition are especially problematic. In my efforts to imagine more equitable outcomes for students, I am not convinced that TFA is a viable, long-term solution.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

I include here a general breakdown of the remaining chapters in an effort to guide readers through both the form and substance of this dissertation. With chapter two, I detail the research context of teacher education and TFA, and I problematize the tendency towards ideologically based discussions of the organization’s overall efficacy. Chapter three focuses exclusively on the methodology that I have selected for this study, which I position as postcritical ethnography. With this section, I also include a detailed description of my guiding theoretical framework, which I label postcritical. Chapter four will be devoted to the presentation and preliminary
analysis of the data that I collected, while chapter five includes a fuller discussion of my analyses, as well as the conclusions and implications of this dissertation research.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The extent to which Teach For America (TFA) has been able to achieve an overwhelming degree of legitimacy in public discourse have focused the attention of both educators and researchers alike on the organization’s measured and documented outcomes. However, the research detailing TFA’s impact remains highly contested. Advocates of the organization cite studies that highlight the perceived advantages of TFA’s ability to attract a diverse corps of dedicated young leaders and professionals who are capable of producing at least similar, if not, improved outcomes on student achievement when compared with other similarly experienced teachers. Advocates also point to TFA’s alumni impact, which often extends beyond traditional classroom boundaries all the way up to the policy arena. Critics of TFA, on the other hand, put forth evidence of the program’s deficiencies in such areas as teacher effectiveness, preparation, and retention, as well as overall student devaluation and teacher deprofessionalization. Although this debate has often played out on largely ideological grounds, there exists an expanding body of empirical research that details the organization’s overall efficacy as assessed via numerous sites and strategies of inquiry. With this chapter, I provide a review of this literature as it pertains to both teacher education generally and the TFA experience specifically.

I begin with a brief discussion of the current debates (and accompanying research) in teacher education in an effort to establish the reform context into which Teach For America, as an institution, has been introduced. Next, I outline the arguments both for and against the

organization’s theoretical mission in order to treat the layered complexities of its development as an alternative to other forms of teacher education. I then provide a discussion of the research that details TFA’s measured outcomes, particularly as they relate to student achievement, principal satisfaction, and alumni impact. In an effort to connect the research with the overarching objectives of this study, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of the research literature for long-term educational change, paying particular attention to the ways in which the TFA experience impacts the career trajectories of its recruits.

**Current Debates in Teacher Education**

The meteoric rise of TFA reflects larger concerns over teacher quality and especially how/by whom effective teachers are recruited, selected, prepared, licensed, and retained. To date and for the last twenty years, questions about how and to what extent teacher quality impacts student outcomes have focused the attention of scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and parents on the relative merits of such perceived quality indicators as certification status, academic competency, teacher preparation pathways, teacher experiences both within preparation programs and within schools, and/or teacher background characteristics/dispositions. However, there exists no definitional clarity regarding what exactly constitutes teacher quality, how it matters, and how/by whom it should be assessed (Cochran-Smith, Cannady, Mceachern, Mitchell, Piazza, Power, & Ryan, 2012). In many ways, this debate is animated by overlapping, and at times, competing policy agendas that have wielded the empirical research as a sort of “weapon” either in favor of or against a particular policy option (Cochran-Smith, 2002). With this section, I discuss some of the major controversies that have animated the teacher quality debate in an effort to highlight the layered complexities of the research landscape. To do so, I
rely on Cochran-Smith et al.’s (2012) review and analysis of empirical research relating to teachers’ education and its outcomes. In that review, the authors identify six distinct genres of research that have been implicated in various ways in the political controversies that currently animate the teacher quality debate. As this dissertation deals with TFA specifically, I will focus my efforts on those debates that are particularly relevant to the organization’s development and implementation.

**Teacher certification status and its correlates**

The first research genre, *teacher certification status and its correlates*, includes studies that connect teacher certification status with, for example, student test scores (e.g., Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007; Croninger, Rice, Rathbun, & Nishio, 2007; Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Thoreson, 2001; Easton-Brooks & Davis, 2009; Goldhaber and Brewer, 2000; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Neild, Farley-Ripple, & Byrnes, 2009; Palardy & Rumberger, 2008; Paneque & Barbetta, 2006) in an effort to assess the extent to which teacher preparation and licensure is an acceptable mechanism of quality control. For example, in their nationally representative survey of twelfth graders, Goldhaber and Brewer (2000) found that the students of standard, probationary, or emergency certified teachers performed better in mathematics than those of teachers not certified in the subjects they were teaching or holding private school licensures. The authors also found that the students of emergency certified teachers exhibited outcomes commensurate with those of teachers holding standard credentials, leading them to conclude that, although certification type is “an important determinant of student outcomes” (p. 139), standard certification may not be necessary for all teachers (see also, Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008).

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47 This study examined the 12th grade subset of the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), which collected data from a nationally representative sample of 8th graders, as well as their teachers and parents, who were later resurveyed as 10th graders (1990) and again as 12th graders (1992).
However, Darling-Hammond, Berry, and Thoreson (2001), in their examination of the same data set as that used in the Goldhaber and Brewer (2000) study, note that “most of these [temporary or emergency certified] teachers have qualifications resembling those of teachers with standard certification, and that those who have more teacher training appear to do better in producing student achievement” (p. 57). These findings are echoed by Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002), who compared the student test results of under-certified teachers, including TFA teachers, with fully certified teachers in similar low-income school settings in Arizona (see also, Clotfelter et al., 2007). In general, the data suggest that the combined set of qualifications that are assessed through certification status do seem to matter, though conclusions about how certification matters are limited by the fact that this particular quality indicator does not speak to the many variations that exist between and within teacher preparation programs/certification routes and teacher experiences.

An additional subcategory within this genre connects certification status with teacher distributions across schools and districts (e.g., Goe, 2002; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). The guiding assumption of these studies is that certification status is a legitimate indicator of teacher quality, and so can be used to track the extent to which effective teachers are being equitably distributed. For example, Goe (2002) documents an over-representation of emergency credentialed teachers in low-performing California schools that serve large populations of students of color and of poverty, thus suggesting that targeted student groups are not receiving their fair share of quality teachers. For the authors, this sort of disproportionate distribution of “teacher quality” is an area worthy of policy intervention in that it exacerbates existing

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48 The authors are careful not to suggest that this relationship is causal; rather, they identify an association between certification status and student achievement.
achievement gaps, and so has serious equity implications. Ultimately, studies within this genre speak to the extent to which teacher certification, and consequently the entire regulatory mechanism of teacher preparation and licensure, is an acceptable measure of teacher quality, or if it poses an undue burden on otherwise qualified individuals. As such, they are pertinent to those controversies surrounding, for example, the teacher deregulation/professionalism agenda and/or the specific pathways that produce the most effective teachers.

**Teachers’ educational backgrounds and the teacher workforce**

The second genre, teachers’ educational backgrounds and the teacher workforce, seeks to assess how indicators of teachers’ academic competence, i.e. content knowledge, highest degree earned, standardized test scores, etc., impact such outcomes as student test scores, teacher distribution, and/or preparedness for/persistence in teaching. In general, this genre speaks to the extent to which academic competency serves as an acceptable proxy for teacher quality, and subsequently how the relative merits of specific measures of academic competency can inform policy decisions concerning how best to identify, recruit, support, assess, distribute and retain a high quality teaching force. For example, Kukla-Acevedo (2009) identified a positive relationship between five measures of pre-service teachers’ academic competence in math and the math scores of their fifth-grade students, thus compelling them to conclude that “a high achieving college student is likely to be a high achieving teacher” when all other variables are

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49 Cochran-Smith and Fries (2010) refer to this as the “teacher quality gap.”
50 Proponents of the professionalization agenda, spear-headed in large part by Linda Darling-Hammond, argue for the professionalization of teaching and teacher education, primarily through the establishment of high standards for teacher preparation, licensure, and certification. In contrast, the deregulation agenda aims to dismantle the expanded requirements of teacher preparation and certification, arguing that they (and the institutions that provide them) place undue burdens on otherwise qualified individuals (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001). In many ways, this debate centers on the extent to which teacher preparation makes a difference.
51 Overall GPA, math GPA, math education GPA, math credit hours, and math education credit hours
equal (p. 50). In addition, Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, and Wyckoff (2007) point to a narrowed gap in the distribution of teacher qualifications between high- and low-poverty NY schools since 2000. In light of the fact that “achievement in high-poverty schools has improved and come closer to that of low poverty schools,” the authors indicate that there is a relationship between improved teacher qualifications, especially in high-poverty schools, and the resulting improvement in student achievement (p. 805). However, there exists little consensus regarding what constitutes academic competence (e.g., content, pedagogy, etc.), how and where teachers should acquire it, and how it should be measured/assessed, all questions that are complicated by a general shortage of empirical studies that explicitly connect academic competency with student outcomes.

 Nonetheless, these sorts of studies have been marshaled in debates surrounding institutional recruitment, selection, certification, and accreditation policies. For example, the potential merits/challenges of raising admission standards for teacher preparation programs have been a hot-topic of debate, particularly within the context of the professionalization/deregulation agendas. Although “students are admitted to teacher education programs largely on the basis of grade point average and scores on tests of academic skills” (Zeichner, Grant, Gay, Gillette, Valli, & Villegas, 1998, p. 165), the research connecting such measures with teacher performance is inconsistent, at best (Mikitovics & Crehan, 2002; Gitomer, Latham, & Ziomek, 1999; Ehrenberg and Brewer, 1994; Guyton & Farokhi, 1987). For example, Mikitovics and Crehan (2002) found that passing scores on the Pre-Professional Skills Test were not a significant predictor of student teaching performance ratings, while Guyton and Farokhi (1987) reported a positive relationship

E.g., teacher experience, undergraduate degree-granting institutional rankings, standardized test performance (SAT and state teacher certification exams), certification type and area, and preparation pathway.
between teachers’ college GPAs and performance-based assessments of their teaching. In general, this sort of inconsistency, as well as the overall paucity of research that treats this topic, suggests that quantifiable measures like grades and test scores alone are, perhaps, not the most accurate predictors of a future teacher’s abilities. What is more, efforts to raise admissions standards based on such measures may negatively impact teachers of color who are already under-represented in the teaching profession (e.g., Gitomer, Latham, & Ziomek, 1999).

**Entry pathways into teaching and their consequences**

Labeled *entry pathways into teaching and their consequences*, the third genre of teacher education research that Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) identify includes studies that connect a teacher’s preparation pathway with his/her effectiveness as assessed by indicators like teachers’ sense of preparedness, career trajectories and retention, student test scores, teaching performance, beliefs, distribution, etc. In general, these sorts of studies are designed to ascertain the extent to which specific certification and training programs prepare effective teachers (or if preparation is even necessary) with the ultimate goal of establishing some consensus as to how and by whom teachers should be educated.

This genre’s research has been deployed in highly contentious political debates regarding the relative merits/challenges of particular teacher preparation programs. The current political landscape is saturated with calls for more alternative pathways,53 which typically embrace the

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53 E.g., President George H. W. Bush’s 1988 pre-election platform on education favored the expansion of alternative licensure programs, a sentiment that was echoed by Rod Paige, U.S. Secretary of Education under the George W. Bush administration, in the first report to Congress on teacher quality: “our system allows too many poorly qualified individuals into the classroom while creating barriers for the most talented candidates” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, p. 12). The Obama administration, too, has embraced alternative licensure options. For example, its key reform, the Race to the Top grant program, awards points to states that provide “high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals” including alternative certification programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 9).
perceived advantages of on-the-job training over traditional, university-based certification programs that require extensive pre-service preparation. The guiding logic here is that the many requirements of traditional programs may prevent otherwise qualified individuals from entering the teaching profession. In addition, many supporters of alternative licensure point to the presumed inability of traditional programs to supply a diverse (Feistritzer, 2011; Barclay, Feistritzer, Grip, Haar, Seaton, Sherman, & Stone, 2008; Johnson, Birkeland, & Peske, 2005; Birkeland & Peske, 2004; Feistritzer, 2003; Reunzel, 2002; Clewell & Villegas, 2001; Shen, 1997, 1998a, 1998b) and academically competent (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Ballou & Podgursky, 1998) corps of teachers, particularly in hard-to-staff schools and subject areas (Haberman, 1999; Shen, 1997, 1998a).

In contrast, advocates of extensive pre-service training express concerns over the fact that some of our most under-served students (i.e., those in hard-to-staff schools) are continuously exposed to the least prepared and experienced teachers, whose impact on student achievement is questionable (Clotfelter et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Vasquez Heilig, 2005; Fetler, 1999; Goe, 2002; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001) and whose rates of attrition may be higher than their traditionally prepared counterparts (e.g., TFA). As this particular genre speaks to one of the more pronounced debates regarding teacher quality, I provide below a level of detail not seen in my discussions of the remaining five genres so that I might adequately

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54 Alternative licensure options are characteristically difficult to define as a result of the wide variation in the types of programs available. Adelman (1986) defines alternative certification as “those teacher education programs that enroll noncertified individuals with at least a bachelor’s degree offering shortcuts, special assistance, or unique curricula leading to eligibility for a standard teaching credential” (p. 2). Additionally, according to Zumwalt (1996), “alternative certification eases entry requirements, minimizes preparation needed prior to paid teaching, and emphasizes on-the-job training” (p. 40).
address some of the major complexities of the issue. Specifically, I will discuss this research as it concerns student achievement, teacher distribution, and rates of retention, as these particular indicators are often cited in larger reform debates. Although not included in Cochran-Smith et al.’s (2012) analysis of the research terrain, I also provide a brief discussion of research related to teacher demographics in an effort to expand on some major controversies surrounding teacher recruitment/selection practices. These particular elements are also consistently represented in research designed to assess the overall efficacy of TFA, which will be addressed in the following section.

**Student achievement.**

The research connecting particular teacher preparation pathways with student achievement reveals a mixed picture. In many ways, this is the result of the tremendous variation that exists between and within various training and licensure routes, as well as the overall lack of definitional clarity and consistency in the research regarding specific programmatic elements. These sorts of challenges, of course, make the accumulation of comprehensive data detailing the overall efficacy of individual pathways exceedingly difficult. Despite these challenges, however, the general research consensus seems to be that, although teachers admitted to highly-selective alternative licensure programs (e.g., TFA) may produce outcomes commensurate with or even slightly better than similarly prepared and experienced teachers, especially in Math (e.g. Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004; Glazerman, Mayer, & Decker, 2006; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001), they typically under-perform when compared with graduates of traditional preparation programs (e.g., Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2006; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Laczko-  

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55 Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) only include studies that explicitly connect teachers’ education or licensure with specific post-preparation outcomes.
Kerr & Berliner, 2002). For example, using teacher and student data from Houston, TX, Darlington-Hammond et al. (2005)\(^{56}\) find that:

Certified teachers consistently produce significantly stronger student gains than do uncertified teachers. Alternatively certified teachers are also generally less effective than certified teachers. These findings hold for TFA recruits as well as others. Controlling for teacher experience, degrees, and student characteristics, uncertified TFA recruits are less effective than certified teachers, and perform about as well as other uncertified teachers. (p. 1)\(^{57}\)

Additionally, Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2006), based on their study of student and teacher data in New York City, find that “when compared to College Recommended teachers alternate route teachers often provide smaller gains in student achievement, at least initially” (p. 25). More often than not, however, this distinction only holds for novice teachers. Under-certified teachers who eventually achieve full teacher certification typically perform about as well as other certified teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). As such, experience, too,

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\(^{56}\) Here, Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) replicate the results of a study conducted by Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque (2001) that was based on an analysis of elementary and middle school student and teacher data for the Houston Independent School District.

\(^{57}\) This finding represents a significant departure from the Raymond et al. (2001) and the Decker, Mayer, and Glazerman (2004) studies, both of which found that TFA-taught students achieved about as well as or better than the students of similarly certified teachers in similar schools. However, as Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) point out, “in both of these studies the comparison group teachers were also disproportionately untrained and uncertified teachers. Neither of these studies explicitly compared TFA teachers to teachers with standard training and certification, controlling for other student, teacher, and school variables” (p. 3). As such, the research seems to suggest that, although TFA teachers may produce outcomes commensurate with, or in some cases better than, other similarly under-certified and under-experienced teachers, they do not outperform certified teachers, at least not initially.
plays a role in a teacher’s ability to produce positive student achievement outcomes (e.g., Clotfelter et al., 2007). As a result, patterns of retention become particularly key in the development of a highly effective corps of teachers.

**Patterns of retention.**

Teacher attrition continues to be a serious problem in the U.S., especially for students of color and of poverty. Donaldson & Johnson (2011) found that, whereas 14% of teachers in low-poverty settings leave their schools every year, a percentage that is already high among new teachers, 21% of teachers in high-poverty settings leave their schools annually. Because novice teachers typically fill these vacancies, students, especially those in high-poverty settings, often experience a “revolving door transfer” of under-prepared and under-experienced teachers (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011, p. 6). In other words, attrition seems to have its greatest impact on the low-income, high-minority schools that most need experienced and effective teachers.

In general, the research on retention for both traditional and alternative certification programs is conflicting. Teachers licensed through alternative programs seem to yield retention rates that are comparable to, or even slightly better than, those who are traditionally licensed (Tai, Liu, & Fan, 2006; Kane et al., 2008, Clewell & Villegas, 2001; Davis, Higdon, Resta, & Latiolais, 2001). In their large-scale study of the 1999-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the 2000-2001 Teacher Follow-Up Survey (TFS), Tai et al. (2006) found that, after controlling for variables like earnings, job satisfaction, salary satisfaction and years at current school, alternatively certified teachers were no more likely to change schools or leave teaching than their traditionally certified counterparts. In addition, in their survey of three cohorts (n=72)

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58 According to a study by the National Center for Education Statistics (2000), 20% of teachers in high-poverty schools have three or fewer years of teaching experience, compared with 11% in low-poverty schools.
from Texas’ Teacher Fellows Program, Davis et al. (2001) found that all members from the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 cohorts were teaching as of the 2000-01 school year and that 83% of the 1997-98 cohort was still teaching. However, these findings seem to be more dependent on the particulars of the individual program than alternative programs as a whole (e.g., Wilson et al., 2001). For example, based on their study of alternatively certified New York City teachers over a ten-year period, Boyd, Dunlop, Lankford, Loeb, Mahler, O’Brien, and Wyckoff (2012), found that traditionally certified teachers had the lowest attrition rate throughout the period of inquiry. What is more, several earlier studies point to high drop-out/attrition rates for alternatively certified teachers (Shen, 1997, 1998a, 1998b; Houston, Marshall, & McDavid, 1993; Guyton, Fox, & Sisk, 1991; Stoddart, 1990). Because there is so much variation in the forms adopted by alternative licensure programs, the research is inconclusive at best. In general, retention rates seem to reflect the extent to which participants have received adequate training and support.

**Teacher distribution.**

Regarding hard-to-staff schools and critical subject areas, Shen (1997) found that alternatively certified teachers (37.8%) were more likely than those who were traditionally certified (26.8%) to teach in schools serving large populations of minority students (more than 50%) (see also, Shen, 1998a, 1998b). Shen (1997) also found that teachers with bachelor’s degrees in mathematics, science, or engineering were more likely to have achieved certification through alternative routes and that 19.2% of alternatively licensed teachers taught mathematics or science, compared with only 13.5% of traditionally licensed teachers. Although these findings suggest that alternative programs have been able to fill those vacancies for which they were designed, they should not be taken as clear indicators of the overall success of these programs. For example, although alternatively certified teachers may enjoy greater representation in
schools serving large populations of students with minority group status, questions surrounding their overall effectiveness and/or intentions to remain in those schools further complicate the picture.

**Teacher demographics.**

At the same time that our K-12 student populations are becoming more and more racially and linguistically diverse, our teaching force remains predominantly white and monolingual English-speaking,⁵⁹ a demographic divide that has serious implications for students, teachers, and teacher education programs (Gay & Howard, 2000; Feistritzer, 2011; NCES, 2012; Goodwin, 2002; Sleeter, 2001, 2008; Gay, 2003, 2006). Although the advantages of a multicultural teaching force have been well documented (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005; Clewell, Puma, & McKay, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sleeter, 2001), many teacher preparation programs have been rather limited in their ability to attract a more diverse population of prospective teachers. Despite this general trend, however, alternative licensure programs have been somewhat successful in their attempts to attract a more diverse pool of applicants (Feistritzer, 2011; Barclay, Feistritzer, Grip, Haar, Seaton, Sherman, & Stone, 2008; Johnson,

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⁵⁹ According to their analyses of U.S. Department of Education data, Gay & Howard (2000) found that “86% of all elementary and secondary teachers are European Americans. The number of African American teachers has declined from a high of 12% in 1970 to 7% in 1998. The number of Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander American teachers is increasing slightly, but the percentages are still very small (approximately 5% and 1%, respectively). Native Americans comprise less than 1% of the national teaching force. Student enrollments are growing in the opposite direction racially. Sixty-four percent of K-12 students are European American. The other 36% are distributed accordingly among groups of color: 17% African American, 14% Latinos, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander Americans, and 1% Native Americans/Alaskans (U.S. Department of Education, 1999a, 1999b)” (pp. 1-2). More recent statistics indicate similar trends. The 2011 demographic breakdown of teachers was: 84% White; 7% Black; 6% Hispanic; and 4% Other (Feistritzer, 2011), while public primary and secondary student enrollments in the Fall of 2010 were distributed as follows: 52.5% White; 16% Black; 23.1% Hispanic; 4.6% Asian; 0.3% Pacific Islander; 1.1% American Indian/Alaska Native; and 2.4% two or more races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012, Table 94).

For example, based on their study of 40 Pathways to Teaching Careers preparation programs, Clewell and Villegas (2001) found that a majority of the participants were from minority groups. In addition, Shen (1998b), in his analysis of NCES data from 1984 to 1994, found that 21% of alternatively certified teachers identified with racial or ethnic minority groups, compared with only 13% of traditionally certified teachers. Overall, these findings suggest that alternative programs have made significant contributions to the diversity of our nation’s teaching force. However, questions of quality, particularly in terms of impact on student achievement and retention, continue to animate the reform landscape.

**Discussion.**

Although current conversations typically pit alternative and traditional programs against one another (often on ideological, not empirical, grounds), this discussion points to the challenges associated with these sorts of stark distinctions. As indicated in the literature, there seems to be as much variation within each pathway as there is between them (see, for example, Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009). As a result, researchers must be very careful in their conclusions about the overall efficacy of each program form, something that many evaluations consistently get wrong. In terms of student achievement, the data suggest not only that teacher education matters, but also that extensive preparation seems to have a positive impact. This holds for both traditional and alternative licensure programs. In terms of retention, research comparing traditional and alternative programs is mixed, though the variations in retention rates seem more the result of variation between individual programs, as opposed to the particular certification pathway. Finally, the research detailing the efficacy of each licensure
option in terms of teacher recruitment and selection suggests that alternative programs may be uniquely capable of attracting teacher candidates who are both more diverse and more likely to work in hard-to-staff schools and subjects. However, questions of quality and retention continue to complicate the larger picture. Overall, this discussion has shown that each pathway, and each individual program within that particular pathway, has its own unique strengths and weaknesses. As a result, there is a need for more nuanced conversations about the specific elements of teacher preparation programs, whether traditional or alternative, that have the capacity to better prepare teachers for diverse classrooms, and thus to lay the foundation for more excellent and equitable schools.

**Teacher preparation programs and their graduates**

The fourth genre of research, *teacher preparation programs and their graduates*, identified by Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) investigates relationships between a teacher’s specific preparation program (typically university-based) and various post-preparation outcomes (e.g. teacher perceptions, performance, and/or career trajectories) in an effort to provide a level of accountability for pre-service teacher education, primarily at the institutional level. In general these studies aim to document, for example, how and to what extent the mission and curricular goals of a particular preparation program are enacted in the teaching practice of its graduates, whether graduates feel adequately prepared for the concrete realities of teaching, how successful they are as teachers (i.e. teacher performance), and/or how long they remain in the classroom. Interestingly, the largest subgroup of studies in this genre deals primarily with teachers’ career paths via examinations of the retention, attrition, and migration patterns of program graduates.

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60 This focus on the local stands in marked contrast to the studies of the first three research genres, which typically inform federal and state policy concerns related to teacher quality and teacher education (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012).
For example, Freedman & Appleman (2009), in their five-year, longitudinal study of graduates from a training program designed to prepare teachers to work in high-poverty, and typically low-performing, urban schools, investigate how various influences impact graduates’ rates of retention and career trajectories (see also, Freedman & Appleman, 2008). This study, as well as others within this particular subfield, point to teacher retention as a key goal of (typically university-based) preparation programs, a commitment that stands in marked contrast to programs like TFA, which require only a two-year service commitment.\(^{61}\)

In general, these studies position teacher preparation primarily as “a learning problem,” as opposed to a policy problem, in that they aim to investigate how teachers’ knowledge and beliefs change over time and in varying contexts (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005). In this way, they operate under the assumption that the dynamic interplay between a teacher’s background and the training that he/she receives via teacher education will ultimately condition his/her beliefs about teaching and learning, classroom practice, sense of preparedness, and persistence in teaching. As such, these studies are often marshaled in debates about the content/pedagogical knowledge that quality teachers should receive before entering the classroom, as well as how and by whom this training should be provided.

**Teacher preparation and learning to teach in the early career years**

The fifth genre of research includes studies that investigate the experiences of teachers during and soon after their training. Although related to the fourth genre of research, whose studies investigate the relative efficacy of individual, usually university-based training programs, this genre takes a more general approach by focusing on how the practices and/or dispositions that teachers develop in their training programs connect with various school-based

\(^{61}\) Studies evaluating the success of Teach For America in keeping its candidates in the classroom are fairly consistent and negative (see chapter one and below).
responsibilities, both related to teaching and otherwise. In this way, these studies also address the impact of varying school contexts by examining not only what teachers know and learn in their pre-service training, but also how they apply that knowledge as novice teachers.

Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) identify two subgroups within this genre. The first aims to assess how novice teachers’ pedagogical practices are impacted by various school-level characteristics. For example, Hoy and Spero (2005), using multiple quantitative measures to track changes in teachers’ efficacy in the early career years, find that “changes in efficacy during the first year of teaching were related to the level of support received” (p. 343). As an example of the second subgroup, which looks at pedagogical practices in specific areas, Athanases and de Oliveira (2007) examine, via a five-year self-study of a California university-based teacher credentialing program, how pre-service teachers were prepared to advocate for equity in their training program and how that preparation played out in the classroom during graduates’ early career years.

In general, this genre of research is designed to broaden our understanding of how a myriad of factors like teacher preparation (and on-the-job training in the case of some alternative licensure pathways), pedagogical knowledge, classroom experiences, etc. shape teachers’ practices, beliefs, and attitudes in the context of specific school-level sites. As such, these studies provide a more nuanced perspective of teaching and learning to teach that goes beyond the sorts of crude measures of teacher efficacy (e.g., student test scores) that often animate the reform landscape. In this way, this genre’s research has relevance for teacher education policy at both institutional and professional levels.
Life histories and teachers’ beliefs and practices

The final and smallest genre of research, life histories and teachers’ beliefs and practices, examines how teachers’ individual backgrounds and beliefs impact their teaching practice, typically in the context of schools that serve large populations of targeted student groups. As a result, these sorts of studies speak to the ways in which teachers’ lived experience shapes their initiation into the profession beyond the level of individual training programs or school contexts, as was the case with the fourth and fifth genres of research. For example, Urrieta (2007) documents “how twenty-four Mexican Americans came to produce Chicana/o Activist Educator identities” (p. 117). Because this genre investigates how a teacher’s personal experiences can influence his/her development, practice, and/or career trajectories, it has the capacity to inform, for example, the recruitment and selection policies of individual preparation programs, as well as how various programmatic features of teacher education interact with teachers’ unique identities.

Discussion

With these discussions, I have highlighted the ways in which the research terrain has been implicated in some of the major controversies at the forefront of both political and popular education reform discourses. Although the current reform landscape is typically saturated with ideological arguments regarding not only what constitutes teacher quality, but also what and how specific programmatic elements can best facilitate the initiation of teachers into our nation’s classrooms, an expanding literature of research does treat the layered complexities of these debates. However, the competing ways in which various political agendas have constructed, interpreted and marshaled the research suggest the need for more nuanced understandings of teacher quality and education.
With this dissertation, I aim to contribute to this body of research by outlining how one preparation program (TFA) impacts the career trajectories of its recruits. This work is most closely aligned with the fourth genre of research identified by Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) in that it aims to assess how TFA recruits are carrying out the mission of the organization to “create the systemic changes that will help end educational inequity” by preparing “lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” (Teach For America, 2013a, p. 1). Through an ethnographic investigation of the lived experiences of TFA alumni, I explore questions like what constitutes systemic change, who has the primary responsibility for accomplishing it, what qualities and/or experiences do “lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” possess and/or pursue, and how do TFA’s corps maintenance practices reflect that commitment? As such, I explore how the TFA experience engenders in its recruits the desire/skills to contribute to long-term educational change, primarily through the career trajectories of its alumni.

**TFA’s Theoretical Mission**

TFA represents a unique example of how these debates have played out in larger public and political discourses, as it encompasses several of the major controversies that have informed the reform landscape. Specifically, TFA, as an institution, speaks to: 1) the professionalization/deregulation agenda via its provision of limited pre-service training; 2) the controversies surrounding alternative licensure generally, as it represents one example of a highly selective alternative licensure pathway that has been designed to compete with traditional preparation programs; 3) the debate surrounding the academic preparation of teachers (e.g. content/pedagogy); and 4) the distribution of teacher quality, as TFA exclusively recruits
teachers into hard-to-staff, and typically low-performing, schools. With this section, I explore some of these debates through the lens of TFA’s theoretical mission (as opposed to its practical materiality). I provide a general discussion of the arguments both for and against the organization in an effort to treat the ways in which TFA has been introduced into the reform vocabulary as a legitimate alternative to other licensure pathways.

**Support**

Proponents of TFA contend that the program attracts academically strong and dedicated college graduates who might not require the extensive preparation required of traditional licensure programs and who might not otherwise consider teaching as a profession, especially in high-poverty urban and rural schools. Ballou and Podgursky (1998) contend that there is no evidence to suggest that formal teacher certification programs produce more qualified teachers, and that the expansion of these programs’ certification policies may discourage interested and able individuals from entering the profession.62 In addition, Raymond and Fletcher (2002) suggest,

TFA corps members are an admittedly select group of college graduates, culled from the finest universities and often performing near the top of their class. These are not the types of students who ordinarily go into teaching. It’s possible that traditional certification programs and pedagogical training are less necessary for them than they are for the typical teacher. (p. 68)63

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62 Questions about teacher professionalism will be discussed at length in chapter five.
63 This sort of elitism will be problematized at length in chapter five.
Because TFA teachers are academically strong and dedicated college graduates often with extensive records of leadership, they may not have a need for extended teacher preparation. As such, the substantial requirements imposed by traditional teacher certification programs may not produce teachers who are more qualified than their TFA counterparts, and they may even discourage individuals who might otherwise become successful teachers from entering the profession.

**Critique**

Opponents contend that TFA’s emphasis on general intelligence and leadership does not provide corps members with adequate preparation in pedagogy, child development theories, and classroom management. In her eight-year ethnographic study of 300 TFA corps members, Veltri (2008) concluded that TFA teachers “lacked pedagogy, school law, child and adolescent development knowledge, and realistic clinical experiences in classrooms” (p. 512). What is more, Glazerman et al. (2006) found that “TFA teachers were significantly more likely [than

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64 See, for example, Boyd et al. (2007), who find that “achievement in high-poverty schools has improved and come closer to that of low poverty schools,” (p. 805). Because TFA teachers have, on average, stronger test scores and prior academic experiences than those of other teachers and because TFA teachers are disproportionately placed in high-poverty schools, this finding suggests that the academic strengths of TFA teachers have helped to close the gap between the distributions of teacher qualifications in high- and low-poverty schools, which may contribute to higher student achievement in high-poverty urban and rural schools.

65 According to Farr (2010/2011), “Our most effective teachers show that great teaching is leadership. Although excellent core knowledge, instructional strategies, content pedagogy, and classroom management are all essential to successful teaching, what most differentiates the great from the good are the leadership principles that govern how the teacher employs those skills” (para. 17).

66 Darling-Hammond (1994) suggests that, “TFA candidates often have difficulty with curriculum development, pedagogical content knowledge, students’ differing learning styles, classroom management, and student motivation” (p. 27). Whereas previously TFA had embraced the perceived advantages of extensive content-based preparation in its recruits, its current emphasis is primarily on its corps members’ demonstrated leadership skills. However, critics continue to point to the inadequate preparation experienced by corps members, thus suggesting that neither content knowledge, nor extensive records of leadership, alone are sufficient to prepare effective teachers.
non-TFA teachers teaching similar students in similar environments] to report that student disruptions and physical conflicts among students in their classrooms were a ‘serious’ problem” (p. 92). As such, TFA’s assumption that academic success and leadership skills alone may dictate successful teaching and the program’s provision of limited training in the development and implementation of effective learning strategies may do more harm than good. In addition, this preference for limited teacher training may function to devalue students and demean the teaching profession as a whole. The limited training offered to new TFA corps members exposes already targeted students to teachers who may not have the capacity to manage their unique challenges. Considering the impact that even one year of ineffective teaching can have on a student, TFA may devalue the very students whom it purports to help. What is more, the organization’s perceived disregard for the effort required to teach students well suggests that anyone with a record of academic excellence and leadership, as well as a desire to “make a difference,” can do it. Critics point to the ways in which the missionary mentality embraced by TFA treats teaching as a “Peace-Corps style rescue mission rather than a true profession” (Raymond & Fletcher, 2002, p. 64; see also, Darling-Hammond, 1994). This sort of altruistic sentiment suggests that good teaching becomes not so much a function of extensive preparation, but of the unique talents of dedicated individuals, thus minimizing the effort and dedication required to become a teacher and devaluing teaching as a profession.

**TFA’s Practical Materiality: Outcomes-based Research**

With this section, I provide a review of literature that treats TFA’s measured outcomes. Specifically, I address TFA’s impact on such measures as student achievement, principal

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67 A majority of this literature is included in TFA’s summary of research, which can be found at: https://www.teachforamerica.org/sites/default/files/what_the_research_says_oct2013.pdf.
satisfaction, and alumni impact. I include reviews of both peer-reviewed research, as well as various sponsored research in an effort to provide a full analysis of TFA’s overall efficacy.

**Student Achievement**

**Peer-reviewed research.**

Program supporters have shown that TFA teachers have produced similar, if not improved, educational outcomes for their students when compared with other similarly experienced teachers in similar schools (Boyd et al., 2006; Clark, Chiang, Silva, McConnell, Sonnenfeld, Erbe, & Puma, 2013; Decker et al., 2004; Glazerman et al., 2006; Henry, Purtell, Bastian, Fortner, Thompson, Campbell, & Patterson, 2014; Raymond et al., 2001). For example, Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque (2001), using elementary and middle school student and teacher data for the Houston Independent School District, found that TFA teachers were at least as good as traditionally certified teachers, especially in mathematics. Similarly, Decker, Mayer, and Glazerman (2004), in the first national evaluation of the organization, identified TFA teachers’ positive impact on math achievement and similar impact on reading achievement when they compared TFA teachers with non-TFA novice and veteran teachers teaching similar students in the same environment. These studies suggest that TFA teachers may produce comparable or better gains in student learning, particularly in mathematics.

Critics of TFA contend that, when compared with certified teachers, TFA teachers are generally less effective. For example, the Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) study of teacher and

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68 See also, Glazerman et al. (2006).
69 Here, Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) replicate the results of a study conducted by Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque (2001) that was based on an analysis of elementary and middle school student and teacher data for the Houston Independent School District. The authors found that TFA teachers were at least as good as traditionally certified teachers, especially in mathematics. In the Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) study, however, the researchers “go beyond their [Raymond et al. (2001)] analyses to examine a wider range of achievement measures over a
student data from Houston, TX, find that “controlling for teacher experience, degrees, and student characteristics, uncertified TFA recruits are less effective than certified teachers, and perform about as well as other uncertified teachers” (p. 1). Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002), who compared the student test results of under-certified teachers, including TFA teachers, with fully certified teachers in similar low-income school settings in Arizona produce similar results.

These findings represent a significant departure from the Raymond et al. (2001) and the Decker et al. (2004) studies, both of which found that TFA-taught students achieved about as well as or better than the students of similarly certified teachers in similar schools. However, as Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) point out, “in both of these studies the comparison group teachers were also disproportionately untrained and uncertified teachers. Neither of these studies explicitly compared TFA teachers to teachers with standard training and certification, controlling for other student, teacher, and school variables” (p. 3). In fact, the only study finding that TFA teachers outperformed more experienced and fully certified teachers (Xu, Hannaway, & Taylor, 2011) was critiqued for not linking students with the teacher who taught them (What Works Clearinghouse, 2008), thus bringing into question the overall validity of that outcome. As such, the research seems to suggest that, although TFA teachers may produce outcomes commensurate with, or in some cases better than, other similarly under-certified and under-experienced teachers, they typically do not outperform certified teachers, at least not initially. Once TFA teachers complete the requisite coursework for full teacher certification, they perform about as well as other certified teachers.\(^{70}\)

\(^{70}\) According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2005), “TFA recruits who become certified after 2 or 3 years do about as well as other certified teachers in supporting student achievement gains; however, nearly all of them leave within three years” (p. 2).
Non-peer-reviewed research.

Several sponsored studies have assessed the overall instructional impact of TFA teachers on student achievement outcomes. The findings of these studies are largely consistent with the peer-reviewed research described above. For example, in their analysis of national student test data, Antecol, Eren, and Ozbeklik (2013) find that TFA teachers produce positive and statistically significant gains in student math achievement. Comparing TFA teachers with other similarly experienced teachers in North Carolina (Henry, Thompson, Bastian, Campbell, Patterson, & Chapman, 2012; Henry, Thompson, Bastian, Fortner, Kershaw, Purtell, & Zulli, 2010; Schoeneberger, 2011; Schoeneberger, Dever, & Tingle, 2009), Louisiana (Noell & Gansle, 2009), Los Angeles (Strategic Data Project, 2012), Tennessee (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2010; 2011; 2012), and Texas (Turner, Goodman, Adachi, Brite, & Decker, 2012; Urdegar, 2011), researchers find that TFA teachers typically outperform other novice teachers (both traditionally and alternatively certified), particularly in Math.

The results are mixed, however, when comparing TFA teachers to other more experienced teachers (Noell & Gansle, 2009; Schoeneberger, 2011; Schoeneberger et al., 2009; Tennessee State Board of Education, 2010; 2011; 2012). Additionally, these results are complicated by the fact that many schools where TFA teachers are placed hire a disproportionate amount of under-certified teachers compared with non-TFA placement schools, making generalizations about different teaching pools in other school settings exceedingly difficult. For example, Schoeneberger (2011) and Schoeneberger et al. (2009) find that TFA teachers underperform when compared with teachers teaching in non-TFA placement schools in Charlotte, NC. What is more, each of these studies has significant methodological flaws, making broad

71 The researchers revisit the data set used in the Decker et al. (2004) Mathematica study.
generalizations about TFA’s overall instructional impact problematic at best (see, e.g. Kovaks & Slate-Young, 2013). In many ways, then, TFA’s contention that “the most methodologically compelling research finds that corps members outperform both novice and experienced teachers in the same schools” is likely inflated, particularly in light of the absence of peer review, a widely accepted mechanism of quality control. These limitations aside, the research described here suggests that TFA teachers may positively impact student achievement outcomes, especially in Math, though questions of retention continue to complicate the larger picture.

Patterns of Retention

As introduced in chapter one, the data on TFA retention rates are largely consistent and negative. Although TFA boasts that 63% of its alumni continue working in education, almost half of whom are classroom teachers (Teach For America, 2013a), its survey response rate of around 70% distorts the overall picture. According to the Raymond et al. (2001) study of beginning and veteran teachers in Houston public schools, TFA teachers were more likely than other novice teachers to remain teaching in the district for at least three years. However, in their expanded study of the same data set, Darling-Hammond et al. (2005), found that “the comparison group teachers [in the Raymond et al. (2001) study] were also disproportionately untrained and uncertified teachers” thus limiting the potential for accurate comparisons to

72 Kovaks and Slate-Young (2013) point to the necessity of peer review to counter what they identify as flawed “science” in TFA’s research webpage. In contrast, TFA contends that “policymakers should take a broader view of evidence [than peer-reviewed publications alone] for two reasons. First, researchers working under contract or for public agencies have no stake in peer review, but they have incentives nonetheless to provide intellectually honest, high quality work. Second, there is considerable variation in the caliber of work acceptable to peer-reviewed research journals concerned with education” (Teach For America, 2014, p. 3).
traditionally certified teachers (p. 3). In general, the research points to the high attrition rates of TFA corps members.

Boyd et al. (2009), in their study of New York teachers, found that attrition rates were higher for TFA teachers than for both traditionally certified and temporarily licensed teachers. For example, the attrition rate of TFA corps members (58.8%) was nearly triple that of College Recommending teachers (19.1%) and double that of other alternatively certified teachers (29.6%) by their second year of service. What is more, the researchers found that, “by the conclusion of the fourth year, nearly 80 percent of TFA teachers have left teaching in New York City public schools, while fewer than 10 percent remain in their original schools” (p. 21).

Similar results were found in Houston (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005), North Carolina (Henry et al., 2012), New York (Kane et al., 2008), Baltimore (Mac Iver & Vaughn, 2007), Louisiana (Noell & Gansle, 2009), and Los Angeles (Strategic Data Project, 2012). When coupled with the reality that teacher effectiveness improves with experience (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2005), these disproportionately high rates of attrition are especially problematic. Because TFA teachers leave at the very stage when their practice is likely most improved, students in TFA placement schools are continuously exposed to under-experienced teachers, and their schools are constantly investing in staff training and development. In terms of long-term impact on student achievement, then, TFA’s mission may be short-sighted.

**Principal Satisfaction**

Although the instructional impact of TFA teachers on student outcomes is typically based on test scores and value-added measures of achievement, principal satisfaction data represents an

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73 Compared with 31.4% of College Recommending teachers
74 For Kane et al. (2008), the gains in student learning compensate for the continual turnover of TFA teachers. However, as Vasquez Heilig and Jez (2010) point out, this finding is confusing given that TFA teachers only slightly outperformed credentialed teachers in math.
expanding body of literature that aims to assess overall teacher quality. In 2011 and 2013, TFA commissioned national principal surveys that point to high levels of general satisfaction (McCann, Turner, & White, 2013; Turner, Romash, & White, 2011).\(^{75}\) It is important to note, however, that, because principals who have had poor experiences with TFA teachers are not likely to continue hiring them if they have control over hiring practices,\(^{76}\) the sample is likely already biased. Additionally, TFA placement schools hire a disproportionate amount of under-certified and under-experienced teachers, making broad comparisons between TFA and non-TFA teachers exceedingly unreliable.\(^{77}\) Each of these studies also had relatively low response rates (68% and 66% respectively), thus complicating the overall findings.

**Alumni Impact**

TFA envisions a corps of change agents who work to close achievement gaps on both micro (i.e., the classroom) and macro (i.e., policy) levels. As such, the work of its alumni has become a key selling point for the organization. Specifically, it cites three studies that assess how the TFA experience might condition the attitudes and post-service activities of former corps members. Based on their survey of former TFA applicants,\(^{78}\) Dobbie and Fryer (2011) find that “participating in Teach For America increases racial tolerance, makes individuals more optimistic about the life chances of poor children, and makes them more likely to work in education” (abstract). However, McAdam and Brandt (2009), based on their analyses of survey data from all accepted applicants to TFA from 1993 to 1998, find that, although graduates

\(^{75}\) Neither of these studies experienced peer-review.

\(^{76}\) Many districts have hiring contracts with TFA, so principals may not have complete authority over the decision to hire TFA recruits.

\(^{77}\) These reports did not extend to principals with stronger staffs, who often refuse to hire TFA teachers.

\(^{78}\) A response rate of about 30% and the absence of peer-review limit the study’s overall validity.
manifest higher attitudinal differences on various measures of civic commitment, those differences are not typically reflected in actual civic behavior.  

In terms of how TFA alumni impact the education sector via their post-service careers, Higgins, Hess, Weiner, and Robison (2011) identify an over-representation of TFA alumni among the founders and top management team (TMT) members of nationally recognizable entrepreneurial education organizations. However, the authors do not speculate on any particular explanation for this over-representation, suggesting the need for future research:

Sorting out the impact of TFA acculturation and training from its success as a talent identifier will require additional research that examines the alumni’s career expectations and decisions over time, with an eye to their experiences during and after their corps engagement with TFA. (p. 25)

It is these experiences that this dissertation explores. I investigate how TFA impacts the career trajectories of its recruits in an effort not only to distinguish the TFA experience from, for example, the organization’s selection criteria and/or the institutional connections that it facilitates, but also to shed light on exactly what constitutes educational change, where it happens, and who has the capacity to deliver it.

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79 The researchers find that “graduates lag behind non-matriculants in current service activity and generally trail both non-matriculants and drop-outs in self-reported participation in five other forms of civic/political activity measured in the study. Graduates also vote at lower rates than the other two groups. Finally, fewer graduates report employment in ‘pro-social’ jobs than either non-matriculants or drop-outs” (p. 945).

80 In an effort to assess the extent to which TFA’s selection model predicts teachers who will positively impact student achievement, Dobbie (2011) finds that “a teacher’s prior achievement, leadership experience, and perseverance are associated with student gains in math. Leadership experience and commitment to the TFA mission are associated with gains in English. The TFA admissions measures are also associated with improved classroom behavior” (abstract).
Discussion and Implications

The general research consensus seems to be that novice TFA corps members, whose preparation is likely more contingent on proven records of leadership than on extensive pedagogical and curricular training, may produce outcomes commensurate with or even slightly better than similarly experienced teachers, but typically under-perform when compared with fully credentialed and veteran teachers. Clearly, experience plays a role in a teacher’s ability to produce positive student achievement outcomes. However, TFA’s disconcerting retention rates suggest that the organization’s leaders might not stay in teaching long enough to reap the benefits that such experience may offer. In general, then, TFA seems a viable policy option only when the alternative hiring pool is comprised primarily of under-certified and inexperienced teachers. However, this does little to produce long-term, systemic change.

To be fair, TFA’s conception of long-term change seems largely dependent on the work of its alumni. The guiding logic here is that change happens primarily at the level of administration and policy, which is a fair assessment. Nonetheless, this line of thinking also positions teaching as a sort of “layover” on the path to a more meaningful career and/or position of leadership. I worry that this understanding of teachers, the same individuals who have the most intimate knowledge of the concrete realities of education and schooling, may prevent the actualization of positive and long-term change. With this dissertation, then, I explore TFA’s conception of long-term change and, specifically, how it prepares its corps members to accomplish it.
Conclusions

With this chapter, I have attempted to provide a detailed discussion of the research landscape as it relates to both teacher education and TFA. The information presented here has pointed to the need for more nuanced conversations about specific programmatic elements of teacher preparation and licensure. As the research has shown, one size does not fit all. Looking forward to chapter three, I provide a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework and methodology that have guided this dissertation research. With chapters four and five respectively, I provide an overview of the study’s findings and my analyses of the data in an effort to describe how TFA has impacted the career trajectories of five corps members.
Chapter 3
Theoretical Framework & Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore how the TFA experience impacts the career trajectories of its recruits, particularly as they pertain to long-term educational change. Because qualitative methods are animated by “thick descriptions” that have the capacity to humanize data in ways not provided for by more quantitative methods (Geertz, 1973), this particular line of inquiry is preferable. With this chapter, I provide a detailed discussion of how my theoretical orientation, which I position as postcritical, has shaped my analyses, interpretations, and representations of the TFA experience as described by the participants, as well as the specifics of my methodology, which I label ethnography.

I begin with a discussion of qualitative research generally in an effort to make the case for this particular methodological approach. I then describe my overarching analytical framework, paying particular attention to the ways in which this project is uniquely suited to ethnographic methods. Next, I describe my commitment to postcritical ethnography, and I provide discussions of various scholars, particularly those of the poststructural and cultural studies traditions, that have informed and expanded my understanding of this epistemological and methodological orientation. I also elaborate on how this approach is consistent with the sort of cultural studies project that I envision for this research. I conclude with a description of my processes of both data collection and analysis.
Qualitative Inquiry: An Introduction

Qualitative research seeks to understand social reality through explorations of the lived experiences of both participants and researcher. To be more specific, qualitative research is a “situated activity” that “involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). They recognize that reality is socially constructed, that the researcher cannot be divorced from the research, and that inquiry is subject to situational constraints. As such, qualitative researchers typically adopt varied empirical methods to describe the concrete materiality of individuals’ lives and engage a myriad of interpretive practices in order to more fully understand their subjects (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Animated by “thick descriptions” that have the capacity to humanize data in ways not provided for by more quantitative methods (Geertz, 1973), qualitative works allow us the space in which to recognize the multiplicities of meaning and interpretation that animate human experience, to enrich the discourse that structures our understandings, and so to reimagine and potentially transform ourselves and the world that we have created.

Analytical Approach

Ethnography

Ethnography represents just one of several analytical approaches that have been applied to qualitative research. Couched in the traditions of anthropology and common in the social sciences, this method is organized primarily around the principle of culture and its various manifestations. Although the specific form that culture may take remains a matter of debate, the
kind of “thick description” embraced by ethnographic inquiry provides researchers with the space necessary to locate, describe, interpret, and explain how “people within a cultural group construct and share meaning” (Glesne, 2006, p. 17). What is more, ethnography demands that we, as researchers, work in the “particular” (Noblit, 1999). For Noblit (1999), the power of the ethnographic enterprise lies in its particularity, that is its commitment to “the close examination of a scene and grounded inferences about the scene,” as well as the overall context of the scene’s recording and representation (p. 2).

In many ways, then, ethnography is not only about the details of lived experience, but also the process through which the researcher is able to interpret these details. It acknowledges that the researcher’s position will inevitably impact the ways in which the story is told. As a result, the researcher herself becomes central to the telling, a principle that carries serious implications for participants whose voices are being represented. Throughout this process, power is continuously being negotiated. On this point, I agree with Denzin and Lincoln (2008), who contend that “qualitative research, in many if not all its forms (observation, participation, interviewing, ethnography), serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power, and for truth” (p. 1). As such, researchers have to be particularly aware of the “dangers of knowing” and the ways in which they reify, and so reinscribe, dominance (Noblit, 1999, p. 5).

**Ethnography in educational research.**

Ethnography as an acceptable mode of inquiry in educational research is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its ability to highlight school culture and the ways in which some populations become targeted has enriched our understanding of what it means to learn and educate in classrooms, though with a decidedly human quality that is often not found in the quantitative work that continues to dominate the education landscape. This dissertation explores
that human quality through an investigation of the lived experience of TFA alumni, particularly the ways in which these individuals perceive long-term educational change and how that might play out in terms of the career trajectories of former TFA corps members. As such, ethnographic methods are uniquely suited to this line of inquiry.

**Postcritical Ethnography**

Specifically, I position myself as a researcher committed to postcritical ethnography. Postcritical works couple the commitments of critical ethnography with a poststructural orientation. Born of the marriage of critical theory and interpretive ethnography, critical ethnography seeks to problematize and critique the ways in which power structures social life, primarily through research designed to “develop forms of critical consciousness, both in the researcher and the researched, that can lead to positive social change” (Hytten, 2004, p. 97; see also, Carspecken, 1996; Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004; Thomas, 1993).

The sort of emancipatory and transformative change advocated by critical researchers, however, has been challenged on the basis of its perceived substitution of one form of power for another, a process which ultimately reinscribes dominance through research. According to Hytten (2004):

Critical researchers argue that the hegemony of dominant structures creates a false consciousness in people that disables them from effectively challenging the status quo. Yet, what we have not considered enough are the ways in which many critical researchers substitute one form of hegemony for another. That is, they do not truly problematize their own understanding of the social world, and rather argue for the oppressed to replace their false consciousness with the “critical consciousness” the researcher has. (p. 96)
In many ways, then, although critical ethnographic works have been rather successful in their ability to enhance the mission of critical theorists, the extent to which they have been able to transform the lives of the oppressed remains a matter of debate (Hytten, 2004).

To address these concerns, ethnographers committed to postcritical works seek to interrogate contexts of power and systemic inequity, while at the same time advocating for the perceived advantages of a poststructural orientation to knowledge. This anti-essentialist ideology rests on the concept of multiple truths, mediated in large part by the dynamic interplay of discourse as a system of representation that is realized in the lived experiences of individuals. As a result, poststructuralists aim to deconstruct master narratives, primarily at the level of discourse, and base truth on context instead of seeking to develop monolithic ways of capturing a culture or an identity.

For the postcritical researcher, then, this coupling of critical and poststructural perspectives means taking seriously issues associated with positionality, reflexivity, objectivity, and representation. My commitment to postcritical ethnography demands that I identify and investigate how my positionality constructs my interpretations and that I take up the practice of recursive reflexivity, wherein I continuously critique my role as critic. Additionally, this commitment demands that I acknowledge the risks and limitations of claims to objectivity and that I problematize the ways in which my both partial and positional representations inform and produce the social world that I describe (Noblit et al., 2004). As such, I work to write against myself, all the while acknowledging the impossibility of this task (Noblit, 1999).

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81 Master narratives are stories that represent legitimated knowledge and/or truth (Lyotard, 1984).
Epistemological Orientation

In many ways, this postcritical orientation to research is consistent with the sort of cultural studies project that I envision. With this section, I provide a general discussion of cultural studies research, taking care to position my own commitment to postcritical ethnography within this larger theoretical orientation. My ultimate goal here is to elaborate on the ways in which this research functions as both a moral and political project. I then provide a discussion of various scholars, particularly those of the poststructural tradition, and the ways in which their ideas have shaped my interpretive work.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies as a field of study\(^2\) has enjoyed a rich history of scholarship and debate. Animated by a multiplicity of origins, methodologies, and theoretical orientations, this academic enterprise is characteristically difficult to define. In its most general iteration, cultural studies is “concerned with the analysis of cultural forms and activities in the context of the relations of power which condition their production, circulation, deployment and, of course, effects” (Bennett, 1998, p. 60). In many ways, then, cultural studies:

- is both a critical project and a political project. Critically, cultural studies aims to interrogate the power dynamics which structure how particular cultural symbols, artifacts, forms, and practices get valued and deemed important and worthy, and conversely, who

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\(^2\) I use the phrase “field of study” here to highlight the contested nature of cultural studies as an academic “discipline.” According to Wright (1996), “cultural studies is not really a single discipline but, rather, it is multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, postdisciplinary and even anti-disciplinary. . . . It appropriates unabashedly from the established disciplines and juxtaposes any number of such appropriations in order to produce work that is not only innovative, contemporary and avant garde but which would often not be quite acceptable to the traditional disciplines” (p. 13).
and what gets marginalized in the process. Politically, cultural studies begins with a commitment to disempowered populations and to the idea that academic work should make a difference. (Hytten, 1997, p. 41)

Cultural studies, then, is about the ways in which culture deploys power through dynamic and often asymmetrical relations of control, the actors who animate these relations, and the overall outcomes of the research endeavor, which becomes a political project.

This orientation is largely consistent with the dictates of postcritical ethnography in that researchers committed to this analytical and methodological approach often critique the ways in which power reinforces systemic inequities, primarily for the purposes of reimagining a more equitable and just world. This critique, however, also extends to the critic, as the interpretations that s/he provides are ultimately conditioned by the discourses and practices in which s/he is positioned. The outcome, then, is research that serves a political purpose and that is the product of the researcher’s own personal and moral commitments. With the remainder of this section, I elaborate on my understanding of the ways in which language and discourse construct particular subjectivities, as well as how those subjectivities function to regulate and legitimate behavior, with a discussion of several key thinkers that have shaped my interpretive work. I do so in an effort to complicate my own interpretations of this research, which is positional, and so personal, moral, and ultimately political.

**Poststructuralism**

The dictates of poststructuralism provide a helpful introduction to the sort of theoretical orientation to research that I claim here. Structuralism understands that language, and the ways in which it is manifested in specific cultural signs, is comprised primarily of stable structures that...
allow for the production of meaning through fixed binary pairs. Meaning, then, becomes inherently stable, and so creates the possibility for objective knowledge. Although incorporating several aspects of structural linguistics into its overall theoretical mission, poststructuralism rejects the contention that language, and ultimately meaning, is stable. Instead, textual meaning is continuously deferred down a chain of signifiers, and so is always in process. What is more, because meaning is unstable and irreducible to single words, phrases, or texts, it becomes the outcome of the relationships between texts, or intertextuality. In many ways, then, every meaning contains within itself traces of other meanings from other times and other places (Barker, 2008). As a result, truth becomes, at best, positional.

This sort of anti-essentialist theory and methodology is primarily concerned with the deconstruction of language and other cultural texts, especially the deconstruction of master narratives. With their focus on institutions and the ways in which they structure our lives by defining and regulating what is possible to know and say, poststructural thinkers, like Derrida, Foucault, and Butler, have been particularly helpful to my understanding of the ways in which discourse has produced and framed my orientation to and interpretation of the data.

**Jacques Derrida.**

Derrida, an Algerian-born French poststructuralist thinker, is most commonly associated with the concepts *différance* and *deconstruction*. For Derrida (1976), “from the moment there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs . . .” (p. 50). As a result, meaning does not exist outside of representation. Because language and writing are represented through signs, and so exist at the moment of origin, they govern our understanding of all that comes after. In many ways, then, there can be no fixed universal signified, or meaning that has the capacity to

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83 E.g., Saussure’s (1966) understanding of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified.
represent objective truth. Instead, meaning is continuously deferred down a chain of signifiers, and so changes in relation to the various contexts in which it has ever at any time appeared. What is more, because a signifier maintains some trace of all prior contexts, meaning is always postponed. This is the hallmark of *différance*, wherein meaning is deferred at the same time that it is supplemented with other meanings that ultimately defy the sort of common sense logic that often gets applied to language.\(^8^4\)

If language is unstable and continuously supplemented with new meaning, there also exists within it the power of *deconstruction*, which refers to the practice of taking a text apart to reveal its underlying assumptions and to dismantle the hierarchical binaries that it sets up. For Derrida, the sorts of asymmetrical relations of power that are delineated through language function to validate truth by denigrating what is perceived to be the inferior binary element. *Deconstruction*, then, serves to expose those places where the assumptions that undergird any given text are hidden (Derrida, 1976; see also, Barker, 2008). Through the process of *deconstruction*, investigators are given the space to think outside of what is obvious and externally defined as natural, and in so doing have the capacity to reveal the ways in which our meaning is, in fact, embedded within and sustained by socially constructed belief systems and ideology. Ultimately, this allows for the interrogation of master narratives and the ways in which texts and the institutions that distribute them structure and regulate social reality through discourse. In so doing, *deconstruction* provides the space with which to reimagine what is possible.

\(^8^4\) Derrida (1976) suggests that “writing is dangerous from the moment that there claims to be presence and the sign of the thing itself. And there is a fatal necessity, inscribed in the very functioning of the sign, that the substitute make one forget the vicariousness of its own function and make itself pass for the plenitude of speech whose deficiency and infirmity it nevertheless only *supplements*” (p. 144).
Michel Foucault.

Foucault, another prominent French poststructuralist thinker, moves beyond structuralist theories of language and signs to the broader role of discourse as a system of representation (and knowledge production). Stuart Hall (1992) describes Foucault’s conception of discourse thusly:

a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e. a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed. (p. 291)

According to this interpretation, discourse encompasses not only the structures that animate language, but also their social practice. Just as language gives meaning to specific cultural signs in ways that we can understand, it also defines and produces through discourse the knowledge base that governs how we interpret ourselves and the world that we have created. In so doing, discourse is able to establish what meanings can or cannot be deployed in particular circumstances at the same time that it excludes other understandings as unintelligible. In many ways, then, discourse is able to construct subjectivities that regulate conduct by defining how individual agents understand, talk about, and act within particular social sites. At the same time, however, it empowers these agents to act upon these sites, and so provides the space in

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85 “The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome” (Foucault, 1982, p. 789).
86 “When one defines the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others, when one characterizes these actions by the government of men by other men—in the broadest sense of the term—one includes an important element: freedom. Power is exercised only over free
which to “separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think” (Foucault, 2007, p. 114). Within the production and consumption of discourse, then, there exists an element of power that is potentially transformative, generative, and capable of deconstructing the sorts of master narratives that so often lie hidden. (Foucault, 1990; 1995; see also, Hall, 1997; Barker, 2008)

**Judith Butler.**

Butler, an American philosopher and feminist scholar, elaborates the concept of discourse and the production of subjectivity in her discussions of the ways in which sexed and gendered bodies, themselves material products, are made visible through discourse. For Butler,

The category of "sex" is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a "regulatory ideal." In this sense, then, "sex" not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, "sex" is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, "sex" is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize "sex" and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms. (Butler, 1993a, pp. 1-2)

...and only insofar as they are free” (Foucault, 1982, p. 790).
In this sense, the sexed body is materialized through discourse in such a way that sex itself becomes a normative ideal that governs how individual actors are to understand themselves. The ultimate outcome is the forced production of very specific subjectivities that construct and define the body according to its sex at the same time that they regulate how that body is to behave. Discourse, then, brings the body into view.

Butler elaborates the intricacies of this process with what she terms performativity, which refers to “that discursive practice which enacts or produces that which it names” (Butler, 1993a, p. 13). For Butler, both sex and gender become performative acts that “cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms” (Butler, 1993a, p. 95). As such, the repeated performance of sex secures its discursive production, and so validates it as an acceptable regulatory norm, despite its derivative status. Because it exists not as a singular act, but as the external expression of reiterated hegemonic norms, the performance of sex and gender becomes ultimately “a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (Butler, 1993b, p. 313). As such, it is “perpetually at risk . . . hence, its compulsion to repeat which is at once a foreclosure of that which threatens its coherence” (Butler, 1993b, p. 314). Ultimately, Butler’s conception of performativity provides me the space in which to investigate how the reiteration of specific subjectivities via discourse, including my own, functions to perpetuate asymmetrical relations of power. At the same time, the iterability of these discursively

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87 “And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that ‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance” (Butler, 1993a, p. 95).

88 “In fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. In other words, the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect” (Butler, 1993b, p. 313).
constructed performative acts also opens up spaces for meaningful critique of both the research and myself as researcher.

The Legitimation of Discourse & Power

My understanding of language and the construction of discourse as a regulatory ideal has led me to explore the various ways in which certain positions get taken up and validated as a result of their perceived legitimacy. Bourdieu’s (1977) conception of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) and symbolic violence, as well as Weber’s (1930; 2002; 2005) discussions of the Protestant ethic and the iron cage, has been particularly helpful in this respect. These concepts seek to explain reality and the ways in which particular social formations are privileged, often at the expense of others, and so reflect asymmetrical relations of power. As a result, they are consistent with the sort of postcritical orientation that I describe here.

Pierre Bourdieu.89

Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence is centered throughout his theoretical analyses of domination. In general, this concept refers to “Violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167); that is, the symbolic imposition of systems of meaning upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate. This perceived legitimacy conceals the very power relations that allow for its success, contributing its own “specifically symbolic force to those relations” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 4). This is accomplished through a process of what Bourdieu terms misrecognition: “the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder” (Bourdieu &

89 The following discussions borrow from what was first published as: Anderson, A. (2013). Teach For America and symbolic violence: A Bourdieuan analysis of education’s next quick-fix. The Urban Review, 45(5), 684-700.
Inasmuch as they are perceived as legitimate, these systems of meaning provide the basis for the power relations that, ultimately, solidify and reproduce the inequalities of the existing social order (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). As such, when dominated groups and classes begin to evaluate the world in terms of the systems of meaning that have been imposed upon them, without recognizing this change in perspective, they perceive the social order as just. In so doing, they perpetuate the structures of inequality that serve the interests of dominant groups, and, thus, consent to their own subordination.

Central to Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence is the notion of symbolic capital. This concept refers to those attributes that have been accrued on the basis of honor, respect, prestige, or renown and that have been vested with authority by social agents who perceive them to be consistent with the “collective expectations” of a group (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 102). The possession of these attributes allows one to name and define what should be an arbitrary value, but which, because of its misrecognized legitimacy, is perceived as being natural, and so conceals the power relations at work. Symbolic capital is based on a system of exchange where credit is owed to those social agents who exhibit the most “symbolic labour,” i.e. both material wealth and time (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 180).

As such, this system of exchange cannot be divorced from that which is based on economic capital. Bourdieu (1977) writes, “Wealth, the ultimate basis of power, can exert power, and exert it durably, only in the form of symbolic capital” (p. 195). This is also true for the other forms of capital described by Bourdieu, i.e. cultural and social. For Bourdieu, cultural capital refers to forms of knowledge, skills, education and academic credentials, etc. which provide those who possess them with high status, whereas social capital refers to resources based on group membership. Both forms of capital, though each may be derived from economic
capital, are only effective when they become transformed into meaningful differences that are perceived by knowing social agents as natural and legitimate (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1985) writes, "Symbolic capital—another name for distinction—is nothing other than capital, in whatever form, when perceived by an agent endowed with categories of perception arising from the internalization (embodiment) of the structure of its distribution, i.e. when it is known and recognized as self-evident" (p. 204). In effect, those who are able to disguise their possession of economic capital, and subsequently cultural or social capital, in the outward performance of symbolic capital, that is honor or prestige, assume the power to dictate cultural value. When they attempt to wield this power against social agents who hold less symbolic capital than themselves, symbolic violence is exercised. This process culminates in the perpetuation of dependent relations, whereby the domination of targeted groups or classes becomes the consequence of perceived inequalities to the extent that the existing social order is reproduced.

Max Weber.

Max Weber, a late nineteenth-early twentieth century German sociologist and political economist, is commonly regarded as one of the founding architects of modern sociology, a credit that is, in part, a consequence of the widespread distribution Weber’s now canonical text The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (hereafter, The Protestant Ethic). With The Protestant Ethic, Weber introduces various cultural aspects that, he believes, had a hand in the eventual rise of capitalism in the West, specifically those resulting from the religious expansion of Protestantism in sixteenth-seventeenth century Europe. For Weber, the advent of Protestant religions after the Reformation, especially Calvinism, fostered the conditions that would ultimately validate, not undermine, the capitalist enterprise. Basing his claims on the historical particularities of the Reformation, as well the expansion of economic activities in various
northern European Protestant communities in the nineteenth century, Weber concluded that capitalism was, in fact, the ultimate consequence of Christianity’s reboot after the sixteenth century schism, which sought to return religious life to its basic principles in response to the increasingly visible corruption and greed of the Catholic Church (Weber, 2002).

The Calvinist concept of predestination provides a particularly useful example of the intricacies of this process. According to this principle, an individual’s savior/damnation is predetermined at birth. However, the likelihood that individuals will achieve salvation, thus assuring their admittance into the kingdom of heaven, would most certainly be reflected in their current lives. As a result, a person who is in the favor of the Lord would exhibit some visible expression of success. Because the outward appearance of wealth is one such indicator of a successful life and because God would not reward an evil person with success, the visible performance of wealth would likely indicate salvation. As such, individuals might be inclined to actively pursue wealth through hard work and self-discipline, as opposed to the kind of outward rejection of worldly materials that was favored prior to the Reformation. The overall outcome is the establishment of a dynamic process, wherein individuals ultimately reconstitute their lives as a function of wealth, and so validate the capitalist mission (Weber, 2002).  

The ways in which the relationship between man and nature was fundamentally altered by the introduction of the Protestant ethic facilitated the reorientation of social life towards the perceived advantages of capitalism, a shift which ultimately culminated in the creation of new frameworks to structure reality. Although not currently religious in its substance and divorced

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90 “Innerworldly Protestant asceticism works with all its force against the uninhibited enjoyment of possessions; it discourages consumption, especially the consumption of luxuries. Conversely, it has the effect of liberating the acquisition of wealth from the inhibitions of traditionalist ethics; it breaks the fetters on the striving for gain by not only legalizing it, but (in the sense described) seeing it as directly willed by God” (Weber, 2002, p. 115).
from what Calvin likely had in mind when he developed the concept of predestination, the Protestant ethic has been assimilated into social and cultural consciousness to such an extent that its preferred practices have justified a capitalist orientation. It has become a structural condition, wherein individuals exist through economic activity, not apart from it. In many ways, then, the world that we experience is not so much the result of our own independent creation, as it is a consequence of the kind of control paradigm that functions according to the Protestant ethic. It is a consequence of what Parsons translates as the “iron cage” (Weber, 1930, p. 181).

The “iron cage,” a highly recognizable sociological concept attributed to Max Weber, is the ultimate consequence of modern capitalism. Introduced by Talcott Parsons in his 1930 translation of the original German *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, the phrase appears in the following context:

> The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter’s view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the “saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.” But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. (Weber, 1930, p. 181)
Here, we see the ways in which the Protestant ethic has been subsumed into the public psyche to such an extent that individuals become bound to it, without ever recognizing the control paradigm of which it is but one consequence. When religious devotion became connected with outward displays of wealth according to the Protestant ethic, the newly formed economic system assumed a sort of public and moral legitimation, despite the ways in which it was able to institute new, albeit hidden, mechanisms of control based on the perceived advantages of rationalization, bureaucracy, and technicality.

This is certainly not to suggest that modern capitalism is without its strengths; on the contrary, Weber recognized its potentially positive applications. However, although the rationalization processes manifested in modern bureaucracies function to streamline society through the provision of a rationally organized and efficient system of control, these perceived benefits are also accompanied by an “iron cage” that constrains us. Ultimately, the “rationalization process now has an autonomous dynamic, driven by the forces of economic and political competition” (Callinicos, 2007, p. 169). The “iron cage,” then, is the price we must pay. It is the primary consequence of the ways in which a capitalist orientation became legitimated by the same actors who experienced its oppressive features.

Towards a Postcritical Orientation

Although these scholars are not singularly responsible for the interpretive work that I provide with this dissertation, as my understandings are continuously evolving, they represent

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91 In reference to the advantages of bureaucracy, Weber writes: “The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization. The fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compares with other organizations as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs—these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration, and especially in its monocratic form” (Weber, 2005, pp. 198-9).
some of the key ideas that have helped me to see not only how TFA as an institution has been able to achieve an overwhelming degree of public legitimacy, but also how my own understandings have ultimately informed the analyses that I include herein. At the same time that I am interested in the ways in which power structures social reality to produce systemic inequity, and so reflect a critical orientation, I am also hesitant to locate “truth” in these manifestations of power. Critical understandings of the world maintain that knowledge is embedded in power relationships, particularly as they pertain to class, that “truth” is written by the victors and exists at the intersection of power relationships, and that power is always already present in claims to knowledge.

Although a critical perspective has allowed me the space in which to challenge dominant discourses and practices that may serve to stifle transformative social change, I worry about the ways in which such an orientation to “truth” creates but another grand narrative that privileges the critic at the expense of the oppressed. The poststructural mission to deconstruct master narratives and to interrogate the ways in which discourses and institutions structure our lives has provided me the space necessary to critique both what I identify as contexts of power, as well as my own embeddedness within them. Because postcritical works aim to bridge the gap between the critical and the poststructural through research that is both critical and positional, this theoretical and methodological approach is uniquely suited to this research. With these commitments in mind, I work to interrogate the dynamic interplay between discourse and the lived experience of TFA alumni. However, I also recognize that my understandings of the ways in which these power dynamics play out are both particular and positional, and so represent only a partial telling of the story.
These commitments all support my adoption of both emic and etic perspectives throughout the research process. Emic representations are participant-driven, and so incorporate the participants’ own understandings, or what might be described as an “insider's point of view,” into the research. Etic representations, on the other hand, refer to the researcher’s personal views (Fetterman, 1998). Although emic perspectives were privileged, as the participants were responsible for the telling, I ultimately guided the outcome of the research by the questions that I selected to ask and by the story that I chose to represent. In an effort to mediate this potential barrier, I provided a detailed description of my positionality and how it has impacted my understandings of Teach For America and long-term educational change in chapter one.

Process of Data Collection

Site Selection & Sampling

I employed criterion-based sampling in an effort to locate a particular cultural group that is representative of the TFA experience. In terms of site-level sampling decisions, I opted for a state-specific approach. This was done in an effort to capture common regional and curricular experiences. Although I will not acknowledge the state that I investigated explicitly in an effort to protect the anonymity of the participants whom I interviewed, the state has been the subject of several recent reports designed to assess the efficacy of various teacher training programs, including TFA. Additionally, because it was one of the first states to win a federal Race to the Top grant, the state serves as a virtual test case for many of the policies that are impacting our

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92 The precedent for a state focus was set by the Boyd reports of NY, which aim to assess the efficacy of various pathways into teaching (e.g., Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, Ronfeldt, & Wyckoff, 2009).
nation’s schools. As such, it makes for a powerful example of how the TFA experience may be impacting the career decisions of alumni.

In terms of within-culture sampling, I opted to investigate the corps experiences of TFA alumni who were no more than three years removed from the program (i.e. recruits from the 2009, 2010, and 2011 cohorts). This decision was made in an effort to reflect the most recent iterations of TFA curricula and practices as experienced by alumni. Admittedly, TFA is an evolving organization, whose mission and diversity is continuously changing in response to its critics. Because I will not be looking at 2012 and 2013 corps members (those individuals are still completing their 2-year service requirements), this study will not be able to capture the TFA experience of the last two years. However, this factor alone should not disqualify the study’s findings, as this sort of limitation is common to education research, generally. In fact, some distance from the organization is required in order to meet this study’s objectives. As Higgins, Hess, Weiner, and Robison (2011) suggest, in order to distinguish the TFA experience from, for example, the organization’s selection criteria and/or the institutional connections that it facilitates, it is necessary to look at some of the factors that contribute to corps members’ career trajectories after their service has concluded. Because alumni are representative of this criterion, they are a group worthy of inquiry. I have tried to mediate this limitation by recruiting participants from the most recent alumni cohorts.

Within this group, I tried to employ maximum variation sampling methods, e.g. TFA alumni who have taken a variety of career trajectories after their service has concluded. These decisions were made on a rolling basis as dictated by the research questions. This approach has

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93 The education sector is continuously shifting its practices and policies to better serve our nation’s children.
allowed me the space in which to document diverse variations of experience, a goal of qualitative research in general (see e.g., Creswell, 2013).

**Making Contacts and Institutional Approval**

Upon receiving IRB approval (see Appendix A), I attempted to build on existing professional contacts and establish new contacts via social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Teachforus.com, etc.). This decision was made in an effort to reach as wide an audience as possible. Fetterman (2010) refers to this as the “big-net approach” (p. 35). In order to avoid recruiting a self-selecting group (as would be the case were I to rely on a single source for participants), I have tried to reach out to as many individuals as possible, including those who may not be as actively connected within TFA’s alumni network (i.e., connected through local offices).

This at times proved difficult, largely as the result of what I perceived to be a pronounced level of insularity on the part of TFA. My existing connections, as well as my initial web search of the local offices, led me to the regional alumni coordinators. I was then informed of TFA’s own internal research review process. After submitting the initial research request online, I was asked (via email) to respond to various concerns the organization had about my research, which included my use of social media to connect with potential interviewees and the extent to which the evolving nature of the program might “frustrate” my findings.

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94 This is to be expected as TFA has been the subject of much recent critique, and so has made efforts to protect both its recruits and its image.

95 TFA’s review of my initial research application is as follows: “1. In your research application, you indicate that you plan to select a sample using purposeful sampling techniques. However, our regional team flagged your twitter messages to their local TFA accounts. Attempting to select a sample via twitter provides evidence that you’ll be pursuing convenience sampling as opposed to purposeful sampling. Can you provide additional insight here? Moreover, can you provide more detail regarding how you would pursue purposeful sampling if assisted by TFA staff (i.e., what would the sample selection process and criteria look like)? 2. In your
After responding to each of these points via email, I was informed of my project’s approval and was connected with TFA’s regional alumni coordinators via telephone conference call. At this time, I discussed the specifics of the research, the identification of potential interviewees, as well as basic logistics, i.e., communication, follow-up, etc. with the alumni coordinators who would be assisting me in my efforts to locate potential interviewees. I restated my interest in connecting with alumni from the 2009, 2010, and 2011 cohorts who completed their service in [state]. Although I opted to let local staff identify cases that would be information-rich, as they have the most intimate knowledge of alumni and their unique experiences, I did express my interest in connecting with individuals whom staff believed best represented the TFA experience, as well as individuals from a broad spectrum of post-service careers. This process proved fruitful, as I identified a majority\(^96\) of the interviewees with the support of TFA staff.

**Data Collection**

Interviewing, wherein the researcher asks questions of the participants, was the primary method of ethnographic inquiry.\(^97\) Upon receiving both IRB (see Appendix A) and TFA approval, I interviewed five\(^98\) former corps members about their motivations for joining the TFA application, you state that your, ‘study seeks to identify how TFA's pre- and in-service support practices impact recruits' long-term commitment to educational change;’ however as a rapidly evolving organization, TFA has shifted its practices (as well as rhetoric) and the diversity of the corps may have changed substantially since the interviewees’ time in the corps. Do you think this might frustrate your project in any way?’ (R. Perera, personal communication, February 5, 2014).

\(^96\) I identified one participant, Sarah, via social media.

\(^97\) Other ethnographic methods include participant observation, where the researcher becomes part of and records a particular social setting (this practice can also drive the formulation of interview questions) and document analysis, where the researcher collects and analyzes artifacts that represent the culture of the participants and/or the research setting (Glesne, 2011).

\(^98\) Although I originally planned to interview eight to ten TFA alumni, as the research progressed it became difficult to connect with new interviewees as a result of a lack of communication from
team, the support they received from the organization during their service, their career trajectories, and their conceptions of educational change. This included discussions of TFA and school-based training and professional support, the timeframes in which this support was offered, and long-term career plans. I applied a constructivist approach in my interviews. This position understands that knowledge and truth are co-constructed, and so do not exist until we come together to create it.

The interviews themselves were all conducted via web-based telephony service providers, like Skype and Google Hangout, as a result of the participants’ geographic distance from myself. After initial contact was established via email (see Appendix E), participants were provided a statement of informed consent for review (see Appendix B). Once they agreed to participate, their approval was documented via signatures on the informed consent forms, after which interviews were scheduled at times convenient to both the participants and myself. Interviews were conducted until saturation (the point at which the information shared with the researcher was not new; see Creswell, 2013) was reached. In situations where participants were unable to speak further via synchronous web-based technologies, email communications were used as a supplement.

The interviews employed a semi-scripted format in an effort to allow the participants to guide the trajectory of the interviews. A series of questions (see Appendix C) were used to guide the interview session, which typically lasted anywhere from 45-80 minutes. The amount

TFA staff. However, upon beginning my analyses of the data, I found that saturation had been reached with five participants.

99 The participants will be fully introduced in chapter four.

100 The interview questions were designed to elicit responses that would speak to the overarching research questions. I also included a section on pre-conceptions in an effort to ascertain the participants’ understandings of long-term educational change, as that is a major goal of TFA as an institution.
of time dedicated to each interview dictated the amount of interviews/further email communication. Each interview was digitally recorded using both computer-based recording software and a small recording device, anonymized (participants were asked to select pseudonyms to which they were referred in both the transcriptions and final report), and transcribed by an outside transcriber. I then reviewed the transcriptions and submitted them to participants for member-checking. Once the transcriptions were complete, the original audio and video files were destroyed.

**Recursive reflexivity.**

Because I am ultimately responsible for the story that is told, I documented via analytic memos the development of my own thoughts and understandings of the research throughout data collection. This process helped me to clarify my own understandings of what the participants expressed, as well as how my biases may be impacting my interpretative work. Additionally, this process provided me the space both to focus in on areas that might need further clarification on the part of the interviewees and to engage in preliminary data analysis.

**Process of Analysis**

**Coding**

To organize the data, as well as the patterns and themes that I produced, I conducted several cycles of both *in vivo* and descriptive coding. According to Saldaña (2009), “a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Far from being isolated, “codes and their segments can be nested or embedded within one another, can overlap, and can intersect” (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p. 36). While *in*
**vivo** codes are those that signal the language used by the participants themselves, descriptive codes summarize the primary topic of a passage, and so reflect my own interests and language. As a result, the codes I selected inevitably structured my interpretations and analyses.

**Analysis**

After the data were coded, I collected and categorized the patterns that I developed according to the dictates of thematic analysis. This approach requires that particular attention be paid to repeated words, phrases, and/or evidence of potential answers to research questions (Grbich, 2007). Additionally, my commitments to postcritical ethnography lead me to focus my efforts on manifestations of power within the interviews and their potential consequences for students, families, and the communities in which TFA leaders are placed. Next, I organized the coded data into discrete categories using a taxonomic approach. This allowed me to compare data across the interviews, and so move towards developing themes (Grbich, 2007). According to Creswell (2013), “themes in qualitative research (also called categories) are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 186). Once the themes were developed, I was then able to move towards interpretation and representation, which will be discussed at length in chapters four and five.

**Validity, Generalizability, & Limitations**

Because qualitative works are based largely on interpretations and meanings that are “particular,” and so situational, positional, and so partial, and ultimately socially constructed, they do not lend themselves to the kind of experimental examination and/or measurement so often advocated in quantitative research. As a result, issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability become much more pertinent to qualitative works than do
quantitative concerns like validity, reliability, and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, although there exists no definitive criteria for evaluating the extent to which “truth” has been achieved, or if it is even possible, qualitative researchers can work to establish a certain degree of “trustworthiness,” in their claims (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), primarily by thinking seriously about "how adequately multiple understandings (including the researcher’s) are presented and whether they ‘ring true’ (have face validity)” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 66).

Creswell (2013) describes procedures that are particularly useful: 1) prolonged engagement, i.e. extensive time spent in the field; 2) triangulation, where multiple sources of data, methods, investigators, and theories are used (see also, Lather, 1986); 3) peer review or debriefing; 4) negative case analysis, which refers to the active search of unconfirming evidence to inform the research hypotheses; 5) extensive self-reflection and clarification of researcher bias; 6) member checking to ensure that the findings are being accurately represented; 7) thick description; and 8) external audits of the research process (see also, Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Glesne, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). I engaged in several of these practices, particularly extensive self-reflection and clarification of researcher bias via analytic memos, member checking, wherein I submitted my work to the participants for review, and thick descriptions in an effort to add to the overall credibility of my work.

Additionally, because I worked collaboratively with TFA staff to locate four of the five participants with whom I spoke,101 I have been able to give this study added legitimacy in that the organization was able to identify individuals who they think most closely represent the TFA experience. Admittedly, my joint work with TFA staff to locate participants also reveals a limitation of this study in that I did not speak with individuals who left the organization prior to

101 The fifth participant, Sarah, was identified via social media.
the completion of their two-year service commitments, nor did I speak with individuals who no longer maintain contact with TFA. I acknowledge that any “truth” claims that are made are both contextual and multiple, and so generalizable only to other similar contexts.

Conclusions

With this chapter, I have laid out my theoretical and methodological orientation, which I position as postcritical ethnography. I have done so in an effort to provide readers a sort of roadmap for understanding how I came to this research, as well as how my perspectives have structured both my methodological approach and my interpretive work. Looking forward to chapters four and five, I provide my analysis of the data and the larger conclusions I have been able to make based on these analyses. With chapter four, I include an overview of this study’s findings based on the themes that I produced via my process of coding (both in vivo and descriptive). In chapter five, I present my analyses of these findings, as well as a detailed discussion of the overall implications of this research, both for TFA as an institution and for the schools/districts that hire TFA recruits.
Chapter 4
Findings

The goal of this dissertation was to examine how the TFA experience impacted the career trajectories of five corps members via its pre- and in-service support practices. The research questions that guided this study were the following:

1. How are corps members maintained throughout their two-year commitments?
2. What sorts of pre- and in-service support practices do corps members experience?
3. What happens after a corps member’s commitment is satisfied, i.e. post-service plans?
4. For what sorts of post-service careers related to education (and otherwise) do recruits feel prepared?
5. What qualities and/or experiences do “lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” possess and/or pursue and how do TFA’s corps maintenance practices reflect that commitment?

With this chapter, I detail the study’s findings as they pertain to these questions, and I provide some preliminary discussion of major thematic elements, all of which will be expanded in chapter five. Additionally, because the participants all spoke of their conceptions of educational change, I also provide discussions of how TFA corps members are prepared to contribute to long-term educational change through the institutional training, networks, and practices that it facilitates, as well as to define what that change might look like for each of the five participants I interviewed. In particular, I trace themes that stretched within and across the interviews. This
has certainly been no easy task, as my telling is always partial.\textsuperscript{102} I have grappled with my own experiences as a former alternatively certified teacher with limited pre-service training, who is often frustrated with the ways in which we target students of color and of poverty with inequitable schooling practices. I have tried to imagine more equitable outcomes with the analyses that I provide here and in chapter five. These findings are not intended as a monolithic reading of the TFA experience; instead, I try to provide the sort of “thick descriptions” common to qualitative works generally at the same time that I shine a critical lens on an organization that has become a major player in the world of education reform (Geertz, 1973).

To begin, I include a profile of each of the participants\textsuperscript{103} in an effort to provide readers with a more complete picture of who the participants are, how their backgrounds, both educational/professional and personal, might impact their understandings of education and schooling, and how they became involved with TFA. I then describe the institutional supports that TFA provides, focusing specifically on the participants’ reasons for applying to TFA, the pre-service training that corps members receive, the in-service supports and networks that TFA facilitates, and the post-service activities of the participants. I go on to discuss how each of the participants understood and envisioned educational change, both in terms of their own perceptions, as well as those communicated to them by TFA, presumably in an effort to accomplish the end goal of long-term and systemic educational change. I conclude with some general remarks to preview the conclusions that I provide in chapter five.

\textsuperscript{102} See chapter three.
\textsuperscript{103} In an effort to protect their identities, all participants were given/selected pseudonyms. Additionally, any information that might identify the participants was anonymized, i.e. hometown, academic institutions, induction site, institute training location, placement region, credentialing institution, etc. When necessary, bracketed descriptors will be used (e.g., [placement city], [college], [city], [state], etc.).
Participant Profiles\textsuperscript{104}

All of the participants with whom I spoke taught in one of two placement cities in a southeastern state. Both of these cities have witnessed varied levels of inequity (both high- and low-performing public schools) and are currently seeing a larger charter school presence. All of the participants are no more than three years removed from their TFA service commitments. With this section, I include various specifics about each of the participants in an effort to better describe their unique positioning and understanding of their TFA experiences.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Hometown Region</th>
<th>College Background &amp; Major/Minor</th>
<th>Content/Grade</th>
<th>Post-Service Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>Public: political science (major), international studies (minor)</td>
<td>High school social studies</td>
<td>College preparation and planning program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxine</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>Public: history (major), education (minor)</td>
<td>High school social studies</td>
<td>Remains teaching in placement school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>Private: business (major), Spanish (minor)</td>
<td>High school Spanish (year 1), U.S. history, world history, personal finance, and ACT prep (all year 2)</td>
<td>Attempted (unsuccessfully) to open charter school in placement region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Northeast &amp; Southeast</td>
<td>Public: bio-engineering (major)</td>
<td>High school math</td>
<td>Ivy League law school with joint degree in education policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe\textsuperscript{105}</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Omitted</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Teach For America staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Liz.}

Liz is a White female from a modestly sized southeastern city. She received her B.A. in political science (with a minor in international studies) from a large, public state school (in her home state). Uncertain of her future career interests and recognizing that she was in a life stage

\textsuperscript{104} I order these profiles alphabetically. All the participants began their work with TFA soon after college.

\textsuperscript{105} Zoe requested that details regarding her hometown and major be left out in an effort to more fully protect her identity.
with few external commitments (spouse, pets, children, etc.), Liz applied to several “service”
organizations (AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, and TFA) in an effort to “pay it forward” (Liz,
personal communication, May 31, 2014). Liz taught high school social studies for two years in a
rural area outside of her placement city (as a result of a hiring freeze), after which she accepted a
position designed to help charter middle school matriculants with career and college
planning/preparation.

Maxine.

Maxine is an African-American female from the southwest, who attended a large, public
state school. Having majored in history and minored in education, she completed a UTeach\textsuperscript{106}
program, as a result of which she became a certified teacher. In an effort to improve her
pedagogy, particularly in light of her desire to teach in a “community where the majority of the
students were a minority” (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014), Maxine joined TFA.
After being accepted into the program, Maxine began teaching social studies at a charter high
school, where she remains and intends to stay. Maxine was the only participant with whom I
spoke who planned on teaching as a long-term career.

\textsuperscript{106}Maxine describes this program as follows: “Essentially the way it works is it is a four
semester program, and you can start, they typically want you to start after your second year at the
[university], but you can start earlier. And it is for non-traditional, it’s for non-primary
educators. So, for high school teachers and middle school teachers, and they start you off, the
model is designed so that they start you off. Each semester you are in a classroom from day one.
You are in a classroom student teaching, and your interaction with the students is minimal. Not
minimal, it grows each year. So, the first semester they put you in an elementary class . . . So,
you spend, I think, 13 hours the first semester in an elementary classroom, and then the next
semester they put you in a middle school classroom, and I think when you are in elementary, you
teach maybe two or three lessons. When you get to the middle school classroom, you teach
twice as many lessons, and then the next year they put you, the next semester they put you in a
high school classroom, and you teach part-time. You observe, maybe, one period and then teach
the next class period kind of deal . . . And then that fourth semester is for student teaching and
wherever your content is” (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014).
Paul.

Paul is a White male from two small towns in the southwest. He graduated from a private post-secondary institution in the southwest with a major in business and a minor in Spanish. Paul then went on to work in higher education at his degree-granting institution, after which he moved to Washington, D.C., where he gained some experience in education policy. Realizing that he did not have any classroom experience, Paul applied to and was accepted to TFA. As his placement region was experiencing a hiring freeze when he joined, Paul was placed in a rural area outside the city, where he taught Spanish (year 1), U.S. history, world history, personal finance, and ACT prep (all year 2). His familiarity with rural student populations helped him to connect with his students, though his middle-class background was very different than those of many of his students. Ultimately, Paul would, after three years at his placement school, work to establish a community-based charter school in his placement region, a project that has, to date, been rejected.

Sarah.

Sarah is an Asian-American female from the northeast who grew up in a large Southeastern city (moved to northeast prior to high school). She experienced a public undergraduate education in the northeast, where she studied bio-engineering. Disliking the isolation that her research dictated and feeling dispassionate about the field generally, she began to think seriously about law school as an alternative. Eventually, Sarah would apply and be admitted to law school and TFA simultaneously, opting to defer law school while she completed her two-year service commitment. In terms of her professional activities prior to her service with TFA, Sarah worked as a Resident Assistant in college, and so had experience leading and mentoring students younger than her (she talks about this experience as impacting her approach
to classroom management). She also had extensive contact with TFA prior to her formal admission to the program, having worked as a campus recruiter and as an Operations Coordinator at a summer institute in the northeast before the start of her senior year of college. While in TFA, Sarah taught high school math. Currently, she is in law school at an Ivy League institution pursuing a joint degree that will allow her to achieve a Masters in education policy while completing her J.D.

**Zoe.**

Zoe is an African-American female from a large urban center, who attended a predominantly White, public university. Feeling a general lack of understanding of the experiences of students of color and of poverty in many of her classes, Zoe began work around issues of access (she describes several projects designed to assist targeted student groups with college applications, financial aid, etc.). This activism drew the attention of TFA recruiters at her degree-granting institution, who began to introduce her to the organization and alumni in various areas of career interest (e.g., policy and law). Eventually, Zoe would receive a customized entry into TFA as a result of various time conflicts. She did not attend the week of induction in her placement city that is typically required of TFA matriculants. She also completed her summer training institute (right after graduating from college) in a separate region than the remaining corps members in her placement city. After teaching elementary school for three years in her placement region, she recently accepted a full time position working with TFA staff.

**Discussion of Findings**

As this study aimed to investigate the ways in which TFA attracts, supports, and maintains its corps members throughout and beyond their service commitments, I move
chronologically through the participants’ matriculation through TFA, beginning with their initial encounters with the program, their pre-service training, their first and second years, and finally their post-service experiences. I also provide a description of the participants’ understandings of long-term educational change and especially how TFA might have impacted those understandings. In an effort to provide a more authentic account of the diversity of experience expressed, I describe those experiences that were common to all or a majority of the participants, as well as those that were unique to one or two individuals. The participants’ own words (in vivo codes) are privileged throughout these discussions, though I have rephrased some of the language to assist readers with the dialogue. This includes the removal of “filler” language (i.e. “like,” “um,” etc.). I also use brackets where appropriate to facilitate understanding.

Why TFA?

With this section, I discuss some of the motivating factors that influenced the participants’ decisions to apply to TFA. These include: educational inequity, service, and career uncertainty and exploration.

Educational inequity.

A majority of the participants describe educational inequity as a motivating factor behind their decisions to apply to TFA. This includes personal experiences with and/or reflections on the ways in which differential access to high quality educational resources manifests between schools/regions and between privileged and targeted student groups. For Sarah, this was largely the result of her experiences in public schools across several states. She says,

Growing up in [city], I went to a Title One school at the beginning of elementary school, and then my parents got jobs, and we moved to a nicer neighborhood, and I could see the
improvement of quality of my education, and then we moved to the suburbs of [northeastern state] and even that huge jump between the . . . I don’t want to generalize and say Southern education is not as good . . . but the curriculum at least was much more rigorous at my new school in [state] than it was at my former school in [city]. And so those kinds of experiences stuck with me, and I realized that public school is not the same everywhere. And so part of Teach For America’s mission to serve specifically low-income communities, that was something that I really wanted to do. (Sarah, personal communication, March 7, 2014)

For Zoe, the disproportionate representation of students of color and of poverty in higher education was a key motivator both for her activism in college and for her decisions to join TFA. She says,

My education trajectory changed due to moving to a different neighborhood, and when I went on to college I noticed that something was seriously wrong with what was happening, because the people that I grew up with and I was in that place of privilege, they ended up in college. However, most of the people in our graduating class from the high school that I graduated from, they did not end up in college, and it wasn’t something that was talked about much often. They pretty much had this special view that they would have been to college visits or have college counselors come and speak to them, but it wasn’t something that was equally put before everyone. It was very limited kind of opportunities. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)
Additionally, her college work with a bilingual education program revealed to her the extent of educational inequity in terms of college access. She says,

I had an internship in a, well a job, with a bilingual program that worked with children of farm workers, and I was just hit in the face, because I realized that they were an invisible population who lacked even more access to education than people who are traditionally quote/unquote people of color. These are people who are left out of the American dream, and it’s on purpose, and they’re not represented in college, and when they do have academic qualifications to go to college, they cannot because they’re paying international tuition, and they have no social security cards, and it just fired me up even more and, at some point, my work was quote/unquote recognized, and Teach For America recruiters started reaching out to me and started sharing the vision of Teach For America. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

For Liz, her sense of preparedness for college, which she attributes to her private education, surpassed those of many of her peers, thus inciting her to identify and reflect on educational inequity. She says,

I was very prepared for college and actually saw that many of my classmates were not who were coming from high schools in [state] and that was one of the things that spurred me to want to do Teach For America. I was very aware of how unequal educations were across the state and even across [city]. It’s very similar to [placement city] in that there
are some really, really good public high schools, but if you don’t’ get into those, then . . .
your options aren’t so great. (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014)

Ultimately, educational inequity would be a key factor in many of the participants’ decisions to pursue admission to TFA.

Service.

To address the educational inequities that they saw in their own histories, both Liz and Maxine express a sort of service mentality in their approach to education. Liz saw TFA as an opportunity to “pay it forward,” and so suggests a service orientation to teaching. This same sort of orientation was echoed by Maxine, who reflects on her initial motivation for considering teaching as a potential long-term career. She says,

Education had always been something that was important to me, and I just assumed that my community was important to me, too, and I had always assumed that I would go away and be this great and amazing person and then come back and reach down and pull up the people in my community so that they could be great, too. I guess growing up and maturity kind of helped me to realize that this whole holier than thou, not holier, but this righteous savior wasn’t who I was anymore or wasn’t who I wanted to be, which was a bit humbling for me . . . I love to build people up and to help them be great, and I still saw education as a way to push people from one state to another, from one area to . . . different opportunities. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)
These evolving understandings of teaching led her to Teach For America, a program that she believed would propel her to a higher level in terms of her pedagogy. She says,

What I learned from my studies at [college] is that I knew I wanted to work in a low-income community. I knew I wanted to work in a community where the majority of the students were a minority. Mostly, I wanted to work with communities where there was this large gap in education, and so I felt prepared with the teaching program . . . But I wasn’t sure that what I had learned was enough to propel me to the status of not just being a good teacher, but a great teacher who made exceptional changes every single year, and so I started doing research and . . . the biggest thing that caught my attention was we work with these communities, and we want to legitimately see transformational change, and this is what we are seeing so far. And the things that I saw, not just their data like “We are doing x, y and z,” but the goals and the idea that there is one vision that is shared by a group of people to move students from Point A to Point W, I felt like that was something I could get behind. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

Ultimately, educational inequities were a driving force behind a majority of the participants’ decisions to apply to TFA. In many ways, this suggests a real effort on the part of the organization both to share a vision that is based on eliminating educational inequity and to seek out service-minded applicants. However, this also raises concerns about the rescue mission mentality leveled against the organization by TFA critics like Linda-Darling-Hammond (1994).\(^\text{107}\)

\(^{107}\) I will explore this charge more fully in chapter five.
Career uncertainty and exploration.

While Maxine was the only participant with whom I spoke who was intent on teaching as a long-term career, the remaining interviewees expressed varied levels of uncertainty regarding their future career prospects. For example, Paul explains:

Throughout college I bounced around from a couple of different career choices. I thought I would get into business. I thought I would do law. Classic TFA in not knowing what to do with my life. So a lot of different things. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

Additionally, several participants described their decision to apply to TFA in terms of career exploration and classroom experience, most notably Paul. When describing his work in K-12 education policy at the national level, Paul says

I was interested in politics, and I was interested in a couple of different foreign policy and things like that, and education was one of the top ones on my list, and I just decided to run with it. So, I got in education policy, and I liked it a lot at first. Okay. I liked the research side of things, and I liked the policy side of things and the detail, and I enjoyed that for a little bit. But then I realized that I didn’t really know what I was doing. I didn’t have any classroom experience. It wasn’t the most meaningful use. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)
In this way, TFA became a way to gain some practical classroom experience. For Zoe, TFA also provided a platform to learn more about other fields in which she was interested and how TFA may have facilitated that process. She says,

Teach For America recruiters . . . introduced me to some policy individuals, and that was something that I was interested in, and they also introduced me to . . . people who joined Teach For America and became lawyers . . . Because law\textsuperscript{108} is another very strong career interest for me. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

Ultimately, TFA seems to have been successful in its efforts to recruit individuals who might not have considered teaching as a potential long-term career. However, this recruitment technique also opens TFA up to the contention that it actively seeks out those who may see the organization as a sort of layover on the path to a more meaningful career.\textsuperscript{109}

**Pre-service Training**

With this section, I describe the extent of the participants’ training prior to beginning their two-year service commitments. Apart from Zoe, who, as a result of various time conflicts, was unable to attend induction, the participants spent one week in their placement regions\textsuperscript{110} (induction) and five weeks at another location for their institute training. After explaining

\textsuperscript{108} All the participants expressed an interest in law.  
\textsuperscript{109} I will elaborate more on this point in chapter five.  
\textsuperscript{110} The placement regions were decided based on ranked preference lists, i.e. highly preferred cities would receive a lower number and least preferred cities would receive a higher number. This ranking system was also used for grade level/content areas. Additionally, high-need areas would be presented at the interview stage prior to a corps member’s formal acceptance. With the exception of Zoe, whose placement was in one of her least preferred regions (she talks about the regional team being motivated to work with her there), all the participants were placed in a region that was preferred.
various specifics about each of these components, which also includes a preliminary discussion of TFA’s vision and how that played out both in the participants’ institute experiences, as well as in their remaining development as corps members, I outline two themes that I produced from our conversations: intensity and adequacy of training. Although several of these discussions extend beyond the pre-service training component of the participants’ involvement with TFA, it is helpful to introduce these elements here, as they ultimately conditioned the experiences described by the interviewees.

**Induction.**

Induction typically consisted of a general introduction to TFA and their placement regions, preparation for institute, and job fairs (not all corps members have jobs yet). Maxine explains induction:

> They bring you to the region, you try to get a job, and you try to think about where you want to stay, but really . . . that is where you learn what Teach For America is, what do we believe, what is our vision, how do you come together as a group, how do you use the resources that are available to you, how do you interact with the people, with the types of people that are here in this city specifically. And then they send you away to a different city to train. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

For Liz, induction also provided valuable insight, not just about dealing with the populations with whom she would be working, but also navigating the sorts of professional relationships to which she would be exposed. She says,
It was really good . . . I feel like in some ways induction can be stereotyped as, “How to deal with low-income minority students and families.” And that’s not what I perceived it as and how it was for me. It was, “How to deal with colleagues and administration,” and I really think it is just really good life training, especially out of college . . . “How to deal with different people.” (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014)

In this way, induction is designed not only as a general introduction to TFA and placement regions, but also as a platform to learn the necessary skills for building relationships within corps members’ newly established learning communities. This is significant in that many corps members may not have a full understanding of the sorts of professional relationships that manifest in schools as a result of their limited exposure to the education sector.

**Institute.**

Once the corps members complete their induction week, they move on to institute, where they teach summer school under the tutelage of experienced TFA alumni and classroom teachers. In addition to providing technical training in areas like pedagogy, lesson planning, curricula, assessments, classroom management, etc., TFA also shares its vision with the new corps, which Zoe describes as follows:

The days were very long, but Teach For America was very purposeful in terms of what they wanted to be true for corps members at that time, which was that they wanted corps members to have enough technical skills to step into the classroom, but, most importantly, they were definitely trying to shift mindsets in terms of how we approach education and how those corps values should play out and how we plan and how we
execute our lessons and how we invest in our students, so it was very focused professional development. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

This vision would figure prominently in the training and development the corps members experienced throughout their two-year commitments. Zoe would consistently refer to TFA as a “movement” (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014), while Paul uses the language of “drinking the Kool-Aid.” He says,

So much of it is mission-oriented, and so much of it is vision-oriented with Teach For America that . . . there’s the joke of “drinking the Kool-Aid” and I drank it . . . And I’ve bought into it and . . . They serve it thick, and so I think that that more than any . . . the technical training they provide in classroom management was effective, and it helped me a lot, but that’s not why I’m continuing in doing this . . . it is because of this idea of buying into a greater work. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

Ultimately, TFA seems to have been rather successful in sharing its vision. Although several participants report feeling initially skeptical about TFA’s mission (Liz, Maxine, and Paul), they shared that they were impressed with how purposeful the organization has been with its

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111 This is a reference to the Jonestown deaths in 1978, wherein followers of Jim Jones participated in a mass suicide by drinking flavored drink laced with cyanide. The phrase typically signals an individual or group holding an unquestioned belief in something.
investments, not only in individual corps members, but also in the creation of a vast network of corps members and alumni across the nation.  

**Intensity.**

Regarding their feelings towards institute, a majority of the participants described their experiences as intense. For both Paul and Maxine, this intensity was welcome. Paul describes institute as a “blast” (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014), while Maxine explains:

> It was helpful to have kind of a teaching vacuum where that was the only thing that you knew you had to focus on. It made it a little stressful though because that was the only thing that you were ever focused on . . . good and bad. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

For Liz, the intensity of institute was problematic, and she expresses that this is something that TFA is working to correct. She says,

> There is this stigma that institute needs to be really, really intense and . . . people cry, and you’re up all night, and that is not necessarily true. That’s just almost a model that has been around that people are saying, “We don’t even know how to fix it right now.” Because it’s become such a thing, because that was my experience . . . I was up very, very late, and I was unhappy, but last year on staff, I noticed, in [national institute], they did a lot to make sure that, even on staff, I was done with work by eight or nine p.m.

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Sarah and Zoe shared stories that were not always so positive regarding TFA’s mission in contrast to the mission of their placement schools/districts. I will address this discrepancy below in my discussions of the relationships between TFA and schools.
every night, which I have friends who did the same job in [institute state] who were saying, “We were up until two a.m.” It was just as intense for staff as it was for corps members. Whereas, [national institute] did a lot to be more efficient, and then [placement city] is saying, “I’m going to be even better.” Because they’re taking a lot of steps to make sure saying, ‘You’re human, and you need sleep, and you need time to go to the gym and be a real person, and it doesn’t have to be this “Give up your whole life, just grind for six weeks type of thing.” And so, I think that’s a really good step in the right direction. Now, we’ll see how . . . if it’s effective, but I am very confident that the changes they’re making are in the right direction. (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014)

Ultimately, the intensity of their Institute experiences would figure prominently in the participants’ discussions of their pre-service training.

**Adequacy of training.**

Regarding the extent to which this training was adequate, however, several of the corps members describe a desire for more extensive pre-service exposure to their placement regions. Although induction seeks to provide this exposure, it lasts only one week, after which the participants transitioned to a new location to complete their summer training. Maxine says of the differences between the students she taught at institute and her students in her placement city as follows:

It was difficult teaching in a region that was not the region that you would be teaching in when the fall came. Not every low-income minority community is the same, so it is
really difficult for that to translate. Those [institute state] kids are nothing like [placement state] kids. So, it is difficult knowing for a fact that that transition is going to be different. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

Zoe’s experiences with this disconnect were drastic, as she completed her institute training in a vastly different region than that in which she would be teaching. She says,

I was very stressed out, because the population of my students were drastically different than the population of the students that I was trained with in [institute city], because in [institute city], the majority of the students were Latino or White students, and they were not so . . . I would say the picture of poverty was much different there. I feel like they were low-middle class, and then I came here to [placement school], which is high poverty. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

It does appear that TFA is responding to this concern by offering select regional institutes in the placement cities. For Liz, this is a move in the right direction. She describes her continued summer work with TFA as follows:

[Placement city] has had the great privilege that we are only doing [placement city] institute, whereas at other institutes, it was four or five different regions all together in one. This is just [placement city], so it is extremely [placement city]-specific, but also

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113 For example, the 2014 Institute schedule included seven regional institutes, where one or two placement cities would train individually, in addition to nine national institutes (Teach For America, 2014a).
because they’ve had this privilege to have it here, they were able to re-think the whole structure and fix a lot of the things that they know didn’t do as well, which I think is great. (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014)

This limited exposure to the community is compounded by the fact that corps members are not always guaranteed practice teaching in the grade level/content that they will be teaching in their placement regions. All the corps members acknowledged this disconnect in the interviews, expressing feeling lucky that they were placed in their grade/content levels (Sarah and Liz) and/or stories of other corps members who were not so lucky. For example, Maxine explains:

I knew a girl who was going to teach first grade in her region, but when she was at the summer institute, she was teaching eighth grade. So, she was . . . and so for people who that happens to, there is another level to the freak out that you add on top of it. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

This disconnect between institute training and actual teaching was not always seen as a problem. Paul, who taught Spanish his first year, says of his practice teaching,

I taught rising ninth graders English and wasn’t ready to teach English but got assigned there, and it was definitely . . . it was a difficult trip. English is tough to fit into summer school, especially with a novice teacher, but it was . . . it was effective in a lot of things, so I think it carried over into the classroom, both behavior management stuff and learning
content techniques that have been transferrable across different curriculums. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

For Maxine, being assigned out of her content area was actually something that proved to be beneficial. She says,

I am a social studies teacher. I ended up getting ELA. They try to assign people to the institute classrooms where they’re going to teach when they get back to their region. It is not perfect. They missed some. For the most part, if they can’t get you in your subject area, they try to get you close. So I ended up in ELA, because that is the closest thing to social studies, which was actually really helpful, because I have to deal with literacy stuff in my classroom all the time, so to have that ELA background even though it was only six weeks, was transformational for me. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

It is important to point out here that Maxine’s case is somewhat unique, because she came into TFA already with a background in education. In fact, she, herself, describes this background as being advantageous to her institute experiences:

So, I took two roommates. One of them is like me, she did education when she was in undergrad, and the other one was like most Teach For America members in that they do . . . they kind of come in saying, “I want to be a teacher,” and thrown into the deep end of the pool. Then, what the roommate and I who were both with education backgrounds, we

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114 This refers to English Language Arts.
both actually came in for the exact same reason. What we found was that the institute experience was a lot easier for us . . . not necessarily because we were better than anybody or more skilled than anybody, but because we knew what to expect . . . So, the institute experience was just easy, because a lot of those, a lot of people who come in had never been in a classroom before, and at the very least I have done four semesters of student teaching, so once you take that “Holy crap! Fifteen to twenty kids who were listening to just me!” Once you take that off the table, doing the education and the lesson planning stuff behind, that was all I really had to focus on. I didn’t have to freak out about students. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

The general consensus from the interviews was that the disconnects between corps members’ institute experiences and teaching assignments/placement regions were problematic.

Additionally, Zoe describes feeling frustrated by a lack of training in meeting the needs of both ELL students and students with special needs. Zoe explains,

During the training, I was not exposed to how to approach teaching learners who speak languages other than English, and then I also wasn’t trained or equipped with the knowledge, skills and mindsets around how to educate students who have special needs . . . And half of my students had special needs. They received special education services, literally half, and about . . . so in one class, I taught four classes of third graders, and in one class I would have anywhere between 12 to 16 students who spoke Spanish as their first language and then some of those students also had identified learning disabilities . . . So the demographics of my students and the levels of . . . learning levels were very much
an obstacle for me, and I came in with two other corps members, but by the end of the nine weeks, it was just me here by myself, because they decided to resign and leave Teach For America for many different reasons, but I think that the lack of preparation we had for teaching students who have special needs and received special services like ESL, we didn’t get that and that’s all that we dealt with. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

This lack of adequate training (and support\textsuperscript{115}), compounded by the fact that Zoe would be left alone in her school as a result of her colleagues’ decisions to resign from the program, would lead Zoe to express feelings of frustration.

**In-service Support**

With this section, I discuss both the participants’ transitions into their placement schools, as well as the support that they received throughout their two-year service commitments. The major themes that I produced were: “rude awakening,” support, a tight-knit group, and TFA-school/district relationships.

**“Rude awakening.”**

All of the corps members expressed feeling overwhelmed their first year. Although this sentiment is certainly not unique to novice TFA teachers, the limited training that corps members receive and their general lack of experience often made their transitions into the schools difficult. Maxine explains,

\textsuperscript{115} Zoe would also express a lack of support from TFA staff during her commitment. This will be addressed in the next section.
I think the biggest frustration that people had was just “Holy crap! I have to start teaching in two weeks, and I have no content.” So, it’s this thing of once you’re out of pocket into a different region, there are different standards, there are different students, there are different expectations, and you have to come back, and you have two weeks to prepare something for Day One. And not just Day One, Unit One, first 9 weeks, so that was difficult. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

Because the TFA model hinges on on-the-job training, this sort of sentiment is to be expected. For Liz, the experience that you gain from this sort of approach to teacher training was crucial. She says,

I felt like I was as prepared as I could have been. Let’s just say that. I was lucky that I got to teach high school social studies over the summer, and so that gave me a little more insight as to how high school social studies looks, and so when I went into my own classroom . . . however, I think that there’s something that experience is really the only best way to teach. I mean, you can study theory and talk about theory, but once you’re in your classroom is really when it’s real for the first time. You’re saying, “Oh, my gosh. I thought in my head it was going to be this way, and it went this way,” because you’re working with people. You really can’t always predict. And so, it took me a little while to get over them. More so not dealing with my classroom or my students, but planning my class, figuring out “How do you write a test?” and things like that and an effective test, not just one that’s kind of getting kids to fill in the answers. And so, there’s trial and
error a lot my first year . . . that I did not experience my second year. (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014)

The guiding assumption here (and with the TFA model in general) is that any deficiencies in pre-service training can be remedied and supplemented with extensive and on-going in-service support, something that Paul reflects on. He says,

I felt as if I was as prepared as you can be to enter into the fold. So, no. In no way was I prepared . . . No one is. So, yeah. It’s hilarious. My kids remember the first day, because I taught Spanish, and so I came in and made them, we only spoke Spanish and we did some motion-based vocabulary lessons, and I still have kids come up and they’ll be saying, “Golly. I remember that first lesson.” I was saying, “You guys were terrified? You guys have no idea what was going through my head.” I had no clue what I was doing. So, yea. But I would say I did feel comfortable in the classroom setting. I didn’t know everything that I was doing, and I needed a lot of work along the way but I do, what I do feel is that it prepared me from a mental and mindset standpoint. That said, I know how to manage a classroom to keep kids doing what they’re supposed to be doing. And then the other things that I know that I don’t know, I know that there’re resources in place for me to get there, and I feel confident that I can grow in my skills to become an adequate teacher, so I felt good from a growth standpoint. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)
For Paul, having basic, technical skills, along with the support of TFA staff and resources, made the transition easier.

**Support.**

The support provided by TFA staff throughout the two-year service commitment was a central topic of conversation, particularly the relationships the participants had with their MTLD’s (Manager of Teacher Leadership and Development\(^{116}\)). Although Sarah, Maxine, and Liz all report receiving extensive help and support from their MTLD’s, Zoe and Paul describe the locus of their TFA-facilitated support as being elsewhere. For Sarah, the feedback that she received from her MTLD was beneficial. She says,

She was coming in to observe classrooms and then giving feedback. I think a couple of times each semester, and she was awesome. I think she taught for two or three years and then joined the TFA staff. I remember in February or March, she came into that Algebra classroom [classroom where she was having difficulty], and it was just really disheartening that in March I still wasn’t managing that classroom, but I thought that our debrief after her observation was really great, and I was implementing these new strategies that she had given me, so that was really helpful. (Sarah, personal communication, March 7, 2014)

For Maxine, having a continuous relationship with her MTLD helped her to advance her pedagogy. She says,

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\(^{116}\)This individual acts as a sort of “coach” for corps members (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014).
I’ve worked with my MTLD from year one and year two, so our relationship was strong. So, she knew who my students were. She knew what my content was, and essentially our conversations about my work went from, “What are you seeing?” to “Hey, this is what we did last year. What are we going to do to up it this year?” So my focus my second year was . . . I think my first year I realized that my kids couldn’t write, and it freaked me out, and I just hid under a rock a little bit. I’m just going to pretend like they can write and don’t touch it. And my second year, it was, “I cannot let them walk out of my classroom without the ability to write.” And I went to my school, and I said, “Hey! I need help with this. Give me some resources. Send me some new thing. Teach me something.” My MTLD would sit down with me for hours and help me lesson plan and talk through my strategies with me, saying “What is the purpose of doing this activity? Is it really necessary? If so, why? Is it the best time to do it?” And these are all things that I definitely would not have been able to do my first year. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

Zoe’s experiences with her MTLD were not so positive (nor continuous\footnote{Zoe would experience three MTLD’s throughout her two-year service commitment. She was assigned a new MTLD for her second year, who was not as helpful, because she taught middle school. This MTLD then resigned, after which Zoe was assigned a new MTLD. This third MTLD was able to help Zoe to advance her pedagogy. She says, “I told her what was going on, and she actually came in and helped me develop a backwards plan of where these students should be at the end of the year and then how I could get there incrementally and then how to instruct a class that is so distinctively levels. So, that really pushed me to achieve excellence in terms of my teacher effectiveness. At the end of the year, my TEM score, which is a teacher effectiveness measure, was a five, which is the highest level that you could go as a teacher” (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014).}) and would ultimately result in her reaching out to other teachers and to her Program Director. She says,
I feel like my MTLD, which was my Manager of Teacher Leadership Development or my supervisor, I felt like she wanted us to own our own professional development, so whenever I would come with a concern, it was combatted with “Well, how do you see yourself getting out of this?” or, “Well, what do you think is holding you back from pushing your students to meet the academic objectives or standards that were on the previous assessment?” or, “Oh, I noticed your assessment results. You know, only about 60 percent of your students passed that assessment. What do you think is holding them back?” So, I wasn’t really getting a complete model for how I should push through this, but I was told that there is something that I should be able to do more . . . I just started reaching out to other schools that had a high population of kids with disabilities and students who get ESL services, and I shadowed them. I reached out to [name omitted], our Director, and told her about how I felt, because we sat down and had a conversation, because for three corps members to come in and then one to be left, there’s an issue there, and she investigated, and where she provided a solution was to link me up with people who have been successful in teaching in environments like this, so I was able to meet with those individuals and go to their classrooms to understand what teaching should look like in this context and how to carry out teaching in this context and how to invest in the community at the same capacity, so while I’m learning the content and how to deliver instruction, [Director] really pushed me to understand the community and how to invest myself in the community and have people invest in my vision.118 (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

118 Zoe understood this intervention to be a strategic move on the part of the director to maintain TFA’s relationship with the school. She says: “Due to the circumstance, I think that the circumstance dictated a necessary need on her part to build a relationship with me, because I was
Paul also reports being connected with other teachers (TFA alumni), something that, he says, helped him more than his MTLD, who was not as familiar with his content. Paul explains:

She [MTLD] was assigned to me, so she was my teacher coach, and she also helped with curriculum, and so she was somewhat helpful in that process. But she hadn’t taught high school Spanish, so I would say what TFA was good at was that it connected me with another former high school Spanish teacher who I really got to see what quality curriculum looks like. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

This form of support extended to Paul’s second year when he taught an entirely new set of subjects, and so had to familiarize himself with new curricula and plan new lessons. He says,

So, second year I was then teaching completely new courses. So, I was teaching U.S. History, World History, Personal Finance, and the ACT prep, I think. Yea. And so they had to re-help me design an entire new curriculum, multiple of them. So, I had a new instructional coach, or new MTLD, on my case, and so she had a more social studies background, so she was very helpful. Again, I would say that the help came in other teachers that were teaching the subjects, so I was able to pull from their curriculum. Someone on the TFA staff who had taught the subject, I just stole a ton of his curriculum pretty much. So, they were helpful in helping me adjust because it is one thing that TFA

the only corps member left at my school . . . And from an economic standpoint, TFA had partnerships with schools, and they don’t like to dissolve them, because that impacts the movement negatively in terms of resources and credibility. So, I felt like there was a need for her to do it, and she approached it in a very strategic way that worked” (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014).
has thankfully recognized was a shortcoming is content-specific skills and pedagogy and things like that. Because I didn’t know what the heck I was doing teaching social studies, because I was a history major, and I just loved it, so I was saying “Kids love this stuff.” And I was later saying “Wow! You guys don’t love this at all!” . . . So, I just re-vamped everything. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

Ultimately, the supports provided by TFA staff, both directly and indirectly, played an integral role in the development of the participants’ practice. However, both Paul and Zoe indicate that having a more involved relationship with an MTLD who is cognizant both of the specific content that corps members are teaching, as well as their student populations, would be beneficial.

A tight-knit group.

For most of the participants, the formal supports provided by TFA were supplemented by fellow corps members and TFA alumni. These connections were overwhelmingly positive for those participants who report being engaged in these sorts of professional relationships. For example, Sarah says of her relationship with other TFA corps members and alumni at her school,

One thing that was really great was that I was at the same school with a bunch of other corps members, so two people who had been in my CMA group were teaching the same subject as I was on my floor. We had a Spanish teacher, a French teacher, a

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119 Zoe’s story, however, was more one of isolation, largely as the result of being the only remaining corps member in her school after two resigned after the first nine weeks. She describes taking on a lot of the responsibility herself for finding ways to reach the student population that she taught.

120 This refers to Corps Member Advisor. At institute, corps members are assigned to a group led by a CMA, who coaches the students through their summer school teaching.
chemistry teacher and then a second-year corps member also teaching math with us. So, that was a great support system. (Sarah, personal communication, March 7, 2014)

For Maxine, the relationships she formed with TFA staff and fellow corps members were significant, to the point where she cites these relationships as one motivating factor for staying in her placement school. She says,

I definitely will say that what I appreciate about the [placement city] corps here, the [placement city] staff, is that there is an intentional strategy to build community here so that it’s not just a place that people come to for two years and it’s so easy to leave. The community here is so strong that you really feel like a jerk for leaving. Not in a negative way saying “Oh! Shame on you for leaving the movement!” But I care about these people just as much as I care about the folks back home, and I know the people on staff. It wasn’t just my MTLD who was in my classroom. The Director of the region came into my classroom on multiple occasions. I’ve had dinner with them, and there is a legitimate community here, and I think the staff takes that very seriously. So much so that in the beginning when they’re trying to build that “What do you like to do for fun? What’s your favorite food to eat?” I was saying, “Stop trying to be my friend.” But at the end of two years, I’m saying, “Oh, my god! I love you! Help me. I want to stay.” But I think that is the biggest thing, and also the region here is really good with working with alumni. Like I said, even at my school alone there are tons of alumni, but they’re all over this city, and they’re from a ton of different regions, and they come out to all of the events, and they’re not all in education, and so it is really cool that it’s not just the “You work
here in our corps.” It is this whole large TFA community. They do a really good job of fostering, and so I knew that even though I wasn’t any longer a corps member, it was not like they were just going to toss me to the wind to fend for yourselves. I call my MTLD at least twice, my former MTLD, at least twice a week and say, “Hey! I’m working on this thing with this kid” or “Hey! You won’t believe what [student] did today. Really, huh?” (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

Ultimately, these connections were overwhelmingly positive for those participants who report being engaged in these sorts of professional relationships.

**TFA-school/district relationships.**

With this section, I describe the participants’ experiences with other teachers (typically non-TFA) and with the administrations within their schools. I also include a discussion of TFA’s relationship with the districts, themselves. Although most report positive relationships with other faculty and staff, this was not always the case.

Most of the participants report positive and supportive relationships with other teachers within their schools. For example, Paul says of his relationship with a fellow Spanish teacher,

My first year, the other Spanish teacher was, is incredible. She was like my Mom. She’s incredible. And so she definitely provided some support and she provided good lesson plan ideas and good review activities. So, she definitely provided some support as well with that. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)
This sort of support from veteran teachers extended into his second year when he began teaching all new courses.\textsuperscript{121} Sarah shares a similar sentiment when she talks about her non-TFA colleagues. She says,

\begin{quote}
So, our department chair for the math department was really helpful and supportive. She, again, had been very familiar with corps members.\textsuperscript{122} There was a veteran math teacher on our hall, [name omitted], who was phenomenal, and he totally understood how hard first year was, and you would just see him as a smiling face at the end of the day, and he would look at you and say “It’s okay.” (Sarah, personal communication, March 7, 2014)
\end{quote}

For Liz, the relationships that she was able to form with other TFA’ers and TNTP\textsuperscript{123} teachers within her school were more meaningful than those of veteran teachers, largely as a result of their ages and levels of experience. She says,

\begin{quote}
What was tough was that I was the only one who taught my content, and so I couldn’t really co-plan with anybody, and so our social studies department would meet together. However, because it was so . . . because all of our subject areas were so different, the person teaching world history couldn’t really help me plan for econ, and so we would
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{121} Paul talks about getting many ideas about pacing from a 20-year teaching veteran, who was also his neighbor.
\textsuperscript{122} Sarah described how her principal’s familiarity of TFA impacted her support. She says: “TFA started in [placement city] in [year omitted] and so ever since [year omitted], our principal had had corps members, and so she was pretty familiar with TFA. She was pretty supportive of TFA. So, that, I think, made the first year a lot easier than some friends that I had who were maybe only one or two of the corps members at a school or a place where the principal had not been familiar with TFA before” (Sarah, personal communication, March 7, 2014).
\textsuperscript{123} This refers to The New Teacher Project, another alternative licensure program similar to TFA.
meet together but really did our own thing. So it wasn’t the same as elementary grade
level planning when everybody’s able to help with the same content . . . So I will say
though there were two other teachers at my school who were Teach For America, and
then there were a couple of TNTP teachers there . . . they taught Math, so it wasn’t the
same. They weren’t content support, but there was a sense of camaraderie. We all were
in similar life stages, as many of the other teachers at our school, because they’ve been
around. I mean they’ve been teachers for 10, 15, 20 years, were from the community,
and so . . . they were very welcoming for the most part . . . it’s a small town, and so we
were much more like the circus coming to town, because they weren’t used to new people
from Texas, from [hometown] from all over the place, so our relationships were mostly
positive. However, I’m not sure if they were professionally productive in terms of they
weren’t watching my classroom and giving me good feedback in the same way that
Teach For America was giving me. (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014)

For Maxine, the support that she received from other teachers was aided by the fact that her
school hired a lot of TFA alumni. 124

My school hires a lot of TFA alumni. But we had the math teacher was from [placement
city], the English teacher was from [city], everybody is from these corps all over the
country, who came to work here. So, it was actually a little easier because 1) they all
knew exactly what I was going through. They knew I had just come from institute. They
knew I was dog-tired, because I was working all night, but it was also cool because they

124 One of her administrators was also “old school TFA,” which she says might be a reason why
so many TFA corps members are hired.
also automatically knew without me telling them what my vision and what my goals were for my students, and I also knew what their visions and goals were for their students, and we were all kind of holding them accountable to the exact same standards and expectations. That was probably one of the easiest things. I hear my friends tell stories all the time about going into different schools and it not being the same thing. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

These sorts of positive relationships with other teachers helped these participants to feel supported in their new learning communities. However, the primary locus of support was TFA-based, thus adding a certain level of insularity that, perhaps, impeded the development of more meaningful relationships and connections within placement schools.\(^{125}\)

Zoe did not have a similar experience in terms of her vision and how that fit into the vision set forth by her school, a disconnect that led to much frustration. She says,

I noticed in terms of school relationships with Teach For America is that the school may have a different vision for excellence than Teach For America, and one place that I found myself in was that I felt like I was being pulled in two different directions . . . Because TFA was telling me to do this, but my school was telling me to do this. “Where is the middle ground?” and no one really quite knew how to navigate that. I had to figure that

\(^{125}\)Sarah reflects on her experiences after completing her service commitment: “It wasn’t until after I left the Corps, and it was around the same time that a lot of these criticisms started coming to the public eye, and it made me think about my experience and think some of the things that we thought were right and some of the things that we did. I was thinking, ‘Oh. Maybe we should have gotten input from our department chair.’ Gotten input from other math teachers instead of just thinking, ‘This is the way TFA said we should do it. This is what we think is best’” (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014).
out for myself. It was just, “Okay. Well, I can try to figure out how this can fit into this piece or how they connect,” so that was a lot of hours of deliberative planning, but after expressing a concern about that in a survey, Teach For America was very quick to respond in offering a session, because it was something that was coming up frequently. Corps members did not know how to navigate those rough waters that exist between TFA and their school sites. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

This sort of disconnect was compounded by the fact that Zoe experienced feeling alienated by the other teachers at her school. She says,

I did feel alone, because I literally was left alone, and at that time there was a hiring freeze when I came in, but the district still decided to hire Teach For America corps members over veteran teachers, so the teachers that were in the building had also this kind of not so positive perspective about TFA corps members, so they were reluctant to reach out, so there was some alienation in there. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

Zoe also reports being singled out, at least initially, by her principal, a factor that led her to feel responsible for TFA’s continued relationship with her school. She says,

My principal was very upset when the two corps members left, and she pretty much took it out on TFA. During our faculty meetings, she was just saying, “Oh. Another Teach For America corps member left.” And she pretty much didn’t have faith in me at the
beginning, because it was the first year that a Teach For America corps member had taught here or Teach For America had a partnership with the school. So, I feel like she decided to take a risk on TFA and kind of lost in some part . . . But at the same time, that happens at other schools as well, and there is some risk involved when you have someone who is not from a traditional education background and you’re very new to education and new to the region . . . I felt like it was on my shoulders as well. It’s just, “Well, I can’t leave, because if I leave, I wouldn’t, there would be no . . . What if there’s no longer an opportunity for corps members to come here?” (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

Zoe’s decision to stay, however, did seem to improve TFA’s relationship with the school. She says,

At the end of the year during our conversations, she [Principal] was saying, “I’m really glad that you stayed, and I’m glad that you showed me that you actually care about the community.” And the following day, she had another Teach For America corps member, and she told me, “I wasn’t sure, but I was hoping that they would stay, similar to you.” And then the year after that, which was this year, she hired three more, so I believe that through trial and error a relationship with Teach For America has gotten better, because it gives you that “Okay, they’re going to be credible teachers who come from Teach For America.” (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)
Ultimately, the relationships that they formed with their colleagues, and the relationships between TFA and schools/districts, were a major factor in the participants’ feelings of support. Where those relationships were strained, new, or non-existent, as was the case for Zoe, there existed frustration and an overall feeling of isolation. In many ways, this suggests that TFA could do more to facilitate connections within the schools themselves, not just within the TFA network. Additionally, the schools could provide additional support for novice teachers, both TFA and otherwise. Sarah suggests that this would be beneficial:

I think after my teaching experience, I recognized how important it is to have administration on the same page as to have the district on the same page. [Placement city] schools, or [county] schools now, can support TFA and say, “We want your teachers,” but if there is a lack of understanding of what TFA is supposed to do, and if principals are just viewing teachers all the same and not necessarily giving additional support to first or second year teachers, whether or not they are TFA, then I think it kind of falls a little short of what the goal is. (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014)

For Sarah, much of the trouble here lies with the districts’/principals’ general lack of understanding of the goals and purposes of TFA’s mission and lack of support for novice teachers. Overall, she suggests that there needs to be more understanding and alignment across all levels of the system.126

126 I will explore these ideas further in chapter five.
Post-service Activities

With this section, I describe the post-service activities of the corps members, paying particular attention to TFA’s impact on the participants’ career trajectories. Because TFA began reaching out to the participants about their post-service plans prior to the completion of their two-year commitments, I also include discussions of in-service activities as they relate to the participants’ career trajectories. Two themes were common to all of the participants: staying in education and staying in/leaving the placement school.

Staying in education.

Although varying widely, all of the participants have remained in education in some capacity: one working with an academic support program for matriculants from a charter middle school (two years in placement school), one pursuing a joint degree in law and education policy (two years in placement school), one working on TFA staff (three years in placement school), one who worked, unsuccessfully, to open up a charter school in his placement region, and so has left his placement school, and one who remains at her placement school. Although all the participants report that their continued connection with the education sector was encouraged and facilitated by TFA, I treat each of them individually here in an effort to relay the diversity of experiences.

For Liz, her positive experiences with her MTLD led her to pursue a job with TFA staff following her tenure with TFA. She says,

So, second semester, third semester, I guess, of my second year, I recognized that I want to stay in education, which is not something I had ever really thought about, but I loved what I did in terms of getting to work with students and passionate about education. I
didn’t know if staying in the classroom was my best fit, and so I actually thought about working on staff with Teach For America. That was something just because of how beneficial my coach had been and how positive my experience with her was. I thought “Maybe I want to be an MTLD.” (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014)

When that didn’t pan out, TFA was very helpful in connecting her with jobs, something that Liz says began in her second year, even before she applied for an MTLD position. She says,

During my second year, I was exposed to a lot more. There are jobs in education, not just in the classroom, and we are happy to expose you to those or to connect you with people to those, and so I felt like I learned a lot more about ways I could stay in education besides just teaching, and I thought that was really great since I knew I didn’t necessarily want to teach, but I still loved kids and still loved education. (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014)

She would eventually accept a position working with high school students who had graduated from a charter middle school with college preparation, something that she likely would not have done without TFA’s support. She says, “I can fully say there is no way this career trajectory would have ever happened without Teach For America” (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014).

Exhaustion was Liz’s primary motivator to leave the classroom. She says, “I thought about staying in the classroom as well. However, I knew that I wasn’t going to be as happy or effective in that role, just because it wore me out. It’s exhausting. Teaching is hard . . . I thought this is just not the best fit for me personally, but I still really care about education and want to stay within that somehow” (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014).
Sarah expresses a similar sentiment regarding her decision to pursue a joint degree in law and education. She says,

I don’t think I would have applied for any type of joint degree if I hadn’t done TFA. I certainly wouldn’t have applied for the education one, and I didn’t think I was going into ed policy straight out of law school, but it was something where I thought long-term if I wanted to go into non-profit or go into education, go into government, I would have this in my back pocket. It would give me just a little bit more credibility than just, “Oh. You taught for two years?” . . . And even, “You’ve got a Masters degree?” is not necessarily going to get me a job or get me in a lot of doors, but at least it is just an advantage.

(Sarah, personal communication, March 7, 2014)

Although Sarah does intend to practice law, she “would like to get back into education in some capacity” down the road (Sarah, personal communication, March 7, 2014), and an additional academic credential, she thinks, will give her more credibility.

Although Maxine knew she would remain in the classroom, she was initially unsure of where she would continue teaching. Fortunately, the sense of community that she felt with other TFA corps members and alumni helped her to solidify her decision to stay. She says,

I knew I was still going to be teaching, the question was just where. And the funny thing about this community is I grew attached to it, so I knew I was going to stay here to teach. Eventually. It took me halfway through the year before I decided to stick around. And it is easier to make that decision, because it is really hard for corps members, especially
ones who have, “I’m really attached to my family.” So, the idea of saying in [state],
which is twelve hours away from my hometown, was a hard thing, but what was really
cool was that there were so many people from my corps, from the [year] corps that stuck
around. And somehow it made it easier to make that decision to stick around for me.
Both of my roommates stuck around. I think all of my friends, I could instantly name a
dozen people from my corps that stuck around, and those are just the ones that I knew
very well. So, we already had a huge retention rate, so it was just . . . the commitment is
easier when you know that other people are committed to it too. (Maxine, personal
communication, May 1, 2014)

An established sense of community and support from her colleagues was instrumental in
Maxine’s decision to stay.

For Zoe (and Sarah), the conversation about post-service activities started within herself
and was supplemented with additional information from TFA. She says,

I feel like the conversation started within ourselves and not really from TFA. It was just,
“Okay, everybody, we’re about to be done at the end of this year. What are you doing?
What are you doing? What can we do?” and then we would get . . . saying that “Oh.
This staff position has opened or is opening. We’d be interested . . . If you’re interested
in going to an info session, let’s make this happen.” And then in December . . . when we
got a survey, they asked us what was one of the biggest needs, and a lot of us answered
that we needed sessions, or we needed more information about what it looks like, life
after Teach For America . . . So, one of the alumni partners or directors at that time who
was working in [TFA region] and [placement city] started leading sessions on it, and he basically told us, “Okay, this is where the majority of Teach For America alumni are. This is where some Teach For America alumni are. But everything was in the public sector. Either you worked for the public sector or a non-profit or in education or . . . I just felt like they very much had an idea of what alumnihood should look like, so they gave us models of, or they gave us information about where TFA alums were in terms of the public sector, but there wasn’t any information about the private sector, and I felt disillusioned at some point, because one of the advertising points was just . . . there are lawyers who went through Teach For America, but when I looked at the actual data, there weren’t many lawyers who did. A lot of people were in education in the public sector, and that’s really what they focused on, so after that session I was, and a lot of us, we were just saying “Okay, you either want to stay in the classroom, or work for TFA, or work for one of the policy partners here in [City B], or abroad, or go to grad school, and that’s actually what ended up happening, which is really strange, but it happened. So, the point of the presentations definitely influenced our pathways directly. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

Ultimately, TFA’s emphasis on remaining in the education sector, whether through connections facilitated by TFA staff or through presentations dealing with post-TFA life, influenced the participants’ decisions to continue working in the education sector.
Staying in/leaving the placement school.

Although all the participants remain involved with education in some capacity, several participants describe active recruitment outside the placement school. For example, Sarah explains:

Throughout the year [second year], we were getting e-mails about jobs. Some people were being wooed by charter schools or whatever networks in [placement city] there were or by staff to join as a MTLD, and I don’t know if people talked explicitly about “Here is what you should do in year three” but people were definitely encouraged to seek other options unless, for me, I don’t think people were really reaching out, because they knew I was going to law school. For people who had already made it clear that they wanted to stay in the classroom, people weren’t really recruiting them for staff. (Sarah, personal communication, March 7, 2014)

For Paul, TFA connected him with various high-performing charter schools in [placement city]. He says,

I’ve had a positive experience, and it has been tough, and it has been a struggle, but I like where I am, and I like the job a lot, so I felt pretty clear that I was going to stay teaching, and by November, before that, I’d looked at a bunch of charter schools in [placement city], and so, due to the TFA network, I was recruited by a couple of schools. So starting in August, I started getting e-mails and calls to come check out, so I toured four or five different schools throughout the Fall and did an application to see if that was something I
was interested in at some of the high-performing charters here . . . I guess it [network] is both formal and informal, and my capacity was more informal. TFA alum and friends of TFA run charter schools in [placement city], and so they go to Teach For America for a heavy recruiting pool for TFA alumni . . . And so traditional schools do as well. Charter schools are a little more aggressive on that front, and so they’ll reach out to the Alumni Directors and Executive Directors of TFA regions and say, “We’re looking for an English teacher for next year. Do you have any alumni in mind or second year corps members who would be interested in staying in the classroom in a different setting?” . . . And it is done . . . informal but there are also job boards and things like that that are available on our on-line database that have it done in a formal capacity. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

Paul also reports that TFA staff helped him to identify where he would like to end up, including staying in his placement region. He says,

They were the ones that helped set me up with the tours of other schools to see if that was something I was interested in . . . We [Paul and TFA staff member] kind of had a professional coaching conversation about “What is it that I’m wanting to do and what is it that I’m working towards?” and through that and a couple of other conversations, I decided that eventual school leadership was kind of what I was thinking, but I liked the classroom, but I am really excited about school-level change and school-level work, and so the more we thought about that, I like [placement school], and I like where I work, and so I just want to see what that can look like. So they helped guide me to the fact that my
work is not done there, and that’s where I want to stay. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

So, for Paul, although he was exposed to numerous experiences outside of his placement school, his conversations with TFA staff guided him to stay and to pursue other leadership experiences, as evidenced by his efforts to open a “community-based” charter school in his placement region, as an alternative for his students and families.

With this section, I have tried to explore how TFA may have contributed to its corps members’ career trajectories. Ultimately, these discussions have shown that TFA can and does impact the post-service activities of its corps members, especially by encouraging and facilitating continued work in education. Although its ability to attract (and maintain) individuals who might not have initially considered education as a long-term career is admirable, its move to attract corps members out of their placement schools via its job board and network is problematic, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.

**Long-term Educational Change**

As this dissertation investigates how corps members’ are prepared to contribute to long-term educational change, I include here a discussion of how the participants’ understood that change. Because their understandings of change varied, I treat each of the participants individually.

**Liz.**

For Liz, change happens on a personal level, and TFA’s ability to attract her (and others) into education is one way in which this change operates. She says,
It’s not necessarily everyday classroom change, but more so that I’m a clear example of someone who would not be working in education without this organization, and so I can say, at least for me personally, it has now impacted my life and I’m going, “I’m going to stay in education.” That’s my plan. To stay at my job for a long time, and so I see that as a greater effective change in that I am now somebody who is passionate about education, who wasn’t before, and so that’s even a broader impact of the organization is making people aware of the issue of educational inequality and then getting them to do something about it at any level. So, that’s something that is really cool in [placement city] to see we have a strong alumni base here and see . . . I’ve talked to people who are doctors who were in Teach For America who now teach classes on the side for healthy living for low-income children and families, so it is interesting to see how, even though, “Oh. They went on to med school.” Their being in Teach For America has impacted, I mean, that’s just one, I see it countless times, because I’m active among the alumni group, and so I’ve connected with people, especially those of us who did not stay in the classroom, but to see how being in TFA has impacted our trajectories for what we do within our jobs. (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014)

Ultimately, Liz suggests that TFA has helped its corps members to be more empathetic and knowledgeable about educational inequity, something that, she believes, will lead to educational change on a larger scale.

Sarah describes a similar sentiment. She says, “If you plan on being a doctor, and you have this experience, I think people would generally be more empathetic to low-income patients or something like that. I’m sure I would have been really interested in pro bono work anyway, but now I would like to do more pro bono work . . . So, I think it is just the experience keeps in the back of your minds, “There is this whole other world out there that I didn’t come from and the
Sarah sees educational change on a more systemic level, noting that “schools are not in a bubble” (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014). She explains,

As far as change goes, it is making sure that the students who are in these low-income communities are able to get the same kinds of opportunities, but I don’t think that is isolated to education. I think it is resources outside of school . . . healthcare, opportunities for them as interns or whatever that are just lacking in their communities. (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014)

Part of this change, too, is keeping teachers in the classroom, or in education. She describes the continuity that she experienced in her own educational history with teachers who remained in her school and who were experienced, noting that this was not something that she saw in her placement school. She says,

There was that continuity that I certainly didn’t really find in [placement city]. Not just through TFA. There was just a lot of teacher turnover . . . And in my first year, there were the seven or eight of us TFA teachers in our first or second years, and there were also two first-year English teachers on my hall, who were through traditional training programs, and I think we had a new science teacher on our hall. We had a long-term sub for social studies, and so this was all new for the students, and so that was kind of people that are now my peers are not necessarily aware of, but it exists, and I think we all have this responsibility to help people who are not like us [meaning not as fortunate]” (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014).
disturbing for me. Even though in high school, you probably only have one teacher in one year . . . But just knowing that you have that teacher that you can go to the next year, or you have a teacher sponsoring a club, and then they can write you a recommendation letter for college . . . The fact that there was something that I felt was missing at my school in [placement city], and when I think about the kind of relationship building that goes on between teachers as well, I think that that is something when you have a lot of turnover doesn’t happen, and so teachers don’t know each other. Teachers aren’t really communicating if they share students, and that is just not the ideal that we want for our kids. (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014)

This understanding ultimately led Sarah to the conclusion that TFA might benefit from a longer service requirement. She says,

I don’t think TFA is a viable solution to solving educational inequity. I think the number of people is just too small, and I think the way that TFA goes about it is not going to be effective long-term. What TFA could do, I have thought, I’ve always thought, that the commitment should be longer rather than just two years. I don’t know if I would have done it if it were longer, and I think TFA has research that shows that if they make it a three-year commitment, the application rates will drop . . . Maybe that is not in their benefit . . . But I certainly think, if you are getting people who have a greater commitment to being in the classroom, that will help. But, at the same time, TFA’s mission is two-fold. It is not all about putting teachers in classrooms. It is also about
change on a larger scale outside the classroom. And I do think that is where change will happen. (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014)

For Sarah, although a longer service requirement might be a more long-term solution to educational inequity, real change still happens beyond the level of the classroom. However, she still thinks that TFA could do more to keep its corps members in the classroom or in the placement region. She says,

I also think that TFA can just do . . . I think TFA can try harder to keep teachers in the classroom or to keep teachers in their regions or to keep teachers “involved” in education. Even people who are set on going to Med school or going to law school, I’ve seen TFA change peoples’ minds, and whether or not it was something TFA staff did or something that just a switch that flipped in that particular person, I think there is something that the organization can do to keep people around. (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014)

This critique extends to the schools, as well. Sarah suggests that school administrations can also do more to keep TFA teachers around. She says,

I think on the principal level, and this is not something against my principal, but she knew that we were TFA, and so she just kind of assumed that we were all gone after year two . . . And I don’t blame her for that, because that was what had happened, was that all of the other TFA teachers she had had, and so I think, especially in our second year, it
didn’t feel like there was any kind of push saying, “Oh. You’re a good teacher and you should stay,” or, “Have you thought about taking on this leadership role?” There was just no like initiative to get us to stay . . . And one teacher at my school who was TFA the year before, I think, she stayed in [placement city] a third year to teach, but she went to a [charter school], and so I’m not sure what her motivations were to leave our school and go to the [charter school] . . . But, clearly she was interested in teaching still. She was interested in staying in [placement city], and if our principal had known that, or if our principal had delved into that, maybe she would have stayed at our school. So, yea, I think that the two-year commitment puts into teachers’ minds, puts them in the district mind that corps members are a revolving door, and they can be replaced by somebody. There is no need to influence them to stay. (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014)

Ultimately, Sarah understands change on a systemic level, and, although she does agree that change happens beyond the level of the classroom, she thinks that both TFA and the districts can do more to keep teachers in the schools and/or in the education sector.

Zoe.

Zoe also understands educational change on a systemic level. For her, part of this change (and TFA’s contribution to change) manifests in the creation of a “movement” to fight educational inequity. She says,

The picture that is painted in my mind is just . . . the people who are in the middle class and upper class . . . I’ll just go back to college. What I believe should be true, or what
TFA has kind of imposed me to believe to be true, is that when we walk into a university, that university should be reflective of the population of that state . . . We cannot see more representations of people from a particular background because of privilege . . . So, in terms of change, changing the way that privilege operates in our social lives, our political lives, and our economic lives, and that really starts with education . . . even in terms of who is managing what. I think that the kind of change that is required is just allowing to break down barriers that prevent people who come from lower class backgrounds, or who are people of color, to break down those barriers and open up bridges, or allow some more access to happen. And that happens when teachers, and educational leaders in the building, and/or policy makers who support this idea that every child needs to be pushed hard, and we need to have very high expectations for these students. We also need to have teachers in place to make sure that they are setup with success and not failure, and then also, “How do we intervene in areas where, in areas of growth basically?” . . . So, I think that education is . . . its kind of cliché, but the great equalizer . . . In order for us to have a future that does not look like what it looks like now, which is kind of similar to the past when there are high percentages of people of color and poverty and then also just people in poverty, their trajectories, this whole cycle of poverty. I think that changes, breaking that cycle . . . And putting people in places that their ancestors may not be in or even, their siblings or family members might not be in . . . And I think that starts with education, and that starts with having the right teachers in the right place, leaders in the right place and policymakers who support these ideas in the right place. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)
Although she understands this change as happening in a “top down” manner, she also points to the key roles of teachers. She says,

    It works from the top down, but I think that teachers are major agents of change, because . . . we’re the ones who are in front of the kids and are implementing everything that they say that we should, and we’re the ones that still focus on a daily basis and push them to do exactly what they need to do to achieve . . . I think that having good teachers on the ground is really going to re-shape the trajectory of all the children that you are educating and how their lives will turn out and even the lives of their families, which would, in turn, re-shape America’s success. (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

In this way, teachers make change happen by implementing the policies created by policymakers and by conforming to the vision set forth for them by administrators. As such, the locus of change still exists primarily outside of the classroom.

    Maxine.

Maxine speaks about change more in terms of the students whom she teaches, and so presents somewhat of a departure from the other participants, who point to change in terms of personal evolution and systemic inequity. She says,

    When I look at change, it is not temporary. It’s not something that . . . so the way I interpret change from my time working with TFA is that it is not what just happens in my classroom, but it’s the overall impact that you make on the student’s life. So, I tell my kids all the time, “It’s not just about what you do in my room, it’s what you do when you
leave my first period class and go to second period. Do you still have the same expectations for yourself?” I mean, “What do you do next year? Right. When you’re not in my classroom or what if you leave this school?” I think that is the change that I’m seeking. Not just growing two points in reading level. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)

So, Maxine describes change in terms of what her students take away. For Maxine, then, change happens at the level of the classroom. When asked about who, she thinks, changes schools, she replies,

Teachers and communities. So, it is not just teachers themselves. I think the biggest key, the lynch pin in this whole plan, is building relationships. So, the teacher who is the holder of education, right? It’s a person who is going in to help and to facilitate and offer opportunities to learn and to grow, needs to be able to build relationships with the students and with the community and the parents and the administrators and bring all of those people together and say, “Holy crap! We have a problem. We need to change it.” And without building those relationships, those authentic relationships by the way, not just crap like, “What’s your favorite movie?” . . . the legitimate relationships, I think that that is being a change agent. Right? You could teach in your room all day and get kids to chant a college cheer or something like that, but at the end of the day, that’s garbage and won’t change anything permanent. (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014)
In this way, teachers become change agents by working with students, administrators, parents, and communities.

**Paul.**

Paul understands change in local contexts, that is, from the ground up. He says of educational change,

> I think that the biggest thing is that the change has to be local . . . And it has to be community-based, and so I don’t see myself as having any authority to step into a community and say, “This needs to change,” and, “This is wrong.” I mean, even from . . . okay, you look at low ACT scores. I don’t know what is going on. It has to come from the community context and a deeper understanding of what’s going on. And then, I think, if change is to occur, it’s got to be done with, not only the community, but community participation. (Paul, personal communication, May 7, 2014)

Ultimately, this understanding of local change would lead Paul to pursue a charter school based on the needs of community members and parents. For Paul, community is central, and the role of teachers and administrators is to incorporate the voices of the community into the school. As such, change happens very much at a local level.

Overall, the participants shared varied images of long-term, educational change that manifest both inside and outside the classroom. These variations also play out along the lines of the participants’ career trajectories. Liz understood change in terms of her own personal evolution, noting that TFA incited her to continue working in the education sector. Sarah also speaks of this sort of personal evolution, though she also points to change happening on a more
systemic level. This systemic understanding of educational change was also shared by Zoe, who envisions “top down” change happening via a “movement” of stakeholders committed to altering the way that privilege operates in our country. Maxine currently remains in her placement school and intends to continue her work in the classroom. As such, her understanding of change happening in the lives of her students is understandable. For Paul, a local understanding of educational change led him to pursue a “community-based” charter school. Ultimately, the variations of change that the participants describe also reflect TFA’s understanding of the locus of change and how individuals can best produce it. The organization does not necessarily see change playing out in the classroom; rather, its mission is to create a network of leaders committed to eliminating educational inequity on a larger scale. As such, its provision of limited training and a two-year service commitment makes sense. The idea here is that TFA will provide limited technical training, while sharing its vision, so that its corps members can then have some experience with and knowledge of the realities of schooling in low-income communities, presumably to inform their continued work to eliminate inequity. Ultimately, this understanding of change is reflected in the participants’ career trajectories in that only one remains teaching in her placement school (this was Maxine’s intention from the very beginning), while the rest continue their work in the education sector in some other capacity. Although its ability to keep corps members working in education is admirable, I question whether the organization might do more to keep its recruits teaching in their placement schools, a problem that I explore further in chapter five.
Preliminary Analysis & Looking Forward

With this chapter, I have described the TFA experience and how it has impacted the career trajectories of five of its recruits. I have also described the participants’ understandings of long-term educational change in an effort to provide a platform to engage with how they are living TFA’s mission beyond their service commitments. For the participants, educational inequity, service, and career uncertainty and exploration were all motivating factors in their decisions to apply to TFA, thus suggesting that TFA has been rather successful in sharing its vision with service-minded individuals who may not, otherwise, have considered education as a potential career choice.

Regarding their pre-service training, the participants all spoke about the intensity of Institute, and some described feeling that their training was inadequate. Ultimately, these findings suggest that TFA might do well to provide more training, over a longer period of time, in the regions in which they will be teaching so that the participants’ sense of preparedness and ability to connect with their unique populations of students might be improved. This would also potentially mitigate the shock that the participants felt upon entering the classroom (“rude awakening”).

In terms of their in-service support and training, the extent to which the participants felt supported by TFA staff and other corps members directly impacted their feelings towards their pedagogy. This finding suggests that TFA needs to invest in extensive and on-going support of its corps, particularly in content areas, as well as to cultivate a sense of community among its recruits. Although most report experiencing this, not all did, suggesting that TFA can provide more institutional support when needed. Additionally, TFA (and placement schools) can do
more to facilitate within-school connections and supports, as several participants describe a certain level of insularity among its corps members.

Regarding the post-service activities of the participants, all remain in education in some capacity, something which they say was actively encouraged and facilitated by TFA. However, the general thrust of the participants’ continued involvement in education is beyond the original placement schools, thus suggesting that more can be done both by TFA and the placement schools to keep corps members around.

Looking forward to chapter five, I provide a more detailed analysis of this study’s findings than that provided here. I also work to connect these findings to the larger research terrain, both theoretical and empirical, where appropriate. Chapter five will also include a discussion of the overall implications of this study’s findings for TFA as an institution, as well as for the schools who hire its recruits.
Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications, & Conclusions

As I began to think about how to approach my analyses of the participants’ experiences outlined in chapter four, I grappled with what I perceived to be broad, and often ideologically based, generalizations about the organization’s overall efficacy. In preparation for a class I teach, I returned to the work of Paulo Freire, whose treatise on oppression has helped me to work through these complexities. Freire speaks of sectarianism and radicalization:

Sectarianism, fed by fanaticism, is always castrating. Radicalization, nourished by a critical spirit, is always creative. Sectarianism mythicizes and thereby alienates; radicalization criticizes and thereby liberates. Radicalization involves increased commitment to the position one has chosen, and thus ever greater engagement in the effort to transform concrete, objective reality. Conversely, sectarianism, because it is mythicizing and irrational, turns reality into a false (and therefore unchangeable) “reality.” (Freire, 1970, p. 37)

My goal with this dissertation is not to provide a sectarian understanding of the TFA experience. As I expressed in chapters one and two, TFA has been the subject of a sort of sectarian war, wherein arguments get leveled from very distinct and opposed ideological positions. These sorts of divisions neither address the complexities of the organization’s implementation, nor do they move us closer to transformation. Although I point to some of these ideological variations in the discussions provided here, I do not intend to wage an ideological war either for or against TFA.
Instead, I attempt to shine a critical eye on the organization, as it has become a very powerful organization in the education sector, whose commitments, at times, go unchallenged as a result of its stated social justice mission. Freire’s conception of “the radical” has been particularly helpful in this respect. He writes,

> The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a “circle of certainty” within which reality is also imprisoned. On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (Freire, 1970, p. 39)

Although my tellings are, of course, positional, and so partial, I have tried to keep Freire’s words regarding sectarianism and radicalization central. I aim to broaden our understanding of one teacher training program in an effort to imagine more equitable outcomes for our students and for our teachers.

**Overview of Findings**

This dissertation explored how the TFA experience impacted the career trajectories of five recruits via its pre- and in-service support practices, particularly as they pertain to long-term

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129 I argue, in Anderson (2013b), that TFA is able to disguise inequitable practices by appropriating the language of social justice.
educational change as that is one of TFA’s signature goals. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How are corps members maintained throughout their two-year commitments?
2. What sorts of pre- and in-service support practices do corps members experience?
3. What happens after a corps member’s commitment is satisfied, i.e. post-service plans?
4. For what sorts of post-service careers related to education (and otherwise) do recruits feel prepared?
5. What qualities and/or experiences do “lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” possess and/or pursue and how do TFA’s corps maintenance practices reflect that commitment?

With this chapter, I outline my analyses of the participants’ experiences within and beyond their two-year TFA service commitments in an effort to more fully address each of these research questions. To do so, I draw upon the existing literature in addition to the participants’ own words where appropriate. For the sake of continuity, I address some of the major concerns that I outlined in chapter four, beginning with the participants’ preliminary exposure to TFA, their pre-service training, their in-service support and maintenance, and finally their post-service activities.

As the participants’ conceptions of long-term educational change and the extent to which TFA operates in its accomplishment were addressed at length in the interviews, and so pertain to each of these chronological moments, I weave those discussions throughout the analyses. I then discuss some implications of this research not only for TFA as an institution, but also for the
schools that hire TFA corps members. I also point to some larger implications for both teacher education and the larger conversation regarding education reform. Finally, I include a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of this research, wherein I also provide areas that warrant future research, after which I present my general conclusions.

**Why TFA?**

For the five participants interviewed (Liz, Maxine, Paul, Sarah, and Zoe), the predominant motivators for pursuing admission to TFA were educational inequity, service, and career uncertainty and exploration. Most of the participants report witnessing inequity in their own educational histories, a perspective that, for some, led them to see TFA (and teaching) as an opportunity to “pay it forward” (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014). When coupled with varied levels of career uncertainty, TFA became an attractive choice to explore and to “figure something out” (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014). In this way, TFA seems to have been successful in its attempts to attract service-minded individuals who might not have had an early interest in education. Because their motivations for joining TFA are indicative of TFA’s overall mission and vision, I provide a detailed discussion of some of the major controversies surrounding that vision. As these arguments speak to various ideological positions, and so are often philosophical in nature, I include various theoretical discussions based in the literature where appropriate.

Although I agree that the organization’s ability to attract individuals who may not have considered a career in education is admirable, the fact that most do not stay in their original

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130 Maxine was the only participant with whom I spoke who was certain of her future career path: teaching (although she did, upon first entering college, express an interest in law, she would eventually complete a teacher preparation program). Sarah, although planning to study law, was unsure of her exact positioning within that field (she also expressed an early interest in education prior to college). Liz, Paul, and Zoe all expressed an interest in law and/or politics/policy.
placement schools is problematic. Instead, students in the schools that hire TFA recruits often experience a sort of “revolving door” of under-prepared and under-experienced teachers. In fact, several of the participants speak of active, TFA-facilitated recruitment outside the classroom, even while they are still teaching in their placement schools. The ultimate outcome of this, then, is an overall lack of continuity, something that certainly negatively impacts the targeted students they are hired to teach.

This is reflective of TFA’s understanding of where change happens. The organization contends that

Filling high-need classrooms with passionate, high-achieving individuals who will do whatever it takes to help their students succeed is a critical piece of our approach—but it’s not enough to reach educational equity. Success relies on the work corps members do as alumni after their two-year commitment, from within the field of education and other sectors, to continue to expand opportunities for all students. (Teach For America, 2014c)

In this way, TFA is stating that change happens beyond the classroom. Although I agree that systemic change in the education sector (and others) is a necessary prerequisite for more equitable educational outcomes for all of our students, it starts with those individuals who have the most intimate knowledge of students and their unique needs; that is their parents, teachers, and administrators.

Regarding the role of parents, and especially mothers, Jane Roland Martin (1982) has provided a helpful introduction into the ways in which we often minimize the “reproductive”

131 I provide a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon below.
work of women in favor of the “productive” work of formal schooling. Martin describes the exclusion of women from the educational realm, which has been defined by the standard texts and has resulted in the distortion of the female image according to the male image of her and the forcing of women into masculine molds. This exclusion effectively devalues women and their traditional activities, maintains sexual inequality, and normalizes the educational activities and experiences of males. Martin recommends the adoption of a new educational ideal where the reproductive processes of society are not divorced from the productive and where reason and the mind are not divorced from emotion and the body.

In light of this understanding of the value of “reproductive” work, TFA’s contention that change exists beyond the classroom (and the home) minimizes the integral role played by parents in the educations of their children. Parents are positioned as disempowered agents incapable of contributing to their students’ educational success, and so are deserving of TFA’s intervention. In a recent article that investigated manifestations of deficit thinking in TFA’s website, I point to the dangers of this sort of orientation to parents. Ultimately, the TFA model recreates existing power differentials that position student families and backgrounds as something to be overcome, or at least something that is secondary to the formal schooling that its recruits are uniquely capable of offering.

The contention that change happens beyond the classroom also suggests that teaching is somehow less than or not as meaningful as other professions. Broudy’s (1956) arguments about the professionalization of teaching are helpful here. His thesis centers on the idea that, although

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132 I define deficit thinking thusly: “Individual students (as well as their families and communities) become targeted and blamed for academic under-performance, all the while letting the systemic inequities that inform student outcomes off the hook” (Anderson, 2013a, p. 32).
teaching is currently a craft, it should aim to be a profession through the establishment of a more developed body of theory that has been mastered and integrated into practice by those individuals who choose teaching as a career and who are client-service oriented. Broudy points to the intrinsic value of theoretical analyses, the potential for new recourses of action in teacher recruitment and training, and the issue’s relevance to those for whom teaching is a primary calling.

This understanding leads him to develop five major requirements for the application of professional status: body of theory, intellectual rigor, the uniting of theory and practice, autonomy and prestige, and a client-service orientation. For Broudy, teaching does not meet the requirements of professionalization, the most important of which being the existence of an adequate body of theory, and so cannot be considered among the professions, though it should be. In order to achieve the status of profession, a new image of the teacher must be developed that espouses the ideals of a higher intellect, dedication to client welfare, and the sacrifice and service for the community.

TFA’s ability to attract individuals with extensive academic and professional qualifications is certainly indicative of Broudy’s model. I agree that teacher education should be recruiting the best and the brightest into the classroom, and the participants with whom I spoke were certainly very impressive individuals. However, TFA’s training model does not include the kind of extensive body of theory that Broudy describes; rather, it aims to provide more technical training so that its recruits have enough skills to enter their placement schools. According to this interpretation, then, TFA does deprofessionalize teaching.

TFA’s mission is likely more consistent with Gotz’s (1988) understanding of teaching as an art form. Gotz claims that, although it could be, teaching is not a profession, nor should it be,
nor would the state allow it to be. For Gotz, teaching does not meet many of the requirements for professional status, particularly in that teachers are not autonomous and there is no specific preparation. Gotz notes that the professionalization of teaching would require a significant shift in power, that, although it may bring prestige, there are better ways of achieving status, that the quality of service will not likely increase with the professionalization of teaching, and that professionalization will not enhance teacher satisfaction.

Ultimately, these understandings of teaching lead him to advocate for expanded access for teachers through less rigorous certification requirements, which would give potential teachers the opportunity to see if teaching is a calling for them. This is consistent with TFA’s mission to attract individuals who may not have considered teaching as a potential career choice. However, less preparation would also produce more inexperienced teachers in the classroom, the ultimate outcome of which is the exposure of students to under-prepared and under-experienced teachers who have yet to develop their pedagogical skills.

In addition, should teaching not be a calling for TFA recruits (and other new teachers), they take with them the experience that they have gained when they leave the classroom. As such, TFA is likely not a long-term solution. In order to produce more systemic change in the education sector, teaching warrants much more value than it is currently afforded. Only then will we be able to recruit the best and the brightest, train them to teach in diverse schools, and retain them in the classroom. Quick-fix solutions like TFA ultimately function to undermine this ideal.

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133 Gotz (1988) defines the requirements of a profession: an essential social service, long specialized intellectual/theoretical and skills training, the acceptance of responsibility, and the rendering of a service.
TFA’s claim that its recruits, as a result of their extensive leadership skills and academic qualifications, are uniquely capable of producing more long-term change also assumes a certain level of elitism about which Sarah speaks:

I think it did a lot of good for me, and I think that that is something that . . . it is also a little, I don’t know, elitist about the way that I think corps members think about TFA or alums. I look back, and I think, “What a great opportunity it was. Look at all of these doors that it has opened for me.” So, I don’t necessarily know if this is how I should be viewing the Teach For America experience or teaching in general . . . Right? I feel like I should be thinking, “Look at how much progress my kids made. Look at how great they did,” and I think that is not what people think of immediately when they think about their TFA experience. And so, that’s just an inherent issue of thinking of what TFA can do for you. I mean, even on the recruitment side, people in recruitment say, “Here is what TFA can do for you,” and it is much less, I think, in the rhetoric about what change you can make for students. (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014)

It is telling that the only participant who spoke of change in terms of her students was Maxine, who also happened to be the only teacher who ultimately remained in her placement school and who had long-term plans for a career in education. When change becomes divorced from students, parents, and teachers, the effort to eliminate educational inequity becomes a bit shortsighted.
The service mentality,\textsuperscript{134} too, that was expressed by some of the participants is problematic in that teaching may become a sort of rescue mission for individuals who often have little firsthand knowledge of the communities into which they will be introduced. This sort of orientation to teaching and low-income communities is problematic:

External forces, typically under the guise of altruism, are assumed to be uniquely capable of delivering local citizens from the challenges they face in their communities. External intervention, not local empowerment, becomes the solution. As a result, entire populations are denied the autonomy to direct their own lives in a manner that is not exclusive of self-respect. Moreover, the commonsense manner in which the argument is framed positions any challenge to the intervention as antipathy towards, or even approval of, the externally identified “problem.” Ultimately, the object of “help” becomes a source of “feel goodery” for the “helper,” not an empowered agent capable of directing his/her own life. This process suggests that enthusiasm and a desire to “make a difference” will be able to correct a problem that has been named according to the “helper’s” own standards. According to these principles, TFA is able to frame teaching, not so much as a calling for dedicated individuals willing to put in the time and effort required to achieve full teacher certification, but a sort of rescue mission designed to save students from the deficiencies of their unique backgrounds. Ultimately, this distinction perpetuates asymmetrical relations of power that privilege and legitimate the backgrounds of TFA teachers over those of the TFA-taught students and their parents, who then become objectified “Others” incapable of saving themselves. This sort of

\textsuperscript{134} For example, Liz’s desire to “pay it forward” (Liz, personal communication, May 31, 2014).
hierarchy poses a serious threat to TFA’s ability to end educational inequity. (Anderson, 2013a, pp. 39-40)

To address some of these power differentials, TFA could do more to expose its recruits to their placement regions and unique student populations. It would appear that TFA is doing that in its provision of regional training institutes, though the national model continues to predominate. Additionally, TFA could do a better job of facilitating more extensive relationships with the schools and districts that hire its recruits. Should corps members feel more connected and supported within their regions, they may be more apt to stay in their placement schools. Admittedly, this move would likely be inconsistent with TFA’s mission to position its corps members outside of their placement schools. However, it would provide a more long-term solution to many of the inequities that persist in schools, and so is worthy of consideration.

**Pre-service Training**

All of the participants spoke of the intensity of the institute training. For some, this intensity provided a sort of “vacuum” to learn and develop their skills (Maxine, personal communication, May 1, 2014). For others, this intensity provided unnecessary stresses, something that, at least according to Liz, TFA is working to address. The stress is to be expected in that TFA’s mission is based on intensive pre-service training that will be supplemented with in-service support. Because corps members do not typically have a background in education, they require significant training and support. As such, an intensive program is necessary.

Regarding the adequacy of their pre-service training, however, several of the participants point to some problems. For Sarah, more classroom teaching would have been beneficial. Additionally, both Maxine and Zoe express a significant disconnect between the students that
they taught at Institute and their own students in their placement regions. Although TFA appears to be addressing this shortcoming by creating more regional Institutes that include city-specific training, the national model continues to predominate at this time.

Regarding content training, all of the participants describe personal experiences with and/or anecdotal evidence of summer school teaching assignments outside the content areas that corps members will be teaching in their placement regions. Although the participants to whom this happened (Maxine and Paul) expressed that this helped them to expand their pedagogical knowledge, a majority of the participants (including Maxine) viewed this as a shortcoming. It is important to point out, again, that most TFA corps members (including a majority of the participants with whom I spoke) have no early interest in and/or exposure to education. As such, their summer school teaching assignments may be their first introductions to the realities of the classroom. When they are assigned to teach in areas outside of this training in their placement schools, they are ultimately responsible for entirely new content (and new as well as more students) when they return from Institute. This is certainly problematic not only for the students assigned to these novice corps members, but also for the corps members themselves, whose inevitable first-year challenges become amplified.

Presumably, TFA aims to correct this potential challenge by selecting and supporting individuals whose dedication and leadership skills might help carry them through this overall lack of experience and limited pedagogical training. However, this contention also minimizes the effort required to prepare for teaching (deprofessionalization) and lends a certain air of elitism to the organization’s overall mission. These concerns aside, all the participants expressed feeling overwhelmed upon first entering the classroom. Although this is certainly not unique to

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135 Zoe points to an overall lack of instruction in how to teach to students requiring ELL and/or special education services.
TFA, it does suggest that the organization could do more to prepare its corps members for the realities of teaching, which may mean a longer term of pre-service training that is consistent with the corps members’ content areas and student populations.

**In-service support**

The transitions into the classroom were rocky for all of the participants. Although some expressed a desire for more training and/or exposure to the placement regions and the unique student populations that they serve, others felt that they were as prepared as they could be for the realities of the classroom.  

Although a full review of literature surrounding novice teachers’ sense of preparedness and self-efficacy is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the general research consensus suggests that there is a relationship between the extent to which novice teachers feel prepared and their self-efficacy and retention. For example, Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow (2002), based on their analyses of a 1998 survey of 3,000 New York City teachers, found that:

Teachers who were prepared in teacher education programs felt significantly better prepared across most dimensions of teaching than those who entered teaching through alternative programs or without preparation. Teachers' views of their preparation varied across individual programs, with some programs graduating teachers who felt markedly better prepared. Finally, the extent to which teachers felt well prepared when they entered teaching was significantly correlated with their sense of teaching efficacy, their sense of responsibility for student learning, and their plans to remain in teaching. (p. 286)

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136 Both Liz and Paul describe feeling as prepared as they could be.
There is a bit more to pre-service training than some of the participants (and TFA) suggest. Teaching is very hard work, and, although experience is certainly part of the equation, there are purposeful things that can be done to make sure that teachers are ready for their new roles. Should teachers feel under-prepared, there is the risk that teacher training programs may “end up disrecruiting potentially great teachers instead of recruiting them” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 37). Although I do not intend to single TFA out here, as there is certainly a wide range of quality in both traditional and alternative licensure programs (Cochran-Smith, Cannady, Mceachern, Mitchell, Piazza, Power, & Ryan, 2012), there is a need for adequate pre-service training to mediate the inevitable challenges of the first year. Based on analyses of the participants’ experiences transitioning into the classroom, this was something that, for most, was lacking, making that first year a sort of “crap shoot” unnecessarily (Sarah, personal communication, March 12, 2014).

The participants all spoke at length about the supports that they received from TFA staff, TFA alumni, and their TFA colleagues. When those relationships were purposeful and positive, the recruits express feeling supported as they learned about their new roles as classroom teachers. This is consistent with TFA’s overall mission to provide limited pre-service training that is supplemented with extensive on-the-job support as corps members complete their two-year service commitments. Sarah, Liz, and Maxine all express positive relationships with their MTLD’s (Manager of Teacher Leadership and Development), while both Zoe and Paul discuss

137 I outline some of the variations in teacher training programs in chapter two.
138 Zoe reports feeling under-supported by both TFA staff and her school community, thus leading her to feel frustrated.
reaching out to other TFA alumni and staff\textsuperscript{139} for models of effective teaching when their MTLD was unable to help.

For Paul, this was largely the result of his MTLD’s (at least in his first year) limited knowledge of his content. When, in his second year, he was assigned an MTLD who was familiar with his subject area, he reports that the relationship was more helpful. Zoe speaks of her initial MTLD (she would ultimately have three) not being able to provide her with effective models for teaching to her unique student population.\textsuperscript{140} This would improve when she began working with her third MTLD in her second year, who, she says, was able to provide her with more extensive support. In addition to support from TFA staff, the relationships the participants were able to form with their TFA colleagues contributed to their feeling supported in their teaching. In this way, TFA seems to have been successful in its efforts to provide its corps members with extensive support, not only from TFA staff, but also from TFA alumni, as well as to facilitate a community of TFA teachers, who would ultimately help one another with their practice.

Regarding specific school-based supports, a majority of the participants express positive, though not always professionally productive, relationships.\textsuperscript{141} For the most part, the participants tended to locate their support within the TFA community, as opposed to the school community. Sarah seems to attribute this to TFA’s reputation for providing teachers who typically do not stay beyond their two-year service commitments. Because her school had witnessed TFA’s high turnover firsthand, there was little incentive to invest more in its TFA teachers. Although she

\textsuperscript{139} These relationships were facilitated by TFA.
\textsuperscript{140} Zoe would ultimately connect with her Director for support, a relationship that, she believed, was very strategic on TFA’s part in that the relationship between TFA and her school was new and strained as a result of two corps members resigning after the first nine weeks of school.
\textsuperscript{141} Liz points to the fact that other teachers in her school were not observing her classroom, and so weren’t as helpful as TFA staff.
reports positive and supportive relationships with her school colleagues, she suggests that these relationships were not as extensive as those formed with other TFA recruits and staff. Liz also reports connecting more with other TFA teachers (and TNTP teachers), largely as the result of her age and status as a newcomer to her school community, while Paul reports turning to veteran teachers for content assistance when his MTLD was unable to help (though, again, he locates his primary support from other TFA teachers and alumni).

For Maxine, the fact that her school housed a large number of TFA teachers and alumni, who could identify with her situation, and so provide support in that way, was overwhelmingly positive. In contrast, the relationships that Zoe was able to form with her school colleagues were not so positive. She describes being singled out by her principal (as a result of other corps members leaving) and feeling alienated by her colleagues as a result of her being hired over veteran teachers, despite a hiring freeze in her placement region. This improved as Zoe continued her service in her placement school and was later seen as a committed teacher by her principal. Ultimately, TFA staff, alumni, and current teachers were the primary locus of support for the participants, thus lending a certain level of insularity to the organization.

Although a majority of the participants report positive relationships with their colleagues, they are somewhat closed off from the school itself, at least in terms of the supports in place. Should TFA be a more viable long-term solution to educational inequity, it needs to do a better job of creating and facilitating more extensive relationships with its placement schools.142 Additionally, the schools themselves need to provide more supports for TFA teachers (and other

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142 This is an area upon which all teacher education programs could improve, not just TFA.
novice teachers\textsuperscript{143} so that they may feel more adequately prepared and encouraged to stay in the classroom.

**Post-service Activities**

All of the participants continue to remain in education in some capacity. As such, TFA seems to have been successful in its efforts to attract individuals who might not have otherwise considered a career in education and to keep them working in the education sector. However, only one of the participants with whom I spoke (Maxine) remains in her original placement school. Although attracting individuals into education is certainly a strength of the organization, there are problems with the fact that TFA facilitates the active recruitment of its corps members outside their placement schools. Several of the participants talk about TFA’s job board and network, through which they were “wooed by charter schools” or groomed to join TFA staff (Sarah, personal communication, March 7, 2014).\textsuperscript{144}

Additionally, Zoe speaks of sessions about what alumnihood might look like, which included information about where TFA alumni were in the public sector.\textsuperscript{145} She says,

A lot of people were in education in the public sector, and that’s really what they focused on, so after that session I was, and a lot of us, we were just like “Okay, you either want to stay in the classroom, or work for TFA, or work for one of the policy partners here in [placement city], or abroad, or go to grad school.” (Zoe, personal communication, May 8, 2014)

\textsuperscript{143} Sarah suggests that other traditionally trained novice teachers received no ongoing support once they entered the classroom.

\textsuperscript{144} Sarah contends that she was being contacted about jobs even in her first year of service.

\textsuperscript{145} Zoe felt disillusioned by TFA’s lack of discussion about the private sector.
In this way, TFA both shares job opportunities with soon-to-be matriculating corps members and informs them of the post-service activities of other alumni. As such, TFA seems to play an active role in the career trajectories of its recruits, which, again, often means work outside the original placement schools. This is indicative of TFA’s training model as a whole.

TFA is designed to provide its corps members both with enough technical skills to function for their two-year service commitments and with experience teaching low-income students. It is not designed to provide long-term school-based placements for its teachers as evidenced by its facilitation of the active recruitment of corps members outside their placement schools. The facilitation of external recruitment is also indicative of TFA’s understanding of long-term change, which typically happens beyond the level of the classroom.

Ultimately, this is a real shortcoming of the organization (and of the schools that hire TFA teachers). When teachers (both TFA and otherwise) leave their schools, if not the profession altogether, students do not receive the kind of teaching continuity and sense of community that they deserve. What is more, with TFA recruits making only a two-year commitment, the schools and districts must continuously invest in rebuilding their staff, thus putting a strain on already limited resources. Instead of facilitating its corps members’ recruitment outside of the placement schools, TFA can invest in creating more extensive relationships with the schools that hire its teachers so that TFA corps members may feel better prepared to stay in the classroom. This might also mean more extensive pre-service training and exposure to the school communities in which corps members will be placed. Additionally, TFA

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Sarah suggests that a lack of continuity is harmful both for students who may eventually need college recommendations and for the professional relationships that teachers form with one another. Both are compromised when teachers leave their schools permanently (see chapter four). Additionally, teacher attrition negatively impacts the sense of community that schools are able to cultivate. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (2002), this sense of community is a hallmark of great schools.
can work to recruit and accept more individuals who have plans to pursue teaching as a long-term career choice.

**Implications, Recommendations, & Evaluation**

This dissertation research has shown that TFA recruits service-minded individuals who may not have had an early interest in education and facilitates their continued work in the education sector. Although their pre-service training was intense and often inadequate in its provision of extensive content training and/or exposure to the placement regions and student populations that corps members will experience, the participants all discuss the active role played by TFA staff, alumni, and fellow corps members in their ongoing development as teachers. The support provided and/or facilitated by TFA tended to eclipse the school-based supports that the participants experienced. Ultimately, these sorts of supports, combined with TFA’s facilitation of its corps members’ exposure to various career opportunities, would impact the participants decisions to remain connected within the education sector in some capacity, though those connections tended to manifest outside their original placement schools.

With this section, I discuss the implications of this research both for TFA as an institution, as well as for the schools/districts that hire TFA recruits. Within these discussions, I also include my recommendations for how this research may be used to improve the educational outcomes of students.

**For TFA**

TFA’s ability to attract individuals who may not have considered work in education is a strength of the organization. However, in an effort to avoid “disrecruiting” those who may potentially be great teachers, TFA needs to provide adequate pre-service training, something that
the participants suggest TFA may be failing to do. To address this concern, TFA might consider expanding its pre-service training component to include more content-specific preparation, more extensive exposure to the placement regions, and more training in how to teach to diverse student populations, including those who may require special services. This might entail lengthening the overall pre-service training required of corps members beyond the typical six weeks, something that would also minimize the intensity that the participants all described.

Regarding the in-service supports that TFA provides, the organization would do well to establish more extensive relationships within the schools themselves. Although the participants all report being supported by TFA staff, alumni, and fellow corps members, this support largely manifested within the TFA community, as opposed to the school community, thus leading to a distinct level of insularity among corps members. In order for recruits to feel connected within their placement regions, support needs to come from all levels, not just TFA. In terms of the post-service activities of the participants with whom I spoke, all report working in the education sector in some capacity. However, only one remains in her placement school. In fact, the participants talk about being exposed to (and even actively recruited for/by) TFA staff positions, external organizations and/or other schools via TFA’s network, job board, and/or professional development sessions. Is this sort of active effort to move recruits out of their placement schools really the best route to more equitable educational outcomes for our nation’s most under-served student populations?

Instead of facilitating work outside the classroom, TFA would do well to invest more in keeping its recruits in their placement schools long-term, which might entail recruiting more individuals with a long-term interest in teaching, providing more extensive pre-service training so that recruits feel better prepared for the realities of the first years, and a longer service
requirement.\textsuperscript{147} This recommendation would likely challenge the critique that TFA corps members see teaching in low-income schools as a sort of “layover” on the path to a more meaningful career.

This might also potentially alleviate much of the critique surrounding the organization’s inherent elitism, wherein recruits, as a result of their records of leadership and academic qualifications, are seen as being uniquely capable of correcting the inequities that persist in schools serving large populations of students of color and of poverty. Should corps members stay longer, and so commit more thoroughly to change within the classroom and community, much of the stigma surrounding TFA’s overall mission may be lessened. Although the number of applications\textsuperscript{148} that TFA receives may go down if it requires a more substantial service commitment, I do not see this as a problem if it means that students would experience more continuity and more dedicated educators.

**For Schools/Districts That Hire TFA Recruits**

The participants’ contention that the locus of their support came primarily from TFA leads me to the conclusion that schools and districts could do more to support all of its novice teachers, not just TFA, as they assume their roles within the classroom. Teacher attrition is a serious concern, not just for TFA recruits (e.g., Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Maciejewski, 2007; Moon, 2007). As such, it is exceedingly important for all stakeholders to make sure that teachers are getting what they need to teach to diverse student populations. In terms of the relationships

\textsuperscript{147} In many ways, these recommendations reflect the commitments of traditional teacher preparation programs. However, TFA has been able to attract a more diverse corps of teachers who may not have considered education, something that many traditional programs have not been able to do. Should TFA be able to keep teachers in the classroom longer, it would be filling a need (teacher diversity) not currently met by existing teacher training programs.

\textsuperscript{148} The organization consistently boasts its expansive applicant pool, which included over 50,000 in 2014 (Teach For America, 2014b).
between TFA and schools, it is important to make sure that both parties are working collaboratively towards the same goals. When those goals and visions were incompatible, the participants with whom I spoke expressed frustration. In many ways, then, schools could do a better job of working, not just with TFA corps members in the schools, but with TFA staff to ensure that students are being adequately served. These sorts of extensive relationships might facilitate corps members’ continued work in their placement schools, one area that may effectively address many of the educational inequities that persist in our country’s schools.

**Evaluation & Future Research**

To close this section, I re-examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of this study, and I offer some considerations for future research. A real strength of this study lies in the diverse perspectives that I was able to share. I spoke with individuals who claim varied raced, classed, and gendered positions and whose histories manifested in multiple geographic locations. Despite this diversity, however, I was able to locate shared and at times overlapping conceptions of the TFA experience, and so revealed research saturation. Additionally, I worked closely with TFA staff to locate four of the five participants with whom I spoke.\(^{149}\) This collaborative effort has afforded this study added legitimacy in that the organization was able to identify individuals who they think most closely represent the TFA experience.

Admittedly, my joint work with TFA staff to locate participants also reveals a weakness of this study in that I did not speak with individuals who left the organization prior to the completion of their two-year service commitments, nor did I speak with individuals who no longer maintain contact with TFA. Future studies might address this area of concern by

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\(^{149}\) The fifth participant, Sarah, was identified via social media.
interviewing more TFA alumni who represent a broader range of placement regions and who have been identified by more diverse recruitment techniques.  

Finally, my commitments to postcritical ethnography have allowed me the space to grapple with the power dynamics that I identified in my research, all the while reflecting on my own position as a researcher who, despite being critical of TFA as an institution, is responsible for representing the stories of TFA alumni. This process has never been easy. At the same time that I was extremely impressed with the participants’ continued dedication to education and their desire to expand opportunities for students of color and of poverty, I maintained my concern with some of their accounts of their TFA experiences. This concern manifested primarily at the level of TFA as an institution, not at the level of the participants themselves, who were all very gracious and inspiring individuals.

Looking forward, future research might examine TFA’s recruitment and selection model, especially its ability to attract a more diverse corps of teachers. This is one area where traditional teacher preparation programs are lacking. Additionally, future research might investigate the relationships that TFA maintains with schools and districts via interviews with teachers, administrations, and district personnel. To date, there is research regarding principal satisfaction of TFA corps members, but none of which I am aware that looks specifically at the relationships between schools and TFA staff. This is an area worthy of study in that it would reveal how TFA functions “on the ground” from perspectives other than corps members in the schools, which is what this dissertation work has shown.

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150 Although I attempted to locate a wider range of participants via social media, my efforts resulted in my being “flagged” by TFA staff. In many ways, this reflects the insularity of the organization. TFA is very protective of its corps members, presumably as the result of its being the target of a healthy amount of negative press.
151 See, for example, my discussions of teacher demographics in chapter two.
Conclusions

In order to establish more long-term, systemic change in the education sector, we have to stop “thinking less than” about the teachers who have the most intimate knowledge of the daily realities of the classroom and the unique student populations for whose outcomes they are primarily responsible. Although TFA is certainly not alone in its perpetuation of this sort of mindset, its mission and understanding of educational change is one place to start. Although I was exceedingly impressed by all of the participants with whom I spoke, I take issue with TFA as an institution that is having an ever-expanding impact on our nation’s most under-served student populations.

In chapter one, I outlined Gloria Landon-Billings’ (2006a) conception of the education debt that manifests: 1) historically in the inequitable practices that have traditionally targeted students of color and of poverty (e.g., Anderson, 1988; Fultz, 1995; Tyack, 2004); 2) economically both in the funding disparities that disproportionately impact schools serving large populations of targeted student groups and in the wealth disparities that have accumulated between, for example, Whites and Blacks; 3) sociopolitically in the extent to which communities of color have been excluded from the democratic process; and 4) morally in our approval (whether intentional or otherwise) of practices that are overwhelmingly inconsistent with what we know to be right and just. Although TFA attempts to address that debt in various forms, its ultimate implementation has been a bit shortsighted.

TFA does aim to serve student populations who have traditionally been targeted by inequitable educational practices, and so reveals a concern with the historical component of the education debt. However, I contend that TFA fails to adequately address the economic, socio-political, and moral components of the debt, largely as a result of the high attrition rates of its
teachers, and so falls short of its goals. Economically, the organization’s high attrition rates suggest that districts must constantly invest in replenishing its staff, which often exacerbates already poor fiscal situations.

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. Why is it acceptable for our most underserved students to be taught by our most under-prepared and inexperienced teachers? Although TFA is not alone in its provision of these sorts of inequitable educational practices, it does provide one increasingly powerful example of how these inequities negatively impact students and teachers.

Additionally, when the locus of change rests with corps members, as opposed to the students whom corps members serve, long-term change seems improbable. A majority of the participants with whom I spoke, and TFA as an institution, characteristically neglect to address change in terms of students. Instead, change is typically located within the corps members themselves and/or the education sector, an orientation that is consistent with the organization’s high rates of attrition. In this way, TFA seems rather to benefit its recruits, not the students whom it is designed to help. The TFA model, then, only serves to reinforce existing structures of inequality that disproportionately target students of color and of poverty. In my efforts to imagine more equitable educational outcomes, I do not see TFA, in its current form, as a feasible
solution for long-term educational change, and I contend that our students and teachers, both TFA and otherwise, deserve more.
List of References


*Educational Researcher, 36*(6), 318-334.


Appendices
All applicants are encouraged to read the Form B guidelines. If you have any questions as you develop your Form B, contact your Departmental Review Committee (DRC) or Research Compliance Services at the Office of Research.

I. IDENTIFICATION OF PROJECT

1. Principal Investigator Co-Principal Investigator:

   Ashlee Anderson  
   1126 Volunteer Boulevard  
   416 Claxton Complex  
   Knoxville, TN 37996-3456  
   865-604-1462  
   abanders@utk.edu

   Faculty Advisor:

   Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon  
   1126 Volunteer Boulevard  
   420 Claxton Complex  
   Knoxville, TN 37996-3456  
   Phone: 865-974-9505  
   Email: bthayer@utk.edu
II. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Teach for America (TFA), a non-profit organization designed to recruit top-performing college graduates and professionals into two-year teaching commitments in urban and rural public school districts, has been the subject of an expanding body of research designed to assess the organization’s overall efficacy. The purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to this growing body of research through an exploration of just one element of TFA’s theoretical mission: the preparation of a national corps of leaders who share a long-term commitment to educational change. Specifically, I investigate the organization’s pre- and in-service support practices and the extent to which these prepare recruits for long-term investments in the education sector, both inside the classroom and beyond. I plan to do so through a postcritical ethnographic analysis of the corps experiences of former TFA recruits who are no more than three years removed from the program and whose service was carried out in [southeastern state], a state that is currently highlighted in the popular discourse of education reform. The research questions that will guide this dissertation include:
1. How are corps members maintained throughout their two-year commitments?
2. What sorts of pre- and in-service support practices do corps members experience?
3. What happens after a corps member’s commitment is satisfied, i.e. post-service plans?
4. For what sorts of post-service careers related to education (and otherwise) do recruits feel prepared?
5. What qualities and/or experiences do “lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” possess and/or pursue and how do TFA’s corps maintenance practices reflect that commitment?

III. DESCRIPTION AND SOURCE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This dissertation will use purposeful sampling that builds on existing professional contacts and establishes new contacts via social media to identify eight to ten former TFA recruits who are no more than three years removed from the program and whose service was carried out in [southeastern state]. This population decision was made in an effort to capture common curricular and state-specific experiences. Upon IRB approval, the researcher will contact potential interviewees, who will be informed in writing regarding the purposes and procedures of the study. Participation will be entirely voluntary. The participant group will be over eighteen years of age and will not exclude participants based on race and/or social class.

IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The dissertation will involve both face-to-face and web-based interviews (e.g., Skype) with former TFA recruits. After contact has been established, participants will be given a statement of informed consent for review (see Appendix B). Should they agree to participate, their approval will be documented via signatures on the informed consent forms. Once these forms have been collected, an interview will be scheduled at a time convenient to both the participant and the researcher. Interviews will be conducted until saturation (the point at which the information shared with the researcher is not new) is reached.

The interviews will employ a semi-scripted format (see Appendix C). A series of questions will be used to guide the interview session, which may last anywhere from 30-60 minutes. The amount of time dedicated to each interview will dictate the amount of interviews needed.

Each interview will be digitally recorded using a small recording device that will be stored in a locked cabinet in Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon’s campus office (Claxton Bldg., Room 420 at the University of Tennessee). Each interview will be anonymized (participants will be asked to select pseudonyms to which they will be referred in both the transcriptions and final papers) and transcribed by the researcher and/or an outside transcriber, who will be required to sign a confidentiality pledge (see Appendix D). Once the transcriptions are complete, the original audio files will be destroyed. Transcriptions will be saved as Word documents on the researcher’s password-protected, encrypted computer as well as on a USB flash-drive that will be kept in Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon’s locked campus office. Transcripts will be coded using ATLAS.ti software on the researcher’s password-protected, encrypted computer, and the data identified in coding will be thematically analyzed. Consent forms and research data will be stored in separate
locked cabinets in Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon’s campus office to eliminate the possibility of matching names to data.

Should participants elect to produce documents to supplement the information provided in the interviews (e.g., curricula), that material will be subject to the same protections as the above-described interview data (i.e., anonymized and stored in Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon’s locked campus office).

V. SPECIFIC RISKS AND PROTECTION MEASURES

There is always the possibility that, through self-reflection during the interviews, participants may discuss previous events and/or issues that are emotionally hurtful. If necessary, the participant will be provided with information on counseling. There are no known physical risks to the participants.

VI. BENEFITS

The information obtained from interviewees will add to the growing body of research literature that details Teach For America’s overall efficacy.

VII. METHODS FOR OBTAINING "INFORMED CONSENT" FROM PARTICIPANTS

Individuals identified through purposeful sampling will be informed of the requirements of the study and advised of their rights as participants, i.e. participation will be voluntary, non-compensatory, and may be discontinued at any time. Those who agree to participate in the study will be provided a copy of the informed consent form prior to their participation in the interviews, most likely as an email attachment. At the beginning of each interview, I will go over the informed consent form point-by-point in order to clear up any potential misunderstandings. After this, each participant will be asked to sign the form in order to participate in the interview. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for the duration of the project in a locked file in Dr. Thayer-Bacon’s campus office (Claxton Bldg., Room 420 at the University of Tennessee). Notes will be kept in a separate file cabinet in Dr. Thayer-Bacon’s office. They will be destroyed in three years.

VIII. QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INVESTIGATOR(S) TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I am a Ph.D. candidate in Learning Environments and Educational Studies. I have training in the ethics and procedures of qualitative research, and I currently hold a graduate teaching certificate in qualitative methods.

IX. FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT TO BE USED IN THE RESEARCH

Conversations will be conducted in a space agreed upon by both the participants and the researcher. Interview sessions will be recorded using a small, digital recording device.

X. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PRINCIPAL/CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S)
By compliance with the policies established by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Tennessee the principal investigator(s) subscribe to the principles stated in "The Belmont Report" and standards of professional ethics in all research, development, and related activities involving human subjects under the auspices of The University of Tennessee. The principal investigator(s) further agree that:

1. Approval will be obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to instituting any change in this research project.

2. Development of any unexpected risks will be immediately reported to Research Compliance Services.

3. An annual review and progress report (Form R) will be completed and submitted when requested by the Institutional Review Board.

4. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for the duration of the project and for at least three years thereafter at a location approved by the Institutional Review Board.

XI. SIGNATURES

ALL SIGNATURES MUST BE ORIGINAL. The Principal Investigator should keep the original copy of the Form B and submit a copy with original signatures for review. Type the name of each individual above the appropriate signature line. Add signature lines for all Co-Principal Investigators, collaborating and student investigators, faculty advisor(s), department head of the Principal Investigator, and the Chair of the Departmental Review Committee. The following information should be typed verbatim, with added categories where needed:

Principal Investigator:  Ashlee Anderson

Signature:  _________________  Date:  _________________

Student Advisor (if any):  Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon

Signature:  _________________  Date:  _________________

XII. DEPARTMENT REVIEW AND APPROVAL

The application described above has been reviewed by the IRB departmental review committee and has been approved. The DRC further recommends that this application be reviewed as:

[ ] Expedited Review -- Category(s):  _________________

OR
[ ] Full IRB Review

Chair, DRC: ______________________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________ Date: _________________

Department Head: ____________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________ Date: _________________

Protocol sent to Research Compliance Services for final approval on (Date) : __________

Approved:
Research Compliance Services
Office of Research
1534 White Avenue

Signature: ____________________________ Date: _________________

For additional information on Form B, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer or by phone at (865) 974-3466.
Appendix B
Informed Consent Statement

Teach For America Corps Maintenance Practices & Long-Term Educational Change

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand how you were prepared by Teach For America to contribute to long-term change in the education sector, both inside the classroom and beyond.

PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
You will be participating in an interview. These interviews will be semi-structured in that there will be a list of questions to guide the interview, but you will ultimately direct where the interview goes. The interview will last anywhere from 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews will be digitally recorded to ensure accuracy in your responses and then transcribed by the researcher.

RISKS
There are no known physical risks to participating in this research study. Through self-reflection during the interview you may discuss previous events and/or issues that were emotionally hurtful. If necessary, you will be provided with information on counseling.

BENEFITS
The benefit of participating in this research study is to help contribute to the body of knowledge regarding Teach For America’s overall efficacy.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to the researcher conducting the study and her advisor. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study. You will be asked to select a pseudonym of your choice, which will be used to refer to you throughout the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Ashlee Anderson, at 1126 Volunteer Blvd., Knoxville, TN 37916, and (865) 604-1462 or abanders@utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT
I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.
Participant's signature ___________________________ Date __________
Investigator's signature ___________________________ Date __________
Appendix C
Participant Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
   a. Brief life story
   b. Self-definitions
   c. What are you doing now?
      i. Job?
      ii. Work in education?

2. Motivation?
   a. What drew you to education?
   b. What drew you to TFA?

3. Tell me how you became involved with TFA.
   a. How did you find out about the organization?
   b. Recruitment practices?

4. Tell me about the admissions process.
   a. Placement?

5. Tell me about your pre-service training.
   a. Describe the preparation that you experienced.
   b. What stands out for you in your teacher preparation?
   c. Did you feel adequately prepared?
      i. How so?
      ii. In what areas?

6. Tell me about your first year.
   a. What stands out?
   b. How did you feel about teaching in a low-income school?
   c. Where did you excel?
   d. Where do you feel you could have improved?

7. Tell me about your in-service training.
   a. Describe the preparation that you experienced.
      i. School-based?
      ii. TFA?
   b. What stands out for you in your teacher preparation?
   c. Did you feel adequately prepared?
      i. How so?
      ii. In what areas?

8. Tell me about your second year.
   a. What stands out?
   b. How did you feel about teaching in a low-income school?
   c. Where did you excel?
   d. Where do you feel you could have improved?
   e. What were your post-service plans?
      i. Did TFA impact those plans? If so, how?
      ii. What supports did TFA provide to help you to accomplish those plans?

9. Long-term plans?
a. What are you doing now?
b. Did your work with TFA impact your career decisions?
   i. How so?
   ii. What elements of your training contributed to your long-term plans?
c. For what sorts of post-service careers did you feel prepared?
   i. What qualities and/or experiences do you feel are relevant to those careers?
   ii. How did TFA contribute?
d. Did your preparation impact your understandings of education and schooling?
   i. Explain why or why not.
e. Did your preparation impact your career decisions?
   i. How so?

10. Pre-conceptions?
   a. What do you see as the most pressing issues in education?
      i. How do you think TFA addresses those areas?
      ii. How did/do you address those areas?
   b. What would a successful school look like?
   c. What would change look like?
      i. Define educational change.
      ii. What does it mean to be a change agent?
      iii. Who changes schools?
   d. What roles do you think various stakeholders play?
      i. The teacher?
      ii. Administrators?
      iii. Policymakers?
      iv. Students?
      v. Parents/Guardians?
      vi. Community?

11. For those who have left their original placement schools → What influenced your decision to . . . ?
12. For those who have left teaching (through job promotion in education) → What influenced your decision to . . . ?
13. For those who have left the education field → Explain what factors affected your decision to leave the field.
Appendix D
Transcriber’s Pledge of Confidentiality

As a transcribing typist of this research project, I understand that I will be hearing tapes of confidential interviews. The information on these tapes has been revealed by research participants who participated in this project on good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentially agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information on these tapes with anyone except the primary researcher of this project. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards, and I pledge not to do so.

________________________________________  _________________________
Transcribing Typist                        Date
Appendix E
Recruitment Letter

Greetings!

My name is Ashlee Anderson, and I am a doctoral candidate in Learning Environments and Educational Studies at the University of Tennessee. I am recruiting potential interviewees for my dissertation research, which will investigate how corps members are prepared by TFA to contribute to long-term change in the education sector. Specifically, I will be looking at the organization’s pre- and in-service support practices and the extent to which these prepare recruits for a long-term commitment to educational change. I plan to do so through an ethnographic study of the corps experiences of former TFA recruits who are no more than three years removed from the program and whose service was carried out in [southeastern state]. This study will involve face-to-face and/or web-based (e.g., Skype) interviews (approximately 30-60 minutes) with former TFA recruits that will be guided by the following research questions:

1. How are corps members maintained throughout their two-year commitments?
2. What sorts of pre- and in-service support practices do corps members experience?
3. What happens after a corps member’s commitment is satisfied, i.e. post-service plans?
4. For what sorts of post-service careers related to education (and otherwise) do recruits feel prepared?
5. What qualities and/or experiences do “lifelong leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity” possess and/or pursue and how do TFA’s corps maintenance practices reflect that commitment?

If you think that you might be interested in participating or have any questions regarding this study, please contact me at abanders@utk.edu or at (865) 604-1462.

Thanks so much for your time!
Ashlee Anderson
Ph.D. Candidate, Learning Environments and Educational Studies
University of Tennessee
abanders@utk.edu
(865) 604-1462
Vita

Ashlee Anderson is from Knoxville, TN, where she received her undergraduate degree in Classics and Anthropology from the University of Tennessee. She went on to obtain a Master of Arts degree in Classical Languages from the University of Georgia, after which she taught high school Latin in Columbia, SC under an alternative licensure. After moving back to Knoxville, Ashlee worked as an Education Specialist with UTK’s Pre-College Enrichment programs, an opportunity that eventually led to her enrollment in the Learning Environments and Educational Studies program at UTK. As a scholar, her primary research interests are foundations of education/sociology of education, teacher education/teacher development, qualitative research methodologies, education policy and reform, international education, equity and social justice, and cultural studies in education.