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# Why Do They Stay? Exploring the Factors that Contribute to New Jersey TFA Alumni Remaining in the Classroom Beyond Their Two-Year Commitment

Shavon Chambers  
shavon.chambers@student.shu.edu

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Why Do They Stay?

Exploring the Factors That Contribute to New Jersey TFA Alumni Remaining in the  
Classroom Beyond Their Two-Year Commitment

Shavon Chambers

Dissertation Committee

Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, Ph.D., Mentor  
Christopher Tienken, Ed.D.  
Joseph Nelson, Ph.D.

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education

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SETON HALL UNIVERSITY  
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OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

**Shavon Chambers**, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the **Ed.D.** during this **Fall Semester 2016**.

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

(please sign and date beside your name)

Mentor:

Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj

 11/28/16

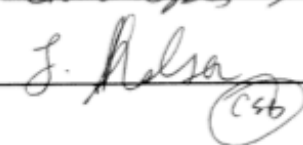
Committee Member:

Dr. Christopher Tienken

 11-28-16

Committee Member:

Dr. Joseph Nelson

 11/28/16  
(CSB)

The mentor and any other committee members who wish to review revisions will sign and date this document only when revisions have been completed. Please return this form to the Office of Graduate Studies, where it will be placed in the candidate's file and submit a copy with your final dissertation to be bound as page number two.

## **Abstract**

In the United States, there are more than 600 alternate route programs, including Teach for America, providing school districts with hundreds of new teachers every year (Feitritzer, 2009). The shortage of highly qualified teachers, particularly in urban school districts, is an ongoing concern in education and one not easily solved by investment in recruitment and hiring given that in urban school districts half of the new teachers will leave within three years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003) Despite evidence of the challenges of teacher retention and attrition, many teachers, including those in alternative certification programs like TFA, decide to remain in the classroom. The current study focuses on the experiences of 20 TFA alumni who are currently in the classroom five or more years beyond their two-year agreement date.

Findings from the current study show that participants shared similar experiences to their traditional teacher counterparts. However, many of their reasons for staying in the classroom were connected to the relationships built with students. Participants in the current study also focused on the different relationships formed with other TFA teachers, TFA staff, and key staff members in their respective schools. It is the general recommendation of this study that the training for TFA teachers become more personalized with an emphasis on student relationship building as well as meeting the needs of each new cohort member based on where they are in their career stage. These recommendations and other implications for future research and policy recommendations are discussed in detail.

Keywords: TFA, teacher attrition, teacher retention

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## WHY DO THEY STAY

### CHAPTER 1

#### INTRODUCTION

In the United States, there are more than 600 alternate route programs, including Teach for America, providing school districts with hundreds of new teachers every year (Feitritzer, 2009). Teach for America (TFA), in particular, has become increasingly popular among U.S. school districts to staff urban and rural schools, with over 3,900 new teachers being placed in the 2010-2011 school year (Donaldson, 2012). These new teachers, known as TFA corps members, often undergo a fast-track certification process in exchange for a two-year commitment of service. Many of the new hires are recent college graduates and lack formal teaching experience. Since TFA's inception in 1989, the organization has demonstrated a mission of "service teaching" by locating field placements for corps members in urban public schools throughout low-income communities of predominantly Black, Latino, and immigrant families (Tkaczyky, 2007).

A tension among Teach for America and public school districts centers on whether or not corps members are being hired and prepared to serve only a two-year term, rather than preparing them for a long-term professional career in K-12 teaching (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Currently, the research surrounding the retention and attrition of TFA corp members has mixed results. In 2007 over 4,000 new Teach for America teachers joined the teaching force; two years later, at the start of a new school year, roughly 36% of these 2007 Teach for America Corp members decided to remain in the classroom beyond their two-year commitment (Heilig & Jez, 2010). In a 2011 study examining the reasons why Teach for America corps members leave the field, 56.9% of the 2,000 new Teach for America corps members who participated in the study indicated

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that when they entered teaching, they planned to teach only two years or less (Donaldson, 2012). In addition to the new corp members who plan to teach only two years, another critique of TFA lies in the nearly 15% of the new hires who deferred a graduate program for the two-year commitment, making any plans to teach longer highly unlikely (Donaldson, 2012). Out of 44,000 Teach for America alumni to date, more than 70% of alumni remain within the education sector, yet less than 30% are still teaching in the classroom (Veltri, 2012).

### **Early History of Teach for America**

As the debates surrounding the mission and need for programs such as Teach for America within urban school systems grow, those in favor of these programs cite the original conception and/or mission of these programs as a rationale for their value. In 1989 Wendy Kopp, a student at Princeton University, conducted research focused on the achievement gap in urban districts across the United States. Kopp's research showed that within low socioeconomic school districts there was an increasing gap in the achievement of students compared to their peers taught in more affluent school districts (as measured by standardized test scores). Kopp's research also found that the recruitment of recent college graduates from teacher preparation programs primarily targeted school districts that did not have a high poverty rate or students with special needs. In 1990 Kopp's research led to the founding of Teach for America, which emerged as an alternative for school districts that had experienced substantial difficulty recruiting staff (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001) The original mission of Kopp's organization was to recruit students from top colleges and universities during their senior year and place them in districts with high teacher turnover shortage (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). While

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TFA supporters may identify this as an ambitious goal, many critics cite this initial mission statement as a band-aid for the rapidly growing problem of teacher turnover in urban school districts. Over the past two decades Teach for America has evolved into an organization that provides primarily urban and rural districts with first-year teachers that are recruited from the top 10% of graduating classes of highly ranked universities and colleges across the United States. By 2000, ten years after the inception of Teach for America, over 7,000 teachers had served in over 45 districts in the United States. In 2009 4,500 new teachers entered the summer institute to join the new teaching pool for the upcoming school year (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). At the start of the 2014-2015 school year over 5,000 new teachers entered the summer institute, yet concern regarding TFA grew, as 18 school districts have begun or already ended their long-standing partnership with the organization. Citing the revolving door of new teachers every year, the school district's belief in the impact of TFA corps member in their classrooms as no longer beneficial.

### **Expansion in Teach for America/Alternate Route Certificate Programs**

In the early 2000s, as Teach for America and other alternate certificate programs such as New York City Teaching Fellows, TEACH Now, and Math for America Fellows program began to gain more prominence, changes were enacted to the federal education law and teacher certification requirements. Some key components of these changes required new teachers to demonstrate their ability to teach through various subject- and grade-specific tests as well as certain courses from their bachelor's program. In 2001, the education sector experienced a significant change with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which had direct implications for teacher certification requirements. (Public

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Law PL 107-110, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) The bill mandated that all teachers be “highly qualified” in their content and/or grade level throughout the K-12 educational sector. With these new mandates in place, in 2007 the U.S. Department of Education predicted that more than 2.2 million teaching positions would need to be filled over the next ten years (Nagy & Wang, 2007). Urban school districts experienced an increase in teacher attrition due to the lack of certified teachers who were ineligible to teach subjects such as mathematics, science, special education, and bilingual education (MacIver & Vaughn, 2007). As a response to the shift in teacher qualifications, 48 states and the District of Columbia created and/or sought out alternate route programs to recruit individuals who had college degrees in these subject areas but no teaching experience (Feistritzer, Harr, Hober, & Scullion, 2005).

### **Expansion of Alternate Route Programs in New Jersey**

New Jersey, similar to other states across the country, saw an increase in teacher vacancies due to the highly qualified teacher requirements under NCLB and the fact that many new candidates from traditional programs did not meet the mandated standard (Feistritzer, Harr, Hobar, & Ulf, 2006). Consequently, due to the undersupply of new candidates who met the mandated standards, in the year 2004 24% of teachers filling positions in the state of New Jersey were all alternate route candidates compared to the 18% of alternate route teachers entering classrooms across the country (Feistritzer, Harr, Hobar, & Ulf, 2006). Teach for America first emerged in New Jersey in 1994 in Paterson, New Jersey, and two decades later provides new teachers in seven urban school districts in the northern region of New Jersey and four in additional regions of the state.

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### **Attrition Rates in Urban School Districts**

Concurrent with the various changes to teacher certification across the country, the percentage of teachers resigning and/or transferring from urban school districts has increased at a startling rate. In the United States one third of teachers, roughly one million, enter and leave the teaching profession each year (Ingersoll, 2001). Almost 50% of new teachers leave the teaching profession completely within five years of entering the classroom (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Ingersoll, 2012). Various studies on teacher attrition in districts across the United States have found that urban school districts report higher attrition rates nationally for new teachers in the first three years following their initial hire (Acorn 2003, 2005; New York Department of Education 2004, 2005; New York City Council, 2003; Schindler et al., 2004). Weld's 1998 study and Ingersoll's 2003 study both found that in urban school districts 50% of teachers exit earlier in their careers compared to their non-urban schoolteacher counterparts. Consequently, in the 2000-2001 school year 8% of 3,377, 900 public school teachers left the profession completely, which mirrors the 8% of 3,380,300 public school teachers who left the profession only three years prior.

Despite considerable negative attention, the retention rates for Teach for America Corp members remain high during the first two years of the corps members' initial commitment. For example, in Baltimore 100% of the 2006 corps member class returned for their second year of teaching, while in New York City 96% of the 2005 Teach for America corps member class returned after their first year of the program ended (Higgins, 2011). However, as Teach for America corps members transition from active Teach for America Corp member status to alumni at the conclusion of their second year, the

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retention rate within the urban school districts declines. In 2009, out of 2,000 alumni who participated in a study on the organization's effectiveness, 47% indicated that they returned for a third year, while 18% continued on to a subsequent fourth year in the classroom (Donaldson, 2012).

### **Causes of Departure**

As a result of the increasing rates of teacher attrition within urban schools, there has been a focus in the research on investigating the reasons for teachers leaving. Lack of teacher preparation and consistent mentor relationships are two causes that many urban school districts teachers have cited as factors that contributed to their departure (Diffily & Perkins, 2002). In addition to teachers' sense of preparation, MacIver and Vaughn (2007) found, in their 2007 study on teacher attrition over a six-year period with TFA teachers in the Baltimore City Public school system, that the school environment was another reason cited by teachers for leaving. In a review of more than seven studies on the factors that lead to a TFA teacher leaving after their two-year commitment, Heilig and Jez (2010) found that the issues of lack of teacher contracts and low salary scale were the primary reason for leaving a school district shared by teachers in exit interviews. Several teachers in their study also indicated that urban districts lagged behind other school districts in notifying teachers of their job status, which led to non-tenured teachers seeking employment elsewhere (Heilig & Jez, 2010).

### **TFA Reasons for Departure**

TFA alumni have cited many of the same reasons for leaving the profession as their counterparts who participated in traditional route programs. Specifically, they point to the lack of preparation for high-stakes certification exams as well as the



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implementation of curriculum within the classroom as reasons for not extending their commitment to teach beyond two years (Veltri, 2012). A considerable number of Teach for America corps members enter the classroom viewing the two-year experience as an extension of career advancement. Similarly, many prestigious universities, as well as distinguished master's programs throughout the United States, have created special opportunities for incoming students who commit to TFA for two years. In Donaldson's 2007 study of older TFA teachers, 34% of Teach for America corps members cited educational advancement as their reason for not returning to the classroom in year three. Teach for America corps members also cited problems with the administrative leadership at their school as reasons for leaving. School environment, which comprises school culture, working conditions, and discipline, was listed as an additional reason for departing after the second year by 18% of Teach for America alumni over a three-year period (Donaldson, 2012).

### **Impact of Teacher Attrition within Urban Schools**

A variety of reasons exists for the growth of teacher attrition in urban school districts, yet the impact and long lasting consequences on the students and school districts are quite similar. When a Teach for America corps member resigns from a school after his/her two-year commitment, a more experienced teacher does not typically replace him/her (Heilig & Jez , 2010). Many urban school district leaders must decide if they can afford to hire a new Teach for America corps member or save funds by keeping a long-term substitute who may lack the credentials in a particular grade or subject area. (Bradley & Loadman, 2005). Students who receive instruction from a new teacher with less than three years of experience are one to two and a half years behind their peers in

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reading who have had an experienced teacher with four or more years of teaching experience (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). In addition to the years of experience impacting the classrooms, urban school districts have difficulty replacing Teach for America teachers that were certified in mathematics, science, special education, and bilingual instruction (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004).

### **Significance of the Study**

The shortage of highly qualified teachers, particularly in urban school districts, is an ongoing concern in education and one not easily solved by investment in recruitment and hiring given that in urban school districts half of the new teachers will leave within three years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003) While many studies indicate that over 50% of Teach for America corps members leave the classroom after their two-year commitment, 40% of Teach for America teachers do choose to return to the classroom for a third year (Archer, 2003; Williams, 2004). The benefits of these teachers staying in the classroom transfer to students in terms of greater learning gains under more experienced teachers (Heilig & Jez, 2010). Students who have a Teach for America teacher with at least three or more years of experience showed substantial achievement in mathematics and a subsequent increase in reading with a Teach for America teacher with five or more years of classroom experience.

Despite evidence of the challenges of teacher retention and attrition, many teachers, including those in alternative certification programs like TFA, decide to remain in the classroom. In order to provide students in urban and low-performing school districts with quality education, there needs to be a focus on what contributes to a new teacher deciding to return to teaching in their third, fourth, or even fifth year as well as

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the supports needed for growth into an effective teacher. The literature regarding what factors contribute to Teach for America alumni choosing to remain in the classroom after the end of the two-year commitment is limited. More significantly, there has been no research completed within a particular state such as New Jersey where 80% of the Teach for America alumni remain in the classroom at the end of their two-year commitment. Since there is a lack of qualitative, explanatory literature on this topic, administrators, school districts, and state policy makers are unable to determine the impact on student achievement as well as the financial benefits of Teach for America alumni that remain within their classrooms.

In the past five years, there has been an increase of scrutiny regarding the prominence of TFA in districts across the United States. Several studies that have emerged have focused on the partnerships between the school district and TFA or the partnerships with colleges and TFA to provide certification in a respective state. Studies that provide a glimpse of what individuals cite as their reasons for remaining a part of the 30% of TFA alumni who remain in the classroom are sparse. In addition, studies that have sought out the perspective of TFA alumni rely on surveys with interviews ranging from 5 to 12 as a sample size.

This study aimed to strengthen the research concerning how to support the retention of alternate route teachers, using a qualitative case study design to determine what factors contributed to New Jersey Teach for America alumni choosing to remain in the classroom years after their two-year commitment ended. The study also aimed to explore what factors contributed to TFA alumni transferring from a public school to a charter, as the expansion and debates surrounding charter schools is a topic that many

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school policy makers are facing at an alarming rate.

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this qualitative case study on New Jersey TFA alumni was to examine some of the factors that contributed to Teach for America alumni corps members remaining in the classroom after their two-year commitment ended and provide an analysis that describes key themes and/or poignant explanations that emerge through the data collection. The study was a narrative, interview-based study of TFA alumni in northern New Jersey. A sample of at least 20 Teach for America alumni who are still teaching were recruited from a list of all TFA alumni who stayed on past their two-year commitment and are currently teaching in New Jersey. The study consisted of interviews with these Teach for America alumni members who are currently in the classroom. Each participant was interviewed at least once for approximately one hour.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors contribute to New Jersey Teach for America Corp members extending their two-year commitment?
  - 1a. How does the school placement of the New Jersey TFA Corp member influence the decision to teach beyond the 2-year commitment?
  - 1b. How do the TFA alumni's reasons to teach beyond the 2-year commitment vary by race, ethnicity, gender, and age?
2. For TFA alumni who extended their contract but moved from a district to a charter school, what factors contributed to their transferring to a charter school from a district schools after their two-year commitment?
3. For TFA alumni who extended their contract but moved from a charter to a

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district school, what factors contributed to their transferring to a district school from a charter school after their two-year commitment?

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The sampling procedures used in the study decrease the generalizability of the findings. This study is not generalizable to the retention efforts for all alternate route teachers, as this study focused primarily on the New Jersey Teach for America alumni. In addition, a qualitative methodology depends heavily on the skill of the researcher, who may have biases. Since surveys or questionnaires are not being utilized, there is also a limitation within the methodology of solely semi-structured interviews. A delimitation of the study lies within the location and time frame. The researcher designed the methodology to involve TFA alumni in New Jersey who responded in the 2015 school year, which limits the perspectives of additional TFA teachers who did not respond during this established time frame. Finally, the decision to limit the sample size decreases the ability to generalize from the findings, but it increases the depth of knowledge about each New Jersey Teach for America Alumni's decision to remain in the classroom.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Achievement Gap** - this widely-used term references the growing educational inequity in U.S. urban (and rural) schools. For the purpose of this study, achievement gap will specifically refer to the existing socio-economic and racial inequity, which contributes to the declining academic achievements of urban school students.

**AYP** - is a measurement defined by the United States federal No Child Left Behind Act that allows the U.S. Department of Education to determine how every public school and school district in the country is performing academically according to

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results on standardized tests.

**Highly Qualified Teacher** - A highly qualified teacher is a teacher who in addition to having a bachelor's degree, must possess full state certification or licensure and prove their competency in each subject that they teach through specific content and grade level tests as well as particular courses from their bachelor's program.

**No Child Left Behind** - The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was signed into law on January 8, 2002, by President Bush. The Act represents the president's education reform plan and contains the most sweeping changes to the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) since it was enacted in 1965. NCLB changes the federal government's role in K-12 education by focusing on school success as measured by student achievement.

**Stayer** - a teacher who remains at the same school at the start of a new school year.

**Mover** - a teacher who decides to move or transfer to another school at the start of a new school year.

**Leaver** - a teacher who decides to leave teaching altogether at the end of a school year and is no longer teacher at the start of a new school year.

**Teach for America (TFA) teacher or corps member** - refers mainly to recent graduates who are trained and placed into school districts at one of the TFA regional sites in the U.S. and who are 2<sup>nd</sup> year (or older) corps members who have had at least one year of teaching experience in the classroom.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Review Methods

This review focused primarily on qualitative and quantitative studies that were applicable to teacher attrition, alternate route, teacher retention, Teach for America as an organization, and TFA corp members. Information was gathered primarily from electronic databases (ERIC, JSTOR, SAGE, PROQUEST, Google Scholar, and Academic Search Premier). The limitations of this review are that only studies that examined teachers in K-12 settings in the United States were included. In addition, studies that were not within the time frame of 2004 to the present were not included with the exception of those that provided historical relevance. In addition to empirical research found in articles on qualitative research, books were also used. Finally, all of the selected sources were published in peer-reviewed journals.

#### Introduction

As of 2010, 48 states and the District of Columbia have some form of alternate route certification program for teaching (Teachingcertification.com). In the 2010-2011 school year, over 59,000 alternate route teachers joined the teaching profession, which is more than triple the 2,000 that began in the mid 1980s when alternate certificate programs first emerged (Teachingcertification.com) The partnerships between school districts and alternate route programs have increased rapidly, leading to more than 20% of new teachers annually being recruited through some form of alternate certificate program. Recently, three states, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee, conducted statewide analyses on the effectiveness of various teacher programs in their state. Each

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determined that Teach for America (TFA) is the most effective teacher preparation pathways and that TFA teachers outperform other beginning teachers (Harding, 2012).

The expansion of TFA from fewer than five states to over 43 regions and 500 new teachers in 1990 to more than 4,000 teachers in 2009 indicates that this particular program is still a prominent growing force within education today. However, the recent announcement of the Durham, North Carolina, school district to end a long-standing partnership with TFA indicates growing concerns with the popular program. Ingersoll's repeated studies on teacher attrition have indicated that the cost of teacher turnover is detrimental to all school districts, and the costs of recruitment remain significantly higher in urban and low-income schools (Ingersoll 1999, 2001, 2003). There are many studies on the topic of attrition rates in alternate route certificate programs such as TFA, yet the studies on retention with these programs remain sparse. It is clear that while many TFA alumni choose to leave the classroom after two years, there still remains a growing number who choose to stay. Understanding what factors contribute to these individuals' decisions to remain in the classroom can help district leaders implement new policies to retain new and current teachers within their schools. Increasing the retention of alternate route teachers who enter the classroom through TFA could save many urban and low-income school districts significant funds as well as enhance the student learning and organizational culture within these schools.

In this chapter, I review the relevant literature to provide an understanding of the ongoing problem of teacher attrition, efforts at retention and the response of alternate route programs such as Teach for America (TFA). Thus, the chapter is divided into six sections. First, I briefly review the literature providing an historical overview of the



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increasing demand for teachers, primarily in urban low-income neighborhoods. Second, I review the emergence of Teach for America as a direct response to the demand for more teachers. Third, I review the literature surrounding the emergence of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and its impact on teacher qualifications and the expansion of failing schools, as well as the increase in the number of alternate route certificate programs.

Fourth, in order to explore the connection between the passage of NCLB and the growing demand for teachers that continued in the early 2000s, I review the literature on teacher attrition with a primary focus on urban and low socioeconomic districts. The fifth section provides an overview of the evolution of TFA since its inception in 1989. The final section of this literature review introduces the application of the Super (1957) theory as the theoretical framework for the study.

### **Historical Overview of Undersupply of Teachers**

During the early 1980s, public schools around the country experienced several sudden changes that have left a long lasting impact on schools today. Many mothers were returning to the workforce, which led to an increase in the number of students beginning kindergarten (Ingersoll, 2001). This, in turn, caused a significant surge in the elementary school population. At the same time that student enrollment was expanding, the requirements of teachers within the profession of education also increased (Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1997). Curriculum and subject content also began to evolve throughout elementary and secondary education, replacing decades of routinized instruction for veteran and even new teachers (Snyder, Hoffman, & Geddes, 1997). As teachers with 30 or more years began to retire due to seniority and age, school districts struggled to keep up with hiring enough staff to replace the growing retiring teacher

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population. All of these changes led to a sudden onslaught of reports focused on the possibility of severe teacher shortages in elementary and secondary schools (Ingersoll, 2001). The two leading causes for this growing problem were growing student enrollments and the increase of retiring teachers (Ingersoll, 2001).

In response to the nation's growing concerns about teacher shortages, the United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics conducted its first school and staffing survey. Data collection for this first survey spanned the late 1980s through the early 1990s. The first major report began with the 1991-1992 sample, which consisted of 6,733 elementary and secondary school teachers at the beginning of the school year. At the close of the 1991-1992 school year, from the 6,733 sample of teachers 50% (3,343) remained at their original placement school, while 21% (1,428) teachers transferred to other schools/districts, and 29% (1,962) left teaching completely (Ingersoll 2001). Statistics from this national report supported the research findings of experts in the field, indicating that a teacher shortage was a growing epidemic in the United States.

As the demand for new teachers across the country increased, urban, high poverty public schools saw an even higher level of teacher turnover in the early 1990s (Darling-Hammond & Green, 1994). Poor work environments, low salaries, and lack of teacher support are just some factors that contributed to the increase in teacher turnover in these urban schools. Echoing these patterns, the results from the early 1990s Staffing Survey showed a surge of teacher shortages and low recruitment in school districts with low socioeconomic status (Ingersoll, 2001).

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Due to increasing budget cuts over the years, urban school districts faced an additional challenge of ensuring that school facilities were safe and in compliance. The resources provided to teachers in these school districts were limited; and since professional development is often teacher-led, these districts did not attract the highly qualified teachers who began to join the teaching workforce in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Darling-Hammond & Green, 1994). In addition to factors related to working conditions, the mandates implemented by NCLB in urban and low-income school districts led to additional scrutiny regarding teacher evaluation and meeting the demands of new curriculums (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Ingersoll, 2011). Ingersoll and Merrill's recent 2012 study on the patterns of teacher attrition spanning a decade from 1998-2008 found that teacher turnover in high poverty/high minority urban schools had reached a staggering 41% (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012).

### **Birth of Teach for America**

In the midst of national reports on teacher shortages and high rates of teacher turnover in urban school districts, Wendy Kopp, a senior at Princeton University in 1989, submitted a senior thesis with an idea for a national program where recent college graduates could join the teaching force. Kopp's thesis focused on the educational achievement gap between students in high and low income communities (Teach for America, 2014a). Kopp (2014a) noted that many low-income school districts reported a need for teachers who wanted to teach in their schools. Many of the teachers who chose to enter or were placed in low-income school districts had fewer credentials and significantly less accomplished educational records than those teachers getting hired in higher income districts. Based on her hypothesis that many young people of her

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generation would be eager to make a difference and would choose teaching over more lucrative career opportunities if a prominent and respected teacher corps existed (Garrard, 2009), the idea of Teach for America was born. TFA would select recent college graduates from top schools across the country to enter a teaching corps and this would give children in low-income communities access to highly qualified teachers.

Kopp's senior thesis evolved into a national campaign to get college students to commit two years to the TFA program. Kopp's original vision that students would have access to top scholars from across the country became a reality, as TFA recruitment was conducted solely on the campuses of Ivy League universities and top-ranked colleges. In 1990 the inaugural group of TFA teachers was formed with 500 recent college graduates who would go on to teach in Georgia, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, North Carolina, and South Louisiana (Maier, 2012). From its inception, TFA's focus remained rooted in the response to the national crisis on shortage of teachers in low-income neighborhoods and Kopp's personal belief that these school districts deserved to have teachers with credentials that were on a par with more affluent school districts (Garrard, 2009).

From the start, TFA's initial recruitment and training have been the two key elements that set the program apart from other alternate route certificate programs. Based on Kopp's core belief that all teachers must demonstrate a sense of leadership, each college student that is selected must demonstrate some type of leadership experience at the collegiate level as well as a minimum of a 3.4 GPA. TFA also differs from traditional-route training in that it is structured around the idea that good teaching skills are gained through direct experience and interaction with other teachers. These original

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foundational steps have evolved into the five-week summer intensive program that began in 1994 and continues two decades later. The final feature—the placement policy that appeared in Kopp’s original thesis—still remains policy. Agreements between TFA and school districts specify that TFA corps members must be placed in schools where students live in high concentrations of poverty and/or receive special funding under Title 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Within the first ten years TFA grew from 500 corps members in 1990 to 1,500 at the start of the new school year in 2000. As TFA continued to grow and the number of applicants increased, the reviews of the organization remained mixed. Critics cited the two-year commitment as a temporary fix to the teacher shortage (Donaldson, 2012).

Others felt that the five weeks of summer training did not properly prepare the new TFA corp members to teach in the urban and low-income school districts in which they were placed (Veltri, 2012). Yet, despite the growing concerns from critics, TFA continued to expand and evolve in order to meet the needs of low-income urban and rural school districts with high teacher shortages, turnover, and/or low recruitment of new teachers.

### **No Child Left Behind Act Emerges**

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the new role of standardized testing created a major shift in the structure of public schools around the country. Similar to Wendy Kopp’s 1989 thesis, the objective of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which was enacted in 2001 during President Bush’s first term as president, focused on closing the achievement gap between high and low achieving students (Maleyko & Gawlisk, 2008). In addition to this initial goal, NCLB emphasized the importance of closing the achievement gap specifically between minority and non-minority students along with the

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advantaged and disadvantaged students (Maleyko & Gawlisk, 2008). Policies and overall curriculum in the United States began to shift with NCLB, requiring that all states establish standards in reading and mathematics as well as science and develop assessments to determine whether students are proficient in meeting the standards (Borowski & Sneed, 2006). The way in which closure of the achievement gap would be measured, according to NCLB, was performance on the state-mandated standardized tests. The law required that all students, regardless of socioeconomic status and geographic location in the United States, demonstrate 100% mastery on state implemented Language Arts and Mathematic assessments by 2014 (NCLB, 2002).

School districts around the country faced a new concern regarding teacher shortages with the mandate of having all teachers labeled as “highly qualified” under the NCLB guidelines. A highly qualified teacher must have, in addition to a bachelor’s degree, full state certification or licensure and prove that he or she has full knowledge in each subject taught (NCLB, 2002) In order to prove subject mastery, teachers were required to pass a subject-based test as well as, in some districts, provide 18 or more college credits in the subject area they intend to teach. Prior to the highly qualified criteria, teachers were able to utilize one teaching certificate to move across grades as well as subject areas. Many elementary school teachers were often able to move across content area, and, in some states, teachers had certification that went all the way through eighth grade (Borowski & Sneed, 2006).

With the requirements of NCLB going into full effect by 2004, many new teachers were unable to fulfill all of the criteria to meet the highly qualified mandate. Middle school and high school teachers faced an additional step of meeting the highly

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qualified standard by having to submit a certain number of credits equivalent to a major in the specific subject they would teach. Many school districts encountered a growing number of potential new teacher candidates or transfers from other states who passed the state subject tests for their respective subject areas yet were still unable to receive a teaching standard certificate due to the missing subject credit hours from their bachelor's degree (Mead, 2007; Neil, 2003). The requirements of the highly qualified standard led to an additional teacher shortage in specific subject areas such as middle and high school language arts, mathematics, and sciences, as well as special education across the country and made the current teacher shortage within low-income and urban school districts significantly greater than their more affluent school district counterparts (Thornton, Peltier, and Medina, 2007).

NCLB also introduced corrective mandates for schools that were not meeting the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goal established to keep districts on track for 100% mastery by 2014 (Judson, Schwarts, Allen, & Miel, 2008). AYP is a goal that is created by the United States Department of Education that varies by state, city, and respective school districts. The attainment of AYP by a school is determined through a specific score on the annual standardized district assessment. For schools that do not attain AYP, the corrective mandates vary in severity from extended hours, mandatory professional development, state implemented walkthroughs, and additional assessments, up to required school leadership change. However, for schools that missed meeting their AYP goal for three or more years consecutively, a higher level of corrective mandate—reconstitution—would be implemented (Mead, 2007; Neil, 2003). Reconstitution within a school could mean the firing of an entire school leadership team, a department of teachers

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and, in severe cases, removing the entire school personnel. Moreover, schools that are forced to restructure an entire new staff face the task of having to recruit from a small pool of available highly qualified teachers, which in the case of urban and low-income school districts the pool is significantly smaller (McNeal, 2012).

### **Alternate Route Certificate Programs Expansion**

In response to the restructuring in failing schools as well as the demand for highly qualified teachers, alternative certification programs have emerged at a rapid pace (Ingersoll, 2003). Some alternative certificate programs like the National Louis University's Academy for Urban School Leadership focus specifically on turnaround schools in which entire staffs might be fired (Albina, 2012). TFA prides itself on providing teachers to school districts with high poverty and high teacher turnover with the notion that these cohorts of teachers will provide an excellent education to students who are not meeting academic achievement goals within their schools (Albina, 2012). Teachers who are enrolled in an alternate route program are able to bypass the immediate need for a highly qualified teaching standard certificate by qualifying for an emergency or provisional certificate (Donaldson, 2012). These provisional certificates allow the entrance of new teachers in both tested subject areas as well as middle and high school placements. Having the opportunity to hire teachers without the pressure of NCLB requirements has increased the number of urban school district partnerships with alternate route certificate programs such as TFA, New York Teachers Fellows Program, and project-based alternate route programs in specific school districts (MacIver & Vaughn, 2007). Only five states in 1995 offered alternative route programs, yet three years after the passing of NCLB in 2004, 48 states and the District of Columbia offered some type of



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alternative certificate program (MacIver & Vaughn, 2007). Despite the growing number of alternate route teachers who fill the classrooms, the two-year contract that is in place makes programs like TFA a temporary fix for teacher shortages (MacIver & Vaughn, 2007). Similarly, although 17 cities in North Carolina have a long-standing relationship with TFA, the school district of Durham has decided to end their partnership with the final cohort for the current 2014-2015 school year. While the school district acknowledges the convenience of being able to place TFA corps members in high demand placements such as mathematics and science, the revolving door at the end of the two-year commitment is a cost the district feels is too much (Quesinberr, 2014).

New York City from 2004 to 2008 received approximately 10,000 new teachers through New York City Teaching Fellows Program (NYCTF, 2009). Sixty percent of all the new mathematics teachers for the New York City public school system during this four-year period were also NYCTF teachers. New York City, as one of the largest public school districts with significant turnover, partnered with NYCTF with the intention of increasing teacher retention in hard-to-fill schools and improving the quality of teaching the students received (NYCTF, 2009). However, despite the high number of NYCTF fellows, annually the teacher retention in these respective schools still remained lower than expected. In 2011 Foote, Brantlinger, Hayden, Smith and Gonzalez conducted a study with 167 New York city teacher fellows to learn about their experiences. The two key issues that were cited through these participants were the lack of content knowledge as well the need for veteran teacher mentors. While many of the fellows had been recruited directly from college they felt ill prepared for the demands of being in alternate route program and teaching for the first time. While many alternate route programs

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similar to NYCTF, and even TFA, state that many candidates seek out challenging schools and succeed, there is still a large number of new hires that do not, which adds to the criticism of these programs.

Alternate route programs such as TFA and NYCTF have continued to face criticism for various reasons. The first would be the lack of foundational coursework and student teaching that new hires missed in comparison to traditional new teachers (Johnson & Birkeland, 2008). Similarly, many alternate route programs recruit candidates with a strong academic background to eliminate the need for intensive pre-service preparation found in student teaching (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). Thus, without the student teaching experience and previous coursework, many new hires of alternate route programs go on to learn through on-the-job support, which proves to be a challenge for the teacher who is still mastering the demands of being a new teacher. (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). The task of juggling the demands of being a new teacher while completing training simultaneously increases the percentage of newly hired alternate route teachers exiting the career at an alarming rate (Johnson & Birkeland, 2008).

Another issue that critics of alternate route programs cite are the characteristics of those who choose to enter teaching through this route. Friedrichsen, Lannin, Abell, Arbaugh, and Volkman's 2008 qualitative study on newly hired alternate route teachers found that many were recent college graduates. Nearly 40% of the 19 participants cited not knowing what they wanted to do after graduation as the reason for signing onto this particular mathematics and science alternate route program. If these alternate route teachers enter the profession not knowing what they want to do professionally, then the

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chances of their making teaching a career declines significantly (Humphrey et al., 2008). Similarly, Chin and Young (2007) study found that many alternate route teachers identified as career explorers or as career changers.

### **Overview of Attrition**

Over the last decade there has been an influx of new teachers with over 580,000 entering the profession in the 2011-2012 school year (NCES, n.d.) At the same time, each year approximately one third of all teachers transfer to schools or leave the teaching profession completely (National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 2003). In Boe, Cook, and Sunderland's 2008 study concerning teacher attrition, the categorization of three groups of people known as stayers, movers, and leavers emerged. "Stayers" are people who remain in the profession at their current work site. "Movers" are people who remain in the profession but switch to another work site. "Leavers" are people who leave their profession altogether. The impact of movers and leavers on the profession are quite similar within a school district as it creates a vacancy that the principal and/or district personnel must fill (Ingersoll, 2011). Thus, for the purpose of this study the statistics surrounding movers and leavers are analyzed when discussing the high attrition and teacher turnover rate in the United States.

In addition to the rising teacher turnover rate in the United States, research shows that in high-poverty schools, teachers are 50% more likely to leave than in low-poverty schools (Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012). More recently, according to the 2012-2013 United States Department of Education Schools and Staffing Survey, out of nearly 3.3 million public school teachers only 84% remained at their initial placement school after the initial year of the study. Over 8% of the roughly 3.3 million public school

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teachers left the profession completely after the end of the 201-2013 school year. The remaining 8% of the teachers surveyed in the 2012-2013 school year transferred to a different school, citing work conditions as a major factor for their transfer.

Significantly, teachers from alternate route programs such as TFA and the New York City Teaching Fellows are more likely to leave than teachers from more traditional programs (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). These programs provide a fast-paced certification track and only require a two- or three-year commitment, which leads to lower retention rates for these popular alternate route programs. Furthermore, teachers that enter the profession through alternate route programs are more likely to be placed in a challenging assignment, often found in urban and low-income school districts (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010).

At the same time, more than two thirds of new TFA members did not plan to teach beyond their two years, which impacts the retention number of school districts who partner with TFA for new teachers (Donaldson, 2012). Thus, many researchers have noted that while school districts with high turnover rates seek out programs such as TFA, the departure of these new teachers at the completion of their two-year commitment does not solve the growing attrition/teacher turnover problem plaguing urban and low-income school districts across the country (Veltri, 2012). On the other hand, leaders within TFA often cite the retention of more than 60% of TFA alumni in large regions such as Baltimore as an indicator that the organization still contributes to the closing of the achievement gap. These ongoing debates continue to increase the tension between current and potential school districts and leaders and advocates of TFA.

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### **Reasons for Attrition**

Research on reasons for high rates of teacher attrition draws heavily on the results of the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and its supplement, the Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS). For example, in his 2011 study of the reasons for teacher attrition and/or migration, Ingersoll conducted an in-depth analysis of the 2008-2009 SASS and TFS reports. Of the nearly 3.5 million public school teachers surveyed in the 2008-09 SASS and TFS, 84.5% remained at the same school while 7.6% moved to a different school. The remaining 8% left the profession completely and were labeled as leavers (Ingersoll, 2011). The primary reasons found for teacher attrition outside of pregnancy and retirement were management and discipline problems, poor student motivation, inadequate administrative support and recognition, and poor salary (Ingersoll, 2011; NCES, n.d.). The analysis conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) also found that workplace conditions were significant in explaining teacher satisfaction.

Nearly a decade has passed since the analysis of the National Center for Education Statistics in 2008, and work conditions within schools have grown to become one of the most prevalent explanations for teacher attrition within urban and low-income school districts (Darling-Hammond, 2003; The National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 2003; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The poor work conditions that teachers cited as contributing to their departure from these urban and low-income schools vary from a lack of instructional supplies, the building facilities, the school culture, and administrative support, as well as the training opportunities within the school (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). The fact that teachers who already receive a

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lower salary based upon their placement in an urban/ low-income school district must also spend their own money on essential classroom supplies leads to many departures or transfers when the opportunity presents itself (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Other teachers cite the lack of resources for training, professional development, and or safe working conditions as factors that lead to their leaving a school district even with the factor of a higher salary (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Ultimately teachers move to find good working conditions (Johnson, 2004).

As new teachers begin to consider a school district the work environment, training and opportunities for advancement and salary are important factors. Many urban and low-income school districts cannot compete with more affluent school districts to offer to the potential new teacher similar benefits (Johnson, 2004). Consequently, the teacher turnover rate continues to rise in school districts across the country as many urban school districts find their already limited school budgets (from missed AYP goals) reduced, making the altering of working conditions nearly impossible (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Inadequate school leadership and the lack of professional autonomy constitute two other explanations for teacher attrition in urban and low-income schools. Ladd's (2011) study in the state of North Carolina analyzed the survey responses of teachers who left their schools over a six-year time period starting in 2002. The survey responses showed that nearly 56.3% of teachers noted that the lack of autonomy and decision making influence from their school leadership led to their departure (Ladd, 2011). Similarly, in a case study of 10 first-year middle school teachers who entered the profession committed to making it a long-term profession, by mid-schoolyear they demonstrated early signs of departing within the first five years (Mee & Haverback,

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2014). The prominent reason that led to these first-year teachers considering departing the profession was the organizational culture and the lack of support from school leadership with classroom management (Mee & Haverback, 2014).

### **Attrition within Charter Schools**

As the various studies have indicated, teacher turnover is a significant problem for district public schools but also a prevalent one for charter schools, although not always for the same reasons. In the 2012-2013 school year, there were over 6,000 charter schools in the United States representing 6.3% of the total schools in the country (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, n.d.). Twenty percent of these charter schools belong to a CMO (Charter management organization) with the largest CMO network being the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), organized in over 15 states with 123 schools across urban low-income cities in the United States (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, n.d.). Many TFA corps members who decide to leave their initial city school placement at the end of their two-year commitment are recruited by local KIPP schools (Kipp, n.d.). The KIPP School network emerged as an idea in 1994 by two TFA alumni who believed that longer school days, extended calendar, extensive extracurricular activities, as well as the best teachers can help close the long-standing achievement gap within urban and low-income school districts (Kipp, n.d.). The CMOs that run public charter schools are allowed to hire their own teachers without adhering to the strict NCLB highly qualified teacher requirements of their city district counterparts (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, n.d.) Yet, as the KIPP organization continues to grow along with other prominent CMO networks such as Uncommon Schools, Achievement

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First, and Democracy Prep, teacher retention and turnover remain an issue for these public charter schools as well.

In 2010 it was reported that charter schools lose between 20% and 25% of their teachers each year (Gross & DeArmand, 2010). Many of these teachers leave the charter schools due to lack of administrator support and poor workplace conditions, which is similar to their public school teacher counterparts. However, an additional factor that charter school teachers cite as the reason for their departure is job security, lack of the benefit of tenure or longevity compared to their public school teacher counterparts (Gross & DeArmand, 2010). Despite the reported high percentage of teacher turnover in charter schools, there are still a significant number who remain within their urban charter school settings. In a 2001 study in Wisconsin, 24% of the 956 newly hired charter school teachers were less likely to leave their urban charter schools compared to 19,695 newly hired traditional public school teachers (CRPE, n.d.) Similarly, the 2008-2009 SASS and TFS survey found that 31% of teachers working in urban charter schools were less likely to switch schools than similar teachers working in a traditional public school. Finally, teachers who are in urban charter schools are less likely to leave than similar teachers in non-urban charter schools (Gross & DeArmand, 2010).

### **Impact of Attrition**

Teacher attrition can have a significant impact on the level of student academic achievement and the quality of instruction within classrooms, as well as the overall school/classroom environment, regardless of the type of school. Ninety percent of new teachers hired are replacements and first-year teachers often taking the place of a veteran and/or more experienced teacher (National Commission on Teaching & America's



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Future, 2003). Schools that lose teachers and replace them with novice teachers face the risk of instruction being impacted, as it takes at least three or more years for teacher effectiveness to increase within a teacher's career (Hanushek et al., 2004; Murnane & Phillips, 1981; Rockoff, 2003). For example, the reading scores of students in a low-income school district in New York City declined over a five-year period when students were continuously taught each school year by a new teacher with two years or less of experience (Boyd et al., 2008). Teachers in urban communities often require extensive training beyond curriculum and pedagogy to understand how to meet the social and emotional needs of their students. The training needed to transform a novice teacher into a master teacher takes several years, and this does not happen with these novice teachers as well as TFA corps members who leave before they have the opportunity to become master teachers (Talbert-Johnson, 2001).

As new teachers continue to come and go in urban and low-income school districts, the chance for students to receive instruction from more experienced teachers diminishes (Heilig & Jez, 2010). As the high-stakes testing from NCLB mandates increases, students who receive instruction from teachers with two years or less of experience over three or more consecutive school years have been found to be at least one and a half or more years behind in mathematics and two or more years behind in language arts compared to their peers who have received instruction from teachers with four or more years of experience (Peske & Haycock, 2006). Therefore, teachers that are well prepared and capable have the largest impact on student learning and in schools with high turnover students are continuously exposed to ineffective teachers who have not had

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the opportunity to grow into more experienced and effective instructors (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

The repeated cycle of high teacher turnover in urban and low-income schools also impacts the organizational culture year after year (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). One study of five schools in the same urban school district with high chronic teacher turnover found that the high turnover led to a yearly restart of the instructional focus within each school and impacted the educational/organizational goals surrounding instruction of the school (Guin, 2004). Along with the yearly instructional reset, the level of trust as well as teacher collaboration were low in the schools due to the departure and entrance of new teachers year after year (Guin, 2004). Johnson and the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (2004) study surveyed nearly 900 teachers in five states and found that schools that had a higher level of culture of collaboration and positive relationships between staff had a lower teacher turnover rate. In schools that had a high teacher turnover, the number of novice teachers outnumbered the veteran teachers, which decreased the availability of mentor teachers as well as instructional collaboration within the school (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Hence, high teacher turnover stands to have a significant negative impact on schools, especially urban and low-income schools whose organizational culture steadily deteriorates and teachers do not have the opportunity to work with mentors and colleagues of various years of experience (Inman & Marlow, 2004).

Beyond the impact of turnover on student learning, there are also financial implications. In 2004 the Alliance for Excellent Education estimated a total figure of \$2.6 billion annually lost on teacher turnover. The financial costs attributed to teacher turnover vary by school district and state yet remain significantly higher in urban and

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low-income school districts. As the percentage of teacher turnover increases, the average of teacher experience within a school district decreases, which impacts the district salary and expenditures (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987). Public school districts rely on the contribution of teachers into their pension plan as well as budget, which increases only as the teacher's longevity within that same school district increases. For districts that have problems with recruitment, the impact on salary becomes an additional hindrance to attracting highly qualified teachers. The largest financial cost lies in the expenses required to recruit, hire, induct, and professionally develop the replacement teachers (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2000). For example, in three urban Texas school districts with high teacher turnover the per teacher cost is \$5,165.76 compared to \$345.92 in a district with relatively low turnover and recruiting problems (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2000).

These growing teacher costs are utilized in the recruitment and hiring of a new teacher as well as the payout of an ending salary and benefits for a retiring or transferring teacher. Similarly, in a study conducted for a group of 64 Chicago elementary schools serving larger numbers of low-income and minority children, the turnover cost based upon 20% of a leaving teacher's salary came to \$10,329.40 per replacement teacher (Chicago Association of Community Organization for Reform Now, 2003). These studies exemplify that the teacher turnover costs are high for schools across the country, where the budgets already remain tight. The money that is currently spent on teacher turnover could be utilized in many areas such as working conditions, professional development, and teacher salaries, which would lead to the improvement of instruction and student learning in these currently failing public school districts. The growing financial costs

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connected to teacher turnover remain another factor that proponents of TFA cite as a deficit of the program and its partnerships with school districts.

### **Teach for America in the Present Day**

With the emergence and passing of NCLB, the growth of charter schools across the United States, and the various reports on the achievement gap between students in low-income school districts as well as the high teacher turnover rate, the role of TFA within these school districts has evolved tremendously. In the past two decades since TFA's inception in 1989, more than 24,000 TFA corps members have been placed in schools across the United States (Higgins et al., 2011). In 2008 over 3,700 new teachers entered urban and rural classrooms via TFA in the United States (Heineke et al., 2010). In 2009, when the U.S. economy experienced a severe recession, over 35,000 recent college graduates applied to TFA, 11% of whom were Ivy League graduates (Miner, 2010). Out of these 35,000 applicants, only 4,000 were selected to join the corps, making the number of TFA corps members in the 2010-2011 school year 7,500 across the 23 states in the United States (Miner, 2010). Less than three years later, in the 2013-14 school year, 11,000 corps members were placed across 50 regions and were responsible for the instruction of more than 750,000 students (Teach for America, 2014b). TFA also reported that in the 2013-2014 school year there were over 32,000 alumni committed to the organization's mission through their own work as leaders and advocates in and out of the educational sector.

The hiring and yearly departures of new teachers within urban school districts creates a revolving door of inexperienced teachers providing instruction for students with arguably the highest learning needs (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). The succession of

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novice teachers diminishes the opportunity for students to be taught by, or exposed to, more experienced teachers. In Ingersoll and Smith's study (2003) of Teach for America corps members found that an estimated 70% of students attending these urban and rural school districts often spend four or more years with teachers who have less than two years of experience (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). These students fail to develop mastery in English language arts and mathematics in comparison to their counterparts who usually receive instruction from teachers with four or more years of experience (Peske & Haycock, 2006). Similarly, Heilig and Jez, in their 2010 study on the impact of Teach for America corps members on mathematics and reading achievement, found that students did not show growth in mathematics until having a Teach for America corps member with three or more years of experience (Heilig & Jez, 2010). For students' reading skills, only students taught by Teach for America corps members with at least five years of experience showed statistically significant growth. This causes concerns for critics who cite that traditional teachers who enter the profession are able to see significant growth in year three or four of the teacher's career based on preparation and the teacher's mindset (Miner, 2010).

There are many driving arguments of TFA proponents that vary from the two-year commitment, and the lack of preparation, as well as the views held by new TFA corp members for the profession as a whole. As TFA corp members approach the end of their two-year commitment, nearly 60% choose to exit the classroom annually, which leads to more teacher turnover in school districts already plagued with high teacher turnover and recruitment issues (Darling-Hammond, 2003). According to a 2008 longitudinal study conducted in New York City, which is one of the largest TFA partner districts (over 500

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corps members placed each year), only 15% of TFA corps members who started four years prior in 2004 remained in the classroom (Boyd et al., 2008). The impact on student achievement of TFA teachers leaving the classroom is another critique launched by TFA detractors. They argue that effective teachers need extensive preparation prior to entering the classroom as well as five or more years of being in the classroom before an impact can be made on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Thus, the current number of TFA corps members who choose to leave the classroom at the end of their two-year commitment does not translate into high student achievement or a decrease in the growing teacher shortage epidemic. Many of the recent graduates who join TFA often defer medical and graduate programs for two years, which decreases the opportunity for these corps members to see teaching as a career (Larabre, 2010). Finally, some critics cite the lack of preparation through a traditional college preparation program causes TFA corp members to see the two-year commitment as a stint rather than the opportunity to impact students with proper training through longevity within the classroom (Heilig & Jez, 2010).

Amongst the growing tension regarding the impact of TFA teachers with only a two-year commitment, the leaders of TFA have continued to argue that the organization's goal of closing the achievement gap is still possible. Founder Wendy Kopp, partially in response to critics of the effectiveness of TFA corps members, partnered with CREDO, a research group based at Stanford University to conduct a study analyzing the performance of TFA teachers in Houston (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). The Houston Independent School District is the seventh largest district in the United States and has recruited TFA teachers since 1993. The Houston TFA study examined teacher

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performance using student and teacher data for the Houston school district for the period of 1996-2000. The performance data of TFA teachers were collected and analyzed using state benchmark assessments, then compared against two groups of other new teachers who did not participate in TFA and all other teachers in the district regardless of the years of experience. The findings from the CREDO study indicated that, in reading, elementary students with TFA teachers scored one or more grade levels higher than students with new teachers, but did not score significantly higher than students with teachers with several years of experience (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). However, in mathematics, elementary students with TFA teachers performed statistically significantly higher on their standardized mathematics assessment than both their peers with new non-TFA teachers and teachers with several years of experience (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). In both reading and mathematics, the performance of middle school students taught by TFA teachers did not significantly differ statistically from their peers taught by new non-TFA teachers or teachers with several years of experience (Raymond, Fletcher, Luque, 2001). It is important to note that at the time of the study Houston, like many urban and low-income school districts, had issues with staffing teachers in the middle school, causing many students to have multiple teachers during the middle school years (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). The biggest finding from this study on TFA was that new TFA teachers did not do significantly worse in comparison to new teachers who had undergone extensive teacher preparation programs (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001).

While the debate about whether TFA is exacerbating rather than ameliorating public school problems wages on, a new perspective of the organization as a training

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ground for education leaders has emerged. One 2011 study on TFA alumni found that TFA has created a growing field of entrepreneurs in education (Higgins, Hess, Weiner, & Robinson, 2011). As of 2011 there are 49 reputable and successful educational organizations, whose founders were originally TFA corps members, primarily charter management organizations some that recruit and/or train human capital, and others that offer supplemental resources to the public education sector. For example, KIPP Academy co-founders Mike Feinber and David Levin created a successful charter school organization in 1994 that has grown to more than 130 schools across the United States. Similarly, TFA alumnus Chris Barbic founded YES Prep Public Schools, which has grown to serve 4,200 students at eight campuses through Houston. While TFA critics such as Darling-Hammond (2004) cite the lack of teacher preparation and attrition rates of TFA corps members as factors that indicate the organization's ineffectiveness, the success of organizations such as KIPP and YES indicate that the impact of TFA alumni serve as a potential change agent within public school education in the United States (Higgins et al., 2011).

### **Retention**

There is a large body of literature focused on the reasons for teacher attrition and mobility as well as the implications within schools. On the other hand, there is a limited number of studies surrounding the question of teacher retention, particularly in the current education context. In a 2005-2006 study in Utah, a survey was administered to five school districts to focus on teacher recruitment and retention (Utah Foundation, 2007). The study found that external characteristics of a school and district and the teacher's ability to implement discipline policies as well as smaller class sizes were all



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associated with lower attrition rates. From the survey responses, the top three suggestions to raise retention were a professional mentoring program, higher salary, and lower classroom sizes (Utah Foundation, 2007). Similarly, several studies have found that increasing teacher salaries within a high-risk school is one solution for increasing teacher retention (Feng, 2005; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Ingersoll, 2011). Finally, comprehensive induction programs, as well as successful teacher induction programs that focus on the professional development of teachers and their well-being were also factors that emerged as reasons for higher retention with urban and low-income school districts (Met Life Foundation, 2008; Cobbold, 2007; Curry & Obrian, 2012).

In response to the growing concerns regarding the retention as well as attrition within TFA, Heineke, Mazza, and Tichnor-Wagner (2014) conducted a mixed-methods study on TFA retention and attrition in a popular urban western TFA region (Heineke et al., 2014) The study focused on what TFA corps members do following the two-year commitment and what factors affect those decisions. Using the research of previous large-scale studies primarily on TFA attrition, Heineke et al. (2014) created three categories for this study entitled leavers, stayers, and lingerers. The category of lingerers is unique to this study, as it describes TFA alumni who often remain a third year but then decided to leave. Out of the study's 73 participants, 23 were leavers and 65% of them indicated furthering their education as the reason for their departure. Sixty-four percent of the 13 participants identified as lingerers stated that their school environment contributed to their remaining a third year. Of the remaining 37 teachers who were identified as stayers, 73% cited school environment within their initial TFA placement as the reason for choosing to stay.

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The Heineke, Mazza, and Tichnor-Wagner study (2014) begins to shed light on the factors that contribute to TFA alumni choosing to stay but is limited to a Western region where many alumni stay in their placement school. In addition, data collection consisted primarily of teacher surveys with fewer than 10 in-depth teacher interviews. The mobility of TFA alumni who remain in the classroom yet switch from public to charter or charter to public is a growing trend within TFA regions on the East Coast. To add to the current research regarding specifically TFA retention, this qualitative case study provides the perspective and stories of 40 different TFA alumni who remain teaching within a region on the East Coast. This particular Eastern region has been listed as having 80% or more of alumni remain in the classroom, yet the factors that contribute to this particular retention rate remain unknown. As the previous research has indicated, increasing the retention of teachers both in alternate route and traditional route will eliminate the high costs of teacher attrition as well as improve the overall achievement of students in low-income school districts.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As the research has shown, the rate of teachers transferring school districts and leaving the profession completely has increased rapidly. Understanding the various reasons why people choose to remain in the profession is important for increasing teacher retention within these low-income school districts. One way the decision to leave or enter a profession has been analyzed is by looking at the various experiences and choices within a person's life. There are various theories derived from psychology that suggest different relationships between age at entry, life experiences, personal preferences, and teacher turnover. A theory developed by Donald Super (1957, 1984) focuses explicitly on

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career development rather than the life cycle and holds that individuals move through stages that are not necessarily related to age. He identified four career stages: trial, establishment, maintenance, and decline. In the trial stage, individuals work to define their interests and skills and assess the fit between themselves and work. During the establishment stage, individuals establish commitments to career and professional growth. During the maintenance stage, they cultivate the accomplishments of other stages. During decline, individuals' emphasis shifts from career to other aspects of their lives.

A qualitative case study of New Jersey TFA alumni who are currently teaching examined decisions each alumnus made based upon what career stage they were in through the use of Super's theory. The participants' responses aided the researcher in determining what common trends exist, if any, that can be attributed to a participant's age or stage in his or her career as outlined by Super's theory. In Donaldson's 2012 study on older TFA teachers, the application of Super's theory indicated that most TFA teachers in the establishment stage and or maintenance stage chose to remain in teaching longer. Thus, as this study examines what factors participants identify as contributing to their decision to extend their commitment, the application of the Super theory helped identify and sort emerging themes and patterns from the participants' responses. Finally, as outlined in Chapter 3, this study continued the qualitative investigation of individual teachers' stories to help explore the complexities behind each teacher's decision to remain within a low-income school district.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine some of the factors that contributed to Teach for America alumni corps members remaining in the classroom after their two-year commitment ended and provide an analysis that described key themes or poignant explanations that emerged through the data collection. The teachers selected for this study are all TFA alumni who completed their two-year commitment and are still teaching at least one or more years after their commitment date ended. This study included examining their perspectives about what contributed to study participants' decisions to continue teaching in an urban school setting after their two-year contract has ended.

My initial interest in the topic of TFA retention is based upon my own personal knowledge regarding why I remained. It was important for me that while I shared similarities with the participants in the study as a current TFA alumni, I continuously monitored my interviews to ensure that I did not project my own beliefs and reasons for staying. By frequently reflecting on my own biases and reasons for staying throughout the study, I ensured that I had a balance of validity and transparency.

#### **Rationale for a Qualitative Research Design**

A qualitative research design was selected to ensure that I was able to collect data that reflect the perspectives of the participants. A qualitative study enables the researcher to focus on the individual meaning of a person's experience or situation (Creswell, 2008). In addition, a qualitative study is useful for describing situations, perceptions, attitudes, or beliefs various individuals may have, which then aids the researcher to explore a social

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problem or phenomenon through the answering of questions (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the use of qualitative research for this case study can also answer questions that may not be addressed by quantitative methods, which are rooted in the voices and opinions of the participants found in the collection of data through interviews.

The selection of a case study design was essential, as the case study allowed the researcher the flexibility of coming across new and unexpected results through interaction with the study participants, which provides a deeper understanding of participants' beliefs and opinions (Gay et al., 2006). Other statistical study methods such as, a survey may provide participant responses, but a case study allows the researcher to gather interpretive data through verbal response, which leads to more understanding of the participants' perception about a particular social or human problem (Creswell, 2007).

### **Data Source**

The primary source of data for this study was in-depth interviews that were approximately 30-45 minutes in length. The study participants included approximately 20 New Jersey TFA alumni, 10% of the New Jersey TFA alumni who are currently teaching in a traditional public or charter school. Each of the participants began their teaching career in a traditional public or charter school, and some have moved from one to another while others have remained.

### **Research Questions**

1. What factors contributed to New Jersey Teach for America Corp Members extending their two-year commitment?
  - 1a. How, if at all, was their decision to extend their two-year commitment related to their initial school placement (in a charter or district public

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school)?

- 1b. Are there discernible patterns in TFA alumni's reasons for extending their two-year commitment by race/ethnicity, gender, or age?
2. For TFA alumni who extended their contract but moved from a district to a charter school, what factors contributed to their transferring to a charter school from a district school after their two-year commitment?
3. For TFA alumni who extended their contract but moved from a charter to a district school, what factors contributed to their transferring to a district school from a charter school after their two-year commitment?

### **Sampling and Selection Procedures**

Potential participants for the interview included all Teach for America alumni teachers who are still working in a K-12 school. Given the large pool of potentially 150 or more TFA alumni subjects within New Jersey, I narrowed down the participants to New Jersey Teach for America alumni who are former TFA corp members that completed the two-year commitment and currently teach at a school in New Jersey. According to the 2013 annual Teach for America alumni report, New Jersey as a region has had 80% of TFA corp members extend their teaching career beyond the two-year commitment for the past five years (Teach for America.com). Based upon this high percentage in one particular region, I hypothesized that these participants would provide a wide variety of regional experiences and factors that contributed to their staying. Table 1 below describes the category in which participants have been placed.

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Table 1

### *School Type in Which Participants Have Been Placed*

SCHOOL TYPE	DEFINITION	Sample Size
Charter-Charter	TFA alumni who were placed in a charter school and still currently teach in a charter school.	2
Public-Public	TFA alumni who were placed in a public school and still currently teach in a public school.	4
Public-Charter	TFA alumni who were placed in a public school and currently teach in a charter school.	14

### **Recruitment Strategy**

Subjects for the study were recruited with the help of TFA staff. After both the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board and the New Jersey TFA Executive Director gave signed consent, I developed a recruitment letter for the research. The recruitment letter was sent electronically to all New Jersey TFA alumni on the TFA listserv through the *New Jersey TFA Alumni Newsletter*, a monthly issue which includes TFA news, happenings, and opportunities. The Director of Alumni Affairs also drafted a paragraph to post in the newsletter. It was indicated on the recruitment letter that participation was voluntary and that it was permissible for participants to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants contacted the interviewer by phone and email to indicate interest in the study. I also had the opportunity to recruit participants at alumni networking sessions as well as those who work with the New Jersey TFA Alumni Advisory Board. The recruitment remained open until there were at least 20 participants

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who signed consent to participate. I then set up a time and location for the interview. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and were conducted at locations convenient for participants (e.g., coffee shops, classrooms, and TFA office). The letter was distributed for two consecutive months in January and February (2015) and provided links to the IRB-approved recruitment letter as well as my contact information.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

After all members had granted their permission, the interviews began. Data collections for the interviews were conducted in a one-time, one-on-one interview with participants. The interviews took place in person or when requested by the participant via a video format through Skype or Face Time via an Apple iPad and/or Mac computer. Interview questions followed a semi-structured format; the general organization and content of questions were predetermined, but the researcher had the flexibility to adjust, reword, and ask additional probing questions. The topics covered ranged from general demographics, TFA corp member start date, educational background, years of experience, contents certified in, and school culture present and past. Conversations were tape-recorded and transcribed then read for accuracy.

### **Data Analysis**

As I conducted the interviews I analyzed the data continuously. Analyzing data simultaneously with data collection enabled the researcher to focus and shape the study as it was progressing (Glesne, 2006). I then transcribed and coded the data from each interview into themes using Google Sheets and Microsoft Excel. After the data had been uploaded, I read through all the transcripts to get a general sense of the information and began an open-coding analysis. I then made a list of all topics as well as organizational



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factors that surfaced in the review of the transcripts of the interviews that the interviewees used to help describe their decision to stay. I then determined a primary code for each identifiable factor. From these primary codes, I then grouped the organizational factors into categories and gave each category of factors a name/abbreviation, which became a sub code underneath a primary code. I then developed a matrix that grouped responses based upon the three types of participants. From this initial coding, I then compared the responses amongst the teachers who started at a public or charter school and stayed in the same school and the teachers who started at a public or charter school and moved to a different setting to see if there were any patterns. All of the factor codes and the codes for the categories of these factors were uploaded into Microsoft Excel to allow for coding, networking, and data chunking. The Excel document assisted in quantifying the frequency of the similar responses among the subjects and observing the patterns that existed in the responses. The data were then summarized into narrative form, using the teacher's own words to illustrate any themes in order to describe the factors that impacted their decision to remain in the classroom.

### **Validity**

This qualitative case study was concerned with the meanings that participants attributed to their reason(s) for remaining in the classroom. I was entrusted with the participants' stories to ensure that the information collected was presented accurately and remained credible. The interview format, which was in-depth, one-on-one, digitally recorded, and followed by immediate transcription, ensured the credibility in the content of the data. To ensure validity of the study, I purposefully recruited diverse participants in order to get a mix of perspectives rather than selecting participants from my own

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immediate network pool. I made sure during each interview that I kept detailed notes and was consistent with my questioning and probing techniques. I also wanted to seek the opinions of teachers from different settings, which is why I included those who are in a district setting as well as those who are in a charter setting.

To safeguard against my own bias as a TFA alumni throughout the data collection and analysis phase, reflective memos were written. Following each interview, I would write a memo about my overall interaction with the participant and how I believed the interview went. Any concerns that I had following the interview or breakthrough moments that I viewed as a success were also included in my memos. When I read through the transcription of each interview, I also stopped to write a memo detailing my initial interpretation prior to any structured coding and analysis of the data results. These memos enabled me to compare my personal interpretation of the data against the structured data analysis as an additional validity check to ensure that the results were derived from the responses of the participants and not my own researcher bias.

### **Reliability**

To ensure that the teachers' responses were truthful, I emphasized that I was not a supervisor or an employee of TFA so that I had no authority over them. I also assured them that none of the information provided would be shared with anyone and that their identities would be kept private. Using pseudonyms would assure confidentiality. By increasing the participants' level of comfort with sharing during their interviews, I increased the reliability of their responses.

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### **Role of the Researcher**

A researcher must question his or her own assumptions regarding his or her knowledge about and the value placed on the topic and subjects of the study (Sprague, 2005). As I conducted this particular study, there were several aspects of my personal and professional history that I am aware of that have contributed to my assumptions concerning the role of TFA within public school education. In the year 2009, I spent time as a child advocacy intern in the state of New Jersey working with students who were wards of the state. During my assignment, I often worked with my students inside their respective schools and assisted teachers with their behavior. One of the teachers that I assisted was a TFA corps member, and her program director inquired whether or not I had considered teaching. My conversation with the program director concerning the need for teachers in special education led to my decision to do more research on the organization and its mission. Once I realized that corp members could be placed in New Jersey, I decided to apply. I was selected to join TFA in New Jersey and was hired as a special education teacher in a large urban school district. During my two years as a TFA corps member, my assignment within my placement school was switched 11 times over the two academic school years.

Despite the lack of stability with being moved around from grade and subject assignment, I felt a connection to the work that I was doing as a special education teacher. When it came time for me to decide what to do at the end of my two-year TFA corp member contract, I decided that my work as a special education teacher was not complete but could not grow in my current placement. I remembered my commitment as a social work intern to work with disadvantaged students and decided that I needed to

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remain in the classroom. My desire to teach but also grow professionally led me to leaving my initial public school district placement and joining the staff at a nearby KIPP charter school. It is my belief that similar to myself several TFA alumni did identify their connection to their students and/or content expertise as the reasons for staying. Other TFA alumni cited their school environment at either their initial school placement or current school as the driving factor behind staying. There are also some factors that remain unknown to myself despite my own personal TFA story that I hoped to discover through the participants' stories in this study.

The next bias that I ensured I addressed within my role as researcher is the disadvantage that I have of insider status based upon my own experiences. During the interviews, participants sometimes referred to a shared session or program that alumni like me have attended without divulging too much information on the relevance of these mentioned items. To ensure that I was not projecting my own assumptions regarding shared experiences as a current TFA Alumni, I utilized a set of probing questions as follow-up to answers that did not provide much clarity for how the participant felt.

Finally, an additional bias that I am aware of are my current views of TFA as a program. Based upon the various forums and articles that I have read regarding TFA's expansion over the years, my personal belief on the program has shifted. When I was a TFA corps member, I was extremely upset at the lack of diversity that I saw in my region. Over the two years I often resented my TFA staff, as I felt they did not understand how I felt as a corps member of color. Over the past few years as an alumna, I have seen the organization evolve with the training offered to new corp members as well as the number of TFA corp members of color that enter each year. I am currently in a neutral

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ground regarding the effectiveness of the program as a whole and feel that certain participants may have wanted me to side with them regarding the program based upon their own beliefs and feelings. I did not provide my own thoughts or feelings about TFA during an interview session to ensure that I maintained a sense of objectivity through my data collection and would not influence the participants with my own personal beliefs and assumptions regarding TFA.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of this study designed to explore the factors that contributed to TFA alumni's decision to remain in the classroom at the conclusion of their two-year commitment. The results include an analysis of the participants' answers to structured and semi-structured interview questions. The study included 20 TFA alumni who participated in semi-structured interviews, and these former TFA corps members spanned TFA cohorts from as early as 1993 to as recently as the 2010 cohort.

The combined responses of the 20 TFA alumni reveal how school environment, relationships with various individuals, and support from TFA influenced the decision of many of the participants to remain in the classroom after their two-year commitment. Additionally, interview participants identified a number of obstacles they encountered during their corps year and beyond, and those challenges were consistent with what has previously been found in studies examining teacher shortages in high-need schools in urban school districts.

The data presented begins with a description of background information on the study participants. Next, the chapter provides an analysis of several recurring themes that emerged throughout the study, namely the relationships and sense of community that the TFA corps members identified as critical to their early teaching experiences. These themes, in turn, point to certain factors that contributed to each TFA alumni's decision to remain in the classroom after their two-year commitment ended.

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Table 2

*Cohort Year, Race, Gender, Teaching Subject, and School Type for Each TFA Alumni's Initial Placement.*

Names	Cohort Year	Race/Sex	Subject/Grade Level/School Type	Traditional TFA (Entered cohort straight from undergraduate program)
Lisa	2010	White/Female	Math/Middle /District	No
Amanda	2007	White/Female	Math/High /District	Yes
Bianca	2007	Black/Female	ELA/Elementary/District	Yes
George	2008	Black/Male	ELA/Middle/District	Yes
Nancy	2007	White/Female	ELA/Middle/District	Yes
Kim	2010	White/Female	Music/Elementary/District	Yes
Melissa	2004	White/Female	ELA/Elementary/District	Yes
Shantel	2009	Black/Female	All /Elementary/District	No
Matt	2006	White/Male	Math/High /District	Yes
Alice	2004	White/Female	ELA/Elementary/District	Yes
Rachel	2002	Latina/Female	Social Studies/Middle/District	No
Travis	2010	Latino/Male	Social Studies/Middle/District	Yes
Fatima	2004	Black/Female	Arts/Elementary/ District	No
Lena	2000	White/Female	Math/Middle/District	Yes
Brooke	2009	Black/Female	Math/Middle/District	Yes
Sharon	2006	Black/Female	Arts/Middle/District	No
Dana	1993	White/Female	Science/High/District	Yes

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Emily	2010	White/Female	ELA/Middle/Charter	Yes
Beatrice	2005	White/Female	Math/Middle/District	Yes
Darla	2010	Black/Female	ELA/Middle/Charter	No

Table 3

*Transfer Numbers for TFA Alumni from District School to Charter School, District School to District School, and Charter School to Charter School*

District to Charter School Transfer after two-year commitment	District School to District School Transfer after two-year commitment	Charter School to Charter School Transfer after two-year commitment
14	3	1

In this study, the TFA alumni shared many similar experiences to people who left the classroom within the first five years of becoming a teacher. They described the difficulties of their first few years in the classroom, the lack of training, and conflicts within their placement schools. However, as they continued to share their experiences, several differences stood out in comparison to what the literature has shown about their counterparts who left the classroom (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Ingersoll, 2011). These differences ranged from the attraction to the TFA mission, a sense of community both in their TFA cohorts and within their region, growth in their content, leadership opportunities, and a long-standing commitment to the students they serve.

In this chapter, I review their reasons for joining the corps followed by the initial first-year challenges. The next section presents several of the positive experiences that the TFA alumni described from their corp members experience. I then present the evidence surrounding the reasons many of the TFA alumni transferred from their initial



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placement school. The final section of this chapter presents the main reasons TFA alumni gave for staying in the classroom for five or more years.

### **Joining the TFA Corps**

Many of the TFA alumni shared similar reasons for signing up to become a Teach for America teacher. The most common were recruitment and informational sessions that were held at their respective schools. Brooke, a 2009 TFA alumni and math teacher, exemplifies this in her description of why she joined TFA:

I knew that I wanted to do something that would be meaningful after graduation. I attended an informational about TFA and thought it would be a great opportunity for me to help children so I applied. Once I got in I grew excited at the chance to be a teacher.

Other interviewees, like Alice (TFA, 2004) had pursued undergraduate education degrees, found TFA's mission appealing, and saw TFA as a logical next step:

My junior/senior year in college I saw a poster advertising an information session for TFA. I attended the informational with my friend (also an education major) and we both agreed with the mission of TFA.

Mentors and advisors played a prominent role in some participants' reasons for joining TFA. Matt, a 2006 TFA alumni math teacher, learned about TFA from his undergraduate advisor, whose ideas and opinion he valued:

My senior year rolled around and I realized that I needed to start thinking about a career. I had a wonderful college advisor through my scholarship program and she knew about TFA and brought it to my attention.

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### **First-Year Challenges**

Teachers that enter the profession through alternate route programs are often placed in more challenging assignments located in urban and low-income school districts (Donaldson & Moore Johnson, 2010). The TFA alumni, like many other first and second year teachers, found various challenges in their initial placements. The first challenge that participants described were connected to their role as a teacher in an underserved school district. Lisa's description of her first year highlights the concerns surrounding environment and other preexisting conditions within her school.

Interviewer: How would you describe your experience as a first-year corps member?

Lisa: It was pretty rough because the place got shut down a year after I left. It was on probation from the state, which meant that we had many state visits and walk-through observations to see if we were in compliance. For part of my time there was a lot of corruption on an administrative level, which didn't help me as a teacher or the work I was doing with the students. It was also difficult in terms of the building needing repairs and dysfunction on different levels between the teachers and the supervisors in the building.

Kim, a 2010 TFA alumni music teacher, described feeling unsettled as a first-year teacher in a building where staff turnover and conflict were present on a constant basis:

First-year teaching was not a good moment. I struggled with a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class because the whole school had poor management, poor structure within administration, high staff turnover; and the environment wasn't conducive to learning. As a new teacher, I also struggled with building relationships with my

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students and colleagues. My biggest memory was feeling really sad about 4<sup>th</sup> grade class teachers being fired unexpectedly; 3-4 teachers in one school year were just let go suddenly. I remember feeling awful.

Kim described her second year as a turning point when she began to recognize her impact on the students. She explained this realization for herself (and her students):

After coming back my second year, many of the students were surprised that I hadn't left. That's when it hit me that I needed to keep at this even if it was difficult, but the students really needed me and needed to see me. So I knew then that I had to keep going.

The placement of TFA alumni within their schools also proved to be a challenge. Based on the need within a building, some TFA alumni found themselves having to move to a new grade or even subject area that differed from what they had trained for during summer institute. For Shante, a 2009 TFA alumni elementary teacher, the switch in grade level left her feeling even less prepared and negatively impacted her experience:

My first two years as a TFA teacher were dreadful. Thought I was going to teach 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and had purchased items for a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom. Instead I was given a room key marked 203, which I thought was a little weird. Found out that I would be teaching a 1<sup>st</sup> grade class instead—felt so unprepared.

Yet, although challenging, Shante ultimately found teaching first grade rewarding since she felt respected by her students and was able to see her impact as a teacher:

I remember I went to a science meeting. I had 26 1<sup>st</sup> graders—not legal per the union contract. I hear a ruckus-chaos, piercing scream walking towards my classroom—students hopping over the desk, playing in the sink, students had

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paint on their face—at first glance I didn't see any adult supervision. I opened up the door—saw a little old woman sitting in the corner; she asked if I was Ms. Rivera and then hurried out the classroom. I told the class they had 3 minutes to get the classroom in order, which they did immediately. I realized then these students knew that I cared and simply wanted structure. Which is what I gave on a daily basis, and that made my experience go a lot more smoothly.

The training and support provided by TFA, or, for some interviewees, the lack of such training and support, was widely cited as a concern during the corps members' first two years of teaching. Several participants explained that when they joined the corps, they thought they would automatically receive training comparable to a teacher-education program. Amanda, a 2007 TFA alumni math teacher, in particular felt that a new special education teacher would need to be taught the legal rules and regulations in addition to teaching strategies, and she had expected TFA to handle this task. However, her experience was just the opposite:

I didn't have the training, and looking back on that I feel I should have had that and then I also didn't have the development in special education. So I felt like I was just kind of thrown in and special education is so, like, you have to be so specific and understand what's happening. I definitely was reading books on my own to figure out what to do, and I just wish someone would have been there to teach me.

Not all interview participants complained about the lack of trainings in their first two years. However, even those who did participate in trainings cited issues related to preparedness for the classroom. For some, like Matt, there was a struggle to understand

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all of the requirements of being a first-year teacher, and the trainings were too short.

Other TFA alumni, like Darla felt that there was not enough time to practice anything from the training. For several alumni, like Bianca, the trainings did not align to what they were doing in their classroom:

I did get some training; it wasn't always exactly what I needed, but they were definitely like there, and I had people to reach out to. And on the flip side of that, I don't think it was that specific, as I needed. Like, yeah, others left feeling good, but me not so much. While they have gotten better over the years, for me the training it just wasn't there.

Interviewer: Ok, and then what training did you feel you needed that you didn't get?

Bianca: Training on how to, like, be a really good reading teacher or a really good content teacher, so at the time I taught reading, ELA, writing and social studies so, like, I didn't have no social studies training, and I didn't have, like, reading content training. I got nothing beyond the basics.

The need for training and support left some TFA alumni feeling as if they were on their own. Several TFA alumni described an expectation that once they were in the classroom, they would still be able to lean on their program director and others in time of need. For many of them, TFA did not live up to their expectations in terms of training and ongoing support. Brooke described her sense of disappointment,

I didn't feel like I had the support to effectively teach students. My program director wasn't very helpful. I felt like I needed more training . . . I thought that based on the interview and summer institute they had matched me correctly and I

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would be prepared. I didn't know that I would be working with students that were grade levels behind and being responsible for helping them learn the materials with no training on how to teach these students.

While the general sense among interview participants was that the trainings were insufficient to adequately prepare them for the classroom, several alumni did express the sentiment that some of the trainings they received during their corps member years continue to be beneficial today. From lesson planning, writing objectives, gathering data, creating data trackers, and other topics, nine of the TFA alumni described using the tips on these topics in their everyday practice years after their initial corps member year ended. Nancy, a 2007 TFA alumni ELA teacher, put it this way:

Yes, certainly I think that I am now a very strong planner in terms of my lesson plans and a big part of that is because of TFA. I think that I have kind of taken those lesson plans and really made it my own but used that as a platform for myself, and I've done that throughout the three different schools I've been at now. I think that now whenever I talk to my administrators and things like that, they state that's one of my biggest strengths is my ability to plan, and I think that came from really focusing in institute and through some of the follow up trainings.

Overall, the TFA alumni articulated challenges ranging from lack of training, switches in grade placements, and not receiving support. However, for many corps members, it was not all negative; there was specific training from TFA as well as their own personal experiences with students in the classroom that would lead to their staying on.

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### **Positive Experiences During the Initial Years**

While the TFA alumni described similar challenges to their first-year counterparts in urban and low-income school districts generally, they also pointed to several positive experiences that stemmed specifically from their participation in Teach for America as a corps member. The summer institute proved to be beneficial for some subset of corps members although it was certainly not universally viewed as positive by all alumni. For some, the institute provided a lot of resources that were transferrable to their teaching in the fall. Other TFA alumni who came from an education background found The Institute to support the theories and best practices that they studied in their student teaching practicum.

### **TFA Community**

Another positive experience that several TFA alumni shared throughout the study was the sense of community they formed within their cohorts and with other TFA peers. Common experiences, resources, tips, and advice are just a few of things that TFA alumni shared they had found within their community of TFA corps members and alumni. Having the opportunity to get together at mandatory professional development events or alternate route training increased the sense of community for a few people like Matt, Travis, and Amanda.

I definitely liked having a community of people that I could share with and know that there were people going through the same experiences, learning the same lessons and we could talk about it. I wasn't completely in my own little bubble or world—definitely something that my family couldn't understand or my friends

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from school. Really nice having that built in community—thought that was really good.

In a similar manner, a few of the TFA alumni described having an immediate connection to a small TFA community that existed at their placement schools. These communities were often sought out for advice for navigating the new workload while also maneuvering through the TFA requirements. Melissa described how excited she felt when entering her placement school by the TFA corps members who were already there:

I loved the community of teachers at my school, both TFA and teaching fellows and other veterans at my school. They were a great support system, particularly TFA members at school took me under their wing. I simply loved it!

Bianca, a 2007 TFA alumni ELA teacher, describes the community she found at her placement school:

Connecting with other corps members and alumni in my placement school I think that was really helpful ‘cause everyone was really supportive. So even though it was difficult and some things weren’t clear everyone was really, really supportive. And so if I need help I could reach out to other people and that was something that helped me to be successful.

### **Relationships**

The relationship that teachers form with students can have an impact in and out of the classroom. Several TFA alumni described students staying after school for hours just to hang out, as well as receive extra help. Others, such as Bianca and Darla, shared how they would become club advisors based on students quizzing them on common interests, which took place in and out of the classroom. Amanda’s experience with her first class



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could have been a challenge, she explained. Yet she made it her duty to get to know each and every student and encourage him or her to respect one another. Her daily lesson on respect would transfer into one of her best experiences as a first-year teacher as she describes a moment that sticks out nearly ten years later.

The most memorable moment was, like, when at the end of the year I did have my four different gangs in my class walk me to the subway and pick me up, 'cause they were, like, this is what we do, we, like, take care of you, you're in our community, but it was everybody from a different gang so I was like, oh my gosh, I did this. Did I teach them calculus? Maybe not, but I did teach them the social skills they are going to need to survive in the world and the importance of getting along with new folks despite surface differences. So, yeah, that was my most memorable experience.

Multiple TFA alumni described relationships formed with students as one of reasons they come back to teaching year after year. While many TFA alumni participants described their favorite relationships with students they had recently taught, several mentioned the relationships they still had with former students. Alice, in particular, described how many of her students often came back to volunteer when they were in high school, yet as the years have gone by she truly enjoys hearing from those former students who are now in college or have become teachers themselves.

One of the things that I really appreciate is when former students come back and look for me —that's a great feeling! When former students come back and help out within the school or when parents comment on how their child does something they normally wouldn't have done if it had not been for the teacher.

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Knowing that I played a role, whether big or small, is a great accomplishment.

Lucky because we still get to be a part of our students' lives even after they have graduated from high school or college. Or seeing some of your former students becoming teachers—it's pretty cool! Just knowing that I made an impact somehow in their lives and the choices they make—we played a part in that—whether good or bad.

Relationships formed with TFA program directors who supported them during their two-year corps member experience proved to be another salient feature of TFA alumni's experiences and a reason for continuing. All TFA corps members are assigned “manager of teacher learning and development,” formerly referred to as program director, who works alongside the school administration to create an action plan for the incoming corps member (Teach for America, 2014b). Program directors also serve as the liaison for the local TFA office and the school. Program directors provided support to their corps members by visiting them at their placement schools and providing resources and additional training, as well as problem solving when different concerns were voiced by the corps member.

The relationships between corps members and their program directors varied but were primarily positive. The frequency of support, whether through visits to the corps member schools or in-person training, were cited as reasons for the relationships going well. A number of TFA alumni named relationships with program directors as one of the reasons they gave teaching a chance despite setbacks they may have experienced.

Travis and Rachel cite their relationship with their program directors as the key reason for their success in their second years. When speaking about his program director,

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Travis, a 2010 TFA alumni social studies teacher, stated the following:

I really think the program directors made things happen. They are really there for you.

Interviewer: So what experience stood out to you during your first year as memorable?

Travis: My program director came to my school constantly my first year and really helped me with my management. I tried multiple plans, yet each time her feedback was spot on. I also relied on her with just getting better as teacher. I don't know if I would be such a strong planner or even in the classroom today if it hadn't been for all the support I received from my program director.

TFA alumni went on to describe the impact of the visits from their program director. During these visits the program directors would assist with lesson planning, and classroom management plans, as well as collaborate with the administration on supporting the corps member.

Interviewer: Thinking back to your first two years, how would you describe that experience?

Rachel: I lucked out because my program director my 2<sup>nd</sup> year was actually a TFA alum from the same region. I worked at a school that had a really strong TFA presence, so I was very much supported. My principal only came to see me twice during my TFA experience, but my program director was really good about observing me and giving me feedback on my instruction.

George, a 2008 TFA alumni ELA teacher, described that the strained relationship that he had with his school administration had only improved based on the constant

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interventions from his program director.

I got no support from my administrator and often felt frustrated. My program director increased her number of visits and began meeting with the administrator and myself. During the meetings, we discussed areas that I felt I needed more help in, and my program director outlined how she would support me, which really made my administrator pay more attention to me. If I didn't have my program director, I doubt I would of stayed even the first year, much less still be thinking teaching is for me.

While the program directors are only assigned to a corps member for their two-year commitment a few participants shared that the relationship with their program director continued beyond their commitment. Lisa questioned whether or not she should continue teaching and credits having the support and strong relationship with her program director as the reason why she continued in the teaching profession.

Interviewer: What experience either inside or outside of school do you think may have helped you decide to extend you commitment?

Lisa: I think I know a lot of people in my school were saying the school was dysfunctional. I didn't think that was how all schools where so if I had thought that's how all urban schools work that way, I would not have continued. Yes, there were serious issues, but I talked to my PD or whatever they call them now, and I talked to her for a while. She had helpful questions that really allowed me to reflect on what I wanted to do, so they were helpful in providing that guidance as well. From those questions I came to the understanding that I wanted to remain in the classroom.

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Generally, the relationships and communities that they formed in their schools, cohort, and the TFA network as a whole drove the positive experiences for the TFA alumni. These relationships and the sense of community that the TFA alumni shared would eventually lead to their individual decision to remain in the classroom.

### **Transfer from Placement Schools**

The environment that corps members found at their initial TFA placement varied, but for many it was often unwelcoming and/or chaotic. The placement schools for a few TFA alumni often lacked structure, and no clear expectations such as grade assignments or role in the building existed during their first year. While positive aspects of their experiences overall, such as relationships and sense of community in the cohort, led to the TFA alumni remaining in the classroom, the environments within their placements often led to their desire to transfer to a new school. Nancy explained:

I was the only new corps member in my school and the only new teacher in my building, and I found it very challenging. And it felt like it was worlds different than the other school back in the summer; and just being in an environment where I had that kind of support, which I think TFA—I don't know—I think that if things were planned out maybe differently, I could have gotten that where I was at my school. Also, there was a lot of dysfunction going on at that school, and I think I just needed to be in a place where I had an opportunity to grow. This led me to leave, and I've been at my current school ever since.

Similarly, Amanda considered leaving teaching due to the fact that she didn't feel she could grow within her current school structure. Professional development opportunities and a change in her sense of the potential to grow in a different

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environment would be the deciding factors that led to her transfer to her current charter school:

After my two years, I really knew I couldn't stay in my placement site. The support was non-existent and the school environment just felt hectic and toxic. I got contacted by my current school, and I said ok, I'll give it a shot. But I ended up coming to this current school, which is a charter school because I liked the mentality. I liked all of the systems on instruction and development I would have gotten as a teacher. So I decided to stay, and I've been here for six years.

While for many of the TFA alumni the environment at the initial placement school played a large role in their decision to switch, budget cuts within a public school district also contributed to four of the 17 switching their schools from a public school to a nearby charter. George describes his experience of being displaced from his placement school despite wanting to stay in the classroom: "Then my second year I decided I was going to keep teaching, but then the layoff happened so then I thought, 'what could I do?' Now I had no job, but luckily other TFA alumni were able to help me land on my feet and enter the classroom in a local charter school in the same district.

Despite the need to leave their placement schools due to lack of support, need for growth, or financial constraints, the driving difference for these alumni compared to their counterparts was their commitment to continue teaching. Each new school would contribute to their underlying desire to remain in the classroom.

In addition to the reasons cited above, all of the participants in the study began their career in a city that has seen an increase in the number of high performing charter schools. These charter schools are run by charter management organizations such as

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KIPP or Uncommon Schools, which provide a variety of competitive benefits that local districts are not able to give such as laptops, cellphone discount, signing bonuses, and full salary during the summer when school is closed. George and Bianca described their initial shock at how much was offered to them when they first transferred from their district school to a charter and emphasized that the benefits have remained the same throughout their time at their new charters. “I remember hoping that I would at least be able to afford my apartment,” George explained. “Instead I was able to move to a better apartment and had much better health insurance, which was great for my family and me in the long run,”

“After only two years of teaching, I already felt that I wouldn’t make much in the field but at least deserve to be in a good school,” Barbara shared. “Imagine my shock when my salary went up by over \$10,000 and I received a laptop and cellphone,” Barbara explained.

### **Why Do They Stay?**

Out of the 20 TFA alumni who participated in the study, at least 14 joined TFA thinking they would stay in education for two years and then leave. Teaching was not a long-term goal; many corps members viewed their two-year service as an opportunity to figure out what they would do with their lives. Some interviewees knew as soon as the first year was over that they wanted to pursue another career in law or the business sector. Yet, as the final months of each TFA alumnus’ or alumna’s second year approached, many of them realized that they were not ready to leave the classroom just yet. The decision and when it happened varied from person to person, but there were commonalities in their expressed reasons for staying.

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### Students

Students are the driving reason why the large majority of interview participants choose to come back year after year. The relationships with students that Beatrice, Rachel, and Lena described forming with their students became the deciding factor for why they continue to stay in the classroom for 10 plus years to date. Lena, a 2000 TFA alumni math teacher, shared how the community has accepted her, and that is why she still teaches:

The commitment I made to my students, fellow teachers, and the community. I have been in New Jersey, specifically Newark, for half of my life. I think there is a lot that Newark has to offer, and I want to make sure the students have that pride also. These students know that I care for them and that they will always walk away with something from me.

TFA alumni also espoused a firm commitment to provide the best possible education to disadvantaged students, and this ideal contributed to their decisions to continue as teachers. In fact, a number of TFA alumni explicitly named this when explaining why they continued in the classroom past their two-year commitment.

Knowing that each student that comes through their door will receive an education that is grounded in strong practice is a source of motivation that keeps Amanda going during tough times. Nancy explained, “*The achievement gap* is a buzz word that TFA prides itself on; and as long as the achievement gap remains in existence, then I need to teach these students.” Finally, for Shante, “It’s not enough to receive awards based on the success of students from a few years ago. Instead, you need to keep pushing



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until more schools have that same success rather than just your classroom or the few other lucky ones.”

George also explains that the students are his motivation for why he continues to choose to recommit year after year.

Interviewer: Ok, so now my last question—you kind of touched on it, but what would you say has been your biggest motivation to continue teaching?

George: Because I know that the kids that I teach and come in contact with on the daily basis are the gift. They are so talented and they’re going to change the world; and the thing is that because of the very fact of their zip code and because of what so and so may have said and because of what they may think of themselves, they don’t believe that because I won’t let them. I wake up every day with the determination to convince them otherwise and to convince them that they can change the world no matter who they may have in their life; and if they don’t have anyone. they will always have me. They can always depend on me always, when they leave out of here, when they graduate and go to another school, they will always have me.

## **Professional Growth**

In addition to the relationships and many experiences with their students, several TFA alumni cited their own growth in the profession as motivation to remain. Amanda, Lena, Bianca, Shante, and a few others have all assumed teacher leadership roles and believe that their work continues to only get better. Amanda shares that the desire to see all students achieve led to her own pursuit of additional certification to ensure that as a teacher leader, she could coach other teachers.

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Bianca remembers feeling that her training was not enough. She has enjoyed growing as a reading teacher and co-chairs the entire department in her school. She explains this growth is her motivation for remaining: “Changes that we’ve made in reading, it would be like ELA; it’s more of an integrated approach now and just like the content in the novels we’re reading now are even more exciting. The way we are reading a text is now more complex and innovative. I think that has excited me and makes me still want to teach reading I’m very passionate about it.

Similarly, Nancy shares her passion for reading, which also keeps her motivated to stay in the classroom:

I think a lot of things that I’ve done with the kids—it’s exciting. It’s exciting to be in a classroom, especially now that I get to do a lot of literature; that’s my love. I went to school as a literature major; and to be able to get kids as passionate about something that you find so interesting or to find what their passion is about and to get them to grow into it that and discover more about it, that’s what I really like and I am not ready to leave.

Having the opportunity to leave your mark is a unique experience shared by Kim and Fatima. During their corps member experience, they both were the first corps members in their particular department at their schools. As teachers of drama and music, the amount of training and support available for corps members was scarce. Yet, both individuals used this lack of expertise in their field to become those experts. Kim relates the following:

My last year in TFA debating about staying or leaving, I figured that I would stay at my school for another year. Being a music teacher, I have a lot of freedom in

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my role and how I teach my curriculum—even being able to bring in presenters. I enjoy it. I’m passionate about music and teaching. I believed in my content, and students getting access to music is not happening for students in schools in Newark. At the end of my 2<sup>nd</sup> year, my principal had a KIPP school that was opening up, and she continued to give me freedom and leadership. Within the school/department, coupled with a strong school structure, has made my job easier and more enjoyable because I can have more fun with students and I’m able to see the impact I have on students.

### Summary

“Empower students and change lives” is the current slogan found on the Teach for America website and can be connected to the common theme shared by the TFA alumni in this study. Through the development of relationships and one’s own professional growth, the desire to remain within the classroom is still there. Relationships were described by more than 70% of the study participants as a factor contributing to their decision to remain in the classroom beyond their two-year commitment. Professional development and career growth were also described as factors that contributed to nine of study participants not only staying in the classroom but also contributing to the school at which they currently work. Finally, it was the students that all TFA alumni interacted with year after year that remain a common thread in their explanations of why they stay.

In Chapter 5 the implications of these findings are discussed in relation to the recruitment, training, and retention practices that policy makers can consider for improving the longevity of current TFA corp members who have the option to remain in the classroom after their two-year commitment ends.

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### CHAPTER 5

#### CONCLUSION

Over the last four years 41% of teachers in high poverty/high minority urban schools, identified by the income of the families, have left the classroom or transferred to new school districts (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012). The cost to replace these teachers ranges from \$10,000 to \$15,000, which impacts a district's budget and resources available for the upcoming school year. With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, school districts around the county have had to create new curriculums and programs and provide in-depth training to new and veteran teachers. In December 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act, replacing the previous No Child Left Behind Act. The premise of this new law is similar to NCLB, which is that every student in the United States should have an equal opportunity to a good education regardless of race, income, background, or zip code. As urban and low-income school districts look to implement the ESSA or remaining NCLB mandates from their respective states, the financial resources that are already limited may not provide the school leaders funds to train their new staff and provide supplemental training to the staff that do remain in their schools (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012).

As a solution to the continuous teacher shortage in schools across the country, many districts in low-income/high minority communities have sought out alternate route programs, such as the New York City Teaching Fellows Program and Teach for America. However, due to the two-year contract that alternate route teachers from TFA commit to when placed in a high needs school district, critics have cited the program as a temporary fix (Quesinberr, 2014; Koran, 2014; Zuckerman, 2013). For each school year that an

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alternate route or new teacher stays in the classroom beyond two years, the respective school district saves on average \$20,000-\$30,000 in salary and professional development costs, and the quality of teaching that the students receive improves as the teacher increases his or her knowledge of pedagogy and performance of best practices (Harding, 2012). While research has shown that teachers leave due to poor work conditions, lack of professional development training, and financial constraints, there is limited research focused on why they stay (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012; Ladd, 2011; Mee & Haverback, 2014). The teacher shortage has persisted for nearly two decades and the ability to retain teachers within school districts, especially in low-income and high minority communities, remains a problem for all stakeholders in education (Wiswall, 2013; TNTP, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). It is within this context that the current study explored the reason why some teachers who entered the teaching profession through TFA chose to continue teaching for five or more years in the same state as their initial placement.

### **TFA Alumni in the East Coast Region**

The study consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a total of 20 TFA alumni teachers from the New Jersey chapter. All participants entered the teaching profession through Teach for America and had completed at least five or more years of teaching at the time of the interview. In order for participants to qualify for this study, they had to identify as a TFA alumni with a cohort date of no later than 2010. The participants also had to be currently still teaching and work within a school district that was identified as urban and/or low-income.

This qualitative case study focused on the various experiences of the TFA alumni when first entering the classroom and their decision to remain in the classroom beyond

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their two-year commitment. The study also explored what led participants to transfer schools, whether public to charter school or in some cases charter to charter.

### **Implications for Literature**

The results from the study confirmed many of the known challenges that first year and new teachers in urban/low-income school districts face. For example, financial restrictions surrounding professional development, classroom resources/supplies, and the work conditions in school buildings were some of the prevalent challenges found in the study results that are consistent with the existing literature (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012; Ladd, 2011; Mee & Haverback, 2014). What was new from the study were the various explanations that interview participants shared about why they stayed, including reasons not linked to the Teach for America structure.

### **First-Year Preparation**

Currently the research literature documents the lack of student teaching experience and previous coursework as challenges that many new hires of alternate route programs cite as missing in comparison to their traditional new teacher counterparts (Johnson & Birkeland, 2008). The findings from this study illuminate these challenges and point specifically to issues of the misalignment between initial teacher grade assignments during the summer TFA training and school starting in September as well as either grade and/or subject changes occurring during the school year. For example, TFA alumni who had to switch initial placements often found it difficult to teach in a new grade or subject area due to lack of content knowledge or misalignment of their previous experience in college. Some new TFA teachers had to study and teach something at the

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same time due to the switch of grade and subject from their original assignment with TFA experience, and this was an ongoing challenge during the first year in the classroom.

### **School Environment**

Poor work conditions ranging from lack of instructional supplies, building facilities, school culture, and/or administrative support are cited in the literature as contributing to teachers' departure from urban and low-income schools (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ingersoll, 2011; NCES, 2008). Although TFA teachers were in schools with poor conditions like many other teachers working within low-income communities, their connection to a TFA network and relationships that were formed during their cohort experience served as driving factors that helped them want to continue beyond the two-year commitment.

### **Mentorship**

Due to the large number of veteran teachers leaving the profession, the availability of experienced mentors is often limited in urban and low-income school districts (McNeal, 2012). The results regarding the need for a mentor by the participants in the study were mixed. Four of the alumni described being paired with a mentor teacher but not really seeing him or her except during evaluation times. Due to the limited interactions with the assigned mentor, the participants did not find this relationship beneficial. Others described having a community of people in their schools that they could go to and talk to ranging from veteran teachers, TFA alumni, and corps members who had been at the school for at least a year.

Within the TFA organization, program directors who are assigned a specific number of first and second year TFA corps members played an important mentoring and guidance role for TFA teachers. These relationships were another salient factor for

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teachers in the current study to stay beyond two years. Program directors served as a liaison between the local TFA office and the school. During the program directors' visits with the TFA alumni, they provided resources and training for the corps members during their initial two years. While the literature identifies specific benefits for new teachers who receive mentorship, the empirical research base is limited about the long-term impact of these mentorship relationships or how mentoring relationships may contribute to retention patterns (Ingersoll, 2011; Waterman & He, 2011; Wong , 2002). In this study, eight of the TFA alumni described the relationship with their program director as one of the key reasons they were able to come back after their first year and eventually commit beyond their second year. Other study participants referred to conversations they had had with their program director at alumni events as having played a part in their sense of connection to teaching and to their decision to remain in the classroom and stay connected to their local TFA office.

### **Training**

Professional development and training varies based on a school's leadership and allocation of resources. The absence of both of these key elements of a successful school have been identified as a primary reason that many first-year teachers consider departing the profession (Mee &Haverback, 2014). The study findings described participants utilizing their own communities of TFA alumni and other new teachers to receive the training and resources that were not provided by their school districts. The continuous networking and collaborating that the study participants described and benefitted from is among one of the many reasons they identified for their decision to remain in the classroom.



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### **Retention**

Teacher induction programs that focus on the development of teachers professionally and their well-being are factors that recent studies on teacher shortages found as potential reasons for higher retention within urban and low-income school districts (Met Life Foundation, 2008; Cobbold, 2007). The TFA alumni in this study described belonging to a community bigger than their school, which, in turn, encouraged them to stay in the classroom beyond their required two-year commitment. Several participants from the current study described serving as hosts for an entire school day for incoming corps members or serving as paid content experts to run quarterly workshops for new corps members. These opportunities helped foster a sense of connection to the larger TFA community. The chance to build relationships and learn from colleagues was another component that several study participants described as reasons for staying. Joining alumni focus groups, attending conferences with alumni from around the country, and participating in alumni panels are some of the ways study participants described forming long-lasting relationships that have influenced their own commitment. A few also shared that their current school's staff are comprised of many alumni, which makes their commitment to the classroom an easier one, as their connection to these schools grows each year.

TFA as an organization worked to show corps members the various professional pathways within education. Some of the TFA alumni who stayed in the classroom beyond their two-year commitment cited these opportunities provided by TFA staff to see how they could grow professionally as influencing their decision to extend their commitment. Program directors initiated a variety of conversations surrounding next steps and

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opportunities with more than half of the study participants. These conversations would inform the participants of new openings in a school that had not yet been publicized as well as lead to promotions based on the participants' background and the recommendation from the TFA staff member. The chance to grow and work in a school that fit their individual styles was a sentiment that several study participants shared they benefitted from based on their own work with TFA.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The decision for the participants to remain in the classroom beyond their two-year commitment varied from relationships formed and opportunities to grow within the profession. As TFA continues to partner with districts around the country to recruit new teachers, there are several recommendations that may enhance the longevity of future TFA corps members. The recommendations, based on current literature as well as the study results, begin with the recruitment process and how TFA can improve their partnerships and recruit more TFA corps members who may exhibit characteristics associated with a greater likelihood of staying beyond two years. In addition to the recruitment process, another recommendation reviews the benefits of earlier assignments for new TFA corps members to provide even more training prior to their first full day in the classroom. Further recommendations are driven by the need to strengthen current resources that were shared by the current study participants, as well as create stronger support systems for TFA corps member both from partnering districts as well as the TFA local office. As the partnerships between low-income school districts and Teach for America are revisited each school year, there are several key things stakeholders and future policy makers should consider based on the findings from this study. The key

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items for consideration for both future policy and practice when applicable are described in the subsequent sections.

### **Recruitment Timeline**

Teach for America currently has at least five deadlines for their hiring process that affords prospective applicants ample time to consider joining the teaching force in the upcoming school year. The deadlines vary from early September through March of the following year. While the various deadlines are beneficial for increasing the applicant pool, it may not be as beneficial for school districts looking to hire for hard-to-fill teaching spots such as mathematics, science, foreign languages, and special education. Teachers that are hired to teach math, science, foreign languages, and special education often have additional certification requirements based on their respective assigned state as well as a higher number of required content-specific credits from their undergraduate program. A few of the study participants described having to pay for additional certification tests after being placed, which proved to be an unexpected challenge. If TFA places a teacher in one of these hard-to-fill spots, meeting the certification requirements may prove to be difficult, and, consequently, this might lead to the TFA corps member being placed in an easier-to-fill subject area or grade.

To alleviate this current problem, TFA might consider limiting hiring for key subjects to the first three application rounds for Teach for America. By hiring new specialty subject teachers early, districts will have earlier access to filling crucial roles in their respective districts. Teach for America would also have an advantage by having a better understanding of the needs of their partners with hard-to-fill spots and providing them with teachers who could potentially receive initial training earlier once placement

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has been secured (Caroll & Foster, 2010). In the current study, the switch of a grade or content year was described as challenging; and it limited the participants from feeling as prepared as their cohort peers who remained in the original placement from the moment of joining TFA. Thus, first-year TFA corps members teaching in specialty subjects would receive early training and enter the classroom feeling more prepared, which can increase their chance of choosing to commit to more than two years based on a smoother entry process to the profession (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Ingersoll & Perda, 2009; TNTP, 2012).

Another component of recruitment that can be revisited is the partnerships with colleges and universities. TFA has created an early deadline process for juniors who are ready to commit to their post-graduation plans a year in advance. During the early deadline process, juniors are able to interview for a TFA corps position for the fall following their graduation from school. Once a junior student accepts his or her early offer, he or she begins professional development that takes place during their entire senior year. There are a few universities that have begun this work, but a larger net may be useful to secure those future TFA corps members who already know their career aspirations. Individuals who enter a new profession in the establishment stage may have a higher sense of investment, which could potentially facilitate a greater proportion of junior TFA corps members deciding to remain in the classroom after two years.

Some participants in this study recounted having met with TFA recruiters as early as their junior year, which provided them additional time to research and decide that they would seek out the organization once they were eligible. Having junior students commit to a program prior to their senior year may allow them to seek pre-training and

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certification, which could better prepare them as a first-year teacher and increase their pedagogy in their selected subject area (Metlife, 2012). In addition, school districts that already work with Teach for America could offer student teaching and/or tutoring positions to the students who already committed to TFA in their junior year. This new partnership would allow for additional on-the-job training and investment for the future TFA corps member. Currently, Aspire Public Schools and the San Francisco Unified School District partner with an urban teacher residency program. The program is yearlong partnerships where new teachers are able to student teach in a district similar to the one in which they will be placed. In a recent review of this partnership, the study revealed that 82% of the teachers from the residency program have gone on to teach for five or more years in a low-income school district (Udesky, 2014). Similarly, the partnership between universities and programs like TFA are continuously improving the retention percentages for new teachers remaining in the profession longer (TNTP, 2012)

### **Super Theory Establishment Stage**

The analysis of the data from the current study was reviewed using the lens of one's commitment to career and professional growth based on Donald Super's theory on career development. The five stages of Donald Super's theory are (1) growth: learning your interests, (2) exploration: choosing a career, (3) establishment: gaining work experiences and evaluating your career choice, (4) maintenance: developing stability, and (5) disengagement: retirement. More than half of the participants in this study were in the establishment stage based on the premise of Super's theory. All of the participants in the establishment stage shared their desire to receive additional degrees and certifications early on in the first year, which connects to the premise of the establishment stage as one

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in which a person identifies one's interests and skills and assesses the fit between oneself and work. As more alternate and teaching programs look to recruit new teachers who join the profession already showing investment during the establishment stage, these findings indicate that providing them with opportunities to grow professionally may also enhance their decision to remain in the profession.

Programs such as TFA may consider adding a skills inventory to their application questionnaire to determine if potential applicants may have a stronger interest in the education field, which could lead to their interest in making the cohort experience a more permanent career choice. By recruiting corp members who are found to be within the establishment stage, TFA could work with partner schools that have positions that would allow for a longer commitment beyond two years. These corp members, if permitted, could agree to a three- or five-year commitment with a clear framework of how they would be supported over the course of their commitment. TFA can also identify if other applicants are in the other phases according to Super's theory and personalize their training.

In addition, future corps members identified as being within the establishment stage, summer institute, and initial training can also be structured to incorporate more interests of the applicants and show how they fit into the long-term vision of education and their future work in the classroom. Several local TFA offices have alternate route programs with universities in their region who could offer a master's degree or advanced certification for these corps members who have already decided they want to grow in the field.

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### **Placement Process**

New teachers consider various factors about a school district, such as work environment, training, and opportunities for advancement before committing to a contract (Johnson & the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). The current placement process for Teach for America lacks input from the incoming corps member outside of accepting the region that has offered availability. More than half of the study's participants described connecting with a TFA alumnus at their current placement during their decision-making time of choosing to extend their commitment. One potential strategy to consider improving the retention rate of new corps members would be to include additional stakeholders beyond TFA and the partnering school district in placement decisions and including new data on those placements. For example, outgoing corps members could be given a survey to rate their placement site and to provide feedback about the strengths and areas in need of improvement of their school placement and of the TFA support staff/resources in that TFA region. Alumni could also give insight into the skill set they think is necessary to be successful at a specific placement and which supports might have helped them develop those skills.

Alumni feedback could represent only one part of the process. The local TFA office could also have incoming corps members complete a survey with characteristics they hope to find at their placement school along with their non-negotiable elements such as class size, school location, and professional development opportunities. Finally, school districts could complete a survey for TFA describing their needs for a new teacher. Using all of these data, the TFA local office could make more data-driven decisions when attempting to match partnering schools and the new corps members. In other words, they

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could implement a new matching process that takes into account the corps member's preferences and skills and the needs of the school and or district.

TFA might also consider working with districts to establish reasonable required supports and resources to be provided to new teachers Recommended criteria for school support would be at least two confirmed professional development opportunities for the new corps member, ongoing lesson plan feedback, a TFA alumni mentor whenever possible who meets quarterly with the corps member, and monthly observations by a designated individual familiar with the content and grade of the TFA corps member. If a school district does not have any TFA alumni, the TFA office should inquire about the measures they would take to ensure a smooth transition for their corps member and provide suggestions and support for how to do this. This could range from the district providing a new teacher coach or mentor, as well as providing time, whether bi-monthly or quarterly meeting times, for the corps members to network with sister schools that may have TFA alumni.

### **Training and Certification Alignment**

The training and certification for new teachers varies from state to state, but the requirements are often provided to each local TFA office within a school district. Five of the current study participants described having to take multiple Praxis exams and switching their alternate route program due to the number of changes to become certified after they had already started teaching. To assist new corps members with getting the right training prior to and after summer institute, which is the five-week training program for new corps members, local offices should begin to prepare a teacher certification overview webinar for each new corps member. During this webinar, new corps members



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would have the opportunity to learn what they need to become certified in their subject area as soon as they enter their contract with TFA. If a corps member has to take the Praxis or additional courses, the webinar could outline the steps to take, as well as resources that TFA will provide. Currently, new corps members may not begin to take their Praxis subject-based test until late spring, which can impact their employment if they are unable to pass. By having all new corps members assigned to their specific subject prior to summer institute, their upcoming training can be solely connected to the needs of their content, regardless of grade, to ensure that they are at least ready for the initial first weeks of school.

Not receiving proper certification can also impact a corps member's decision to extend their commitment even beyond their first year. In the current study, participants indicated that having to pay nearly \$300-\$500 to take multiple Praxis exams to secure a placement was a challenge for which they were unprepared. Therefore, the expense of certification and preparation should also be offered through TFA to show an investment in the new corps member. TFA should also establish a rule that restricts corps members from starting their corps member experience until they have received the appropriate certification through the respective state of their school district. The certification of a new teacher is extremely important and having to deal with this during the school year is an unnecessary hardship for all parties involved. Having the support from TFA from the initial onboarding phase could be beneficial for the organization and the new corps member.

## **Alumni Network**

Teach for America currently has a variety of programs and staff members

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dedicated to the alumni networks within each region. However, based on the various responses from this study's participants, the work for alumni needs to be expanded. In addition to the current efforts of having alumni host new corps members by allowing them to shadow a current TFA alumni and helping with phone interview selection, TFA should consider creating additional yearlong roles for alumni volunteers.

An official alumni advisory board could be the first role that is considered by TFA. This alumni advisory board could meet monthly and collaborate with the local school district while providing specific resources for new corps members such as the following: teacher supplies and resources for both in and out of the classroom, relocation to a new area, advice and tips, