



'Policy embodiment': Alternative certification and Teach For America teachers in traditional public schools

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers embody high-level policies in their schools.
- The concept of 'policy embodiment' advances sociocultural policy studies.
- Teach For America teachers may face resistance in traditional public schools.

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ABSTRACT

A vociferous policy debate concerning Teach For America (TFA) and alternative certification programs can be heard in many countries where 'Teach For ...' initiatives are found. Yet limited scholarship has examined how TFA teachers must negotiate negative reactions from non-TFA teachers. Drawing on interview data with 27 TFA teachers in public schools in the Midwestern United States, this article uses a sociocultural policy analysis framework to explore how these teachers are positioned as embodiments of alternative certification policy and the larger organization, TFA. It further articulates the broad conceptual application of educational 'policy embodiment' beyond the TFA case study.

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1. Introduction

One of the most fervent and contentious education policy debates in the U.S. today concerns the preparation, placement, and support of teachers through alternative routes that compete with traditional teacher education programs. Although Teach For America (TFA) is not the only program in the United States that recruits and trains teachers through alternative pathways, it is certainly one of the most visible. TFA's political prominence as an advocate for education reform continues to grow alongside its cadre of teachers, known as corps members (CMs), which has grown to more than 50,000 alumni since its inception in 1990 (TFA, 2017b). These CMs comprise a small minority of the nearly three million working teachers in the U.S., but their growing presence in underperforming schools that largely educate students receiving free and reduced lunch has sparked considerable controversy

within the field of education and the broader public sphere. Moreover, TFA has spawned a global network of similar organizations (e.g., Teach For Austria, Teach For Ghana, Teach For Qatar) under the umbrella organization, Teach For All. While prominent supporters and public figures such as musician John Legend and former chancellor of Washington, DC public schools Michelle Rhee, promote the message and core mission of these organizations—to reduce inequity and the achievement gap—many scholars, educators, and community members continue to express trenchant concerns.

TFA has certainly received mixed reviews. Critics argue that TFA contributes to the deprofessionalization of teaching by circumventing traditional teacher education structures and allowing 'underqualified' teachers into the profession (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2011; Kretchmar, 2014; Labaree, 2010); that students who need the most assistance should not be educated by the least experienced teachers (Scott, 2015; Strauss, 2013); that TFA teachers displace experienced teachers from the local community (White, 2016); and that privileged graduates from highly-ranked

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universities who become TFA corps members embody a savior or “epic hero” complex (Trujillo & Scott, 2014, p. 58) predicated on a deficit view of both the students and communities where they teach (Anderson, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Houck, 2015; Martin, 2015). Relevant policy issues, therefore, abound. These include questions concerning whether state legislatures and federal policies should encourage alternative certification programs and TFA, which schools should partner with TFA and hire CMs and how they should be hired (Brewer, Kretchmar, Sondel, Ismael, & McGlenn Manfra, 2016), and what systems should be in place to support TFA teachers in specific licensure areas such as special education (Thomas, 2017) and English to speakers of other languages (Hopkins & Heineke, 2013). In sum, there is vociferous debate about whether TFA and other alternative certification policies and programs do more harm than good (Grossman & Loeb, 2008), and this debate is increasingly being heard in the more than 40 international contexts where Teach For All operates (Blumenreich & Gupta, 2015; Crawford-Garrett, 2017; Gautreaux & Delgado, 2016; Nesje, Canrinus, & Strype, 2018; Rice, Volkoff, & Dulfer, 2015).

Despite its public prominence and these ongoing debates, there has been limited scholarship on the ways in which TFA corps members live, or embody, these policy debates in traditional public schools. While all beginning teachers face significant challenges as they navigate their new roles (Flores & Day, 2006; Fuller, 1969), and may operate in survival mode (Casey, Dunlap, Brister, Davison, & Martin, 2011; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011), this article focuses primarily on challenges faced by teachers who enter the profession through alternative pathways (c.f., Consuegra, Engles, & Struyven, 2014), especially through TFA, namely, and how they come to embody alternative certification and to serve as a visible representation of controversial educational policies that enable their entrée into teaching. For CMs working specifically in traditional public schools, where fewer ideological synergies may exist than in charter schools and where debates concerning programs such as TFA are generally more robust (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017; Weiner & Torres, 2016), navigating this identity and the attendant politics of policy can be incredibly complex.

This paper therefore adds nuance to the ongoing debate concerning TFA and related alternative certification options. Yet on a broader level it also introduces a new approach to considering educational policies through the bodies of teachers. Based on data from interviews with CMs in 27 schools in the Midwest, I posit the notion of ‘policy embodiment’, or the inscription of educational policy on the bodies of teachers whose presence in schools serves as a visual representation of the perceived shortcomings, rightly or wrongly, of alternative certification policies. This embodiment goes beyond their roles as actors or implementers of policy to their representation of controversial policies and of TFA itself. As teachers who typically did not complete traditional teacher education programs, CMs are positioned as outsiders by teachers who did so, and who often resent their daily encounters with CMs because they are physical manifestations of policies that allow for radically different, and abbreviated, preparation of teachers in public schools. The notion of policy embodiment is premised on a sociocultural approach to educational policy (Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Shore & Wright, 1997; Shore, Wright, & Però, 2011) and lends new insights into the ways corps members recognize and mitigate their complex positions in public schools. Finally, it shows how those who enter professions through alternative paths, including but not limited to teachers, are perceived by ‘insiders’ who completed more extensive traditional forms of training and preparation.

The first section of this paper briefly outlines the TFA program and the process for becoming a corps member, while the second

section reviews research related to TFA and policy studies, with specific attention to a sociocultural approach to the study of policy. The next section describes the research setting, participants, and methods utilized in this study followed by an analysis of the discourse employed by corps members related to how they recognized and mitigated policy embodiment in their schools. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of policy embodiment for CMs and other teachers who enter schools through alternative certification programs.

1.1. *Becoming a TFA corps member*

TFA began 1990, when Wendy Kopp realized her dream of turning her senior thesis at Princeton into a bona-fide program. With this program she aimed to catalyze what she perceived as an elite corps of teachers, the “best and the brightest” (Kopp, 1989, p. i), to work in underserved and underperforming schools. In Kopp’s words, these inaugural corps members were “some of the country’s most sought-after recent college graduates” (p. 47), and they were laudable because they chose to devote two years of their lives to teaching before embarking on “ambitious careers” (p. 37), presumably outside of teaching. In addition, considerable social capital and professional benefits are accrued through joining TFA; these benefits extend beyond the classroom and provide advantages in other sectors, should CMs opt not to remain in the teaching profession (Labaree, 2010; Maier, 2012).

At first, corps members entered schools in only a few locations across the United States, including New York City, Los Angeles, and rural Georgia. However, CMs are now in schools across more than 50 geographic ‘TFA regions’ throughout the U.S., and in 2017 3500 new CMs entered classrooms in more than 30 states (TFA, 2017b). The number of applicants wishing to join TFA has fluctuated in recent years: 46,359 in 2010; 37,000 in 2016; and 49,000 in 2017 (TFA, 2017b). Thus, its overall competitiveness has waned as well. Yet the organization has inducted 3400–3500 new CMs in each of the last two years, and seems poised to continue its expansion of both TFA regions and the number of CMs in teaching or leadership positions.

Amidst this growth, some structural elements of the training program have remained relatively constant. First, corps members must apply to TFA and undergo a rigorous application process before gaining acceptance to the program (deMarrais, Wenner, & Lewis, 2013). Both TFA and its critics cite the competitiveness and exclusivity of TFA as an attractive feature of the program. Indeed, the TFA application process is perceived to be so rigorous that a former corps member published an entire book devoted to sharing insider information about how to “build the skills that successful applicants exhibit to convince the selection team” for admission to TFA (Whitman, 2012, p. 1). Once they gain acceptance to the program, CMs are typically invited to attend a short induction program in the TFA region where they will teach. Induction generally serves as an orientation to the geographic locale and an opportunity to meet other corps members in the same cohort who will teach in that region.

A second core element of the program is the training program known as Summer Institute, which corps members complete before the school year begins and is generally five weeks in length. Summer Institute is designed to help CMs “learn essential teaching frameworks, curricula, and lesson planning skills” as well as facilitate instructional feedback from “experienced teachers who observe and coach them” (TFA, 2013). In fact, however, TFA often recruits recent corps members (and generally not experienced traditionally trained teachers) to serve as instructional coaches, known as corps member advisors, or CMAs in TFA vernacular, to teach and coach in the Summer Institute (Steudman, 2015; Taylor,

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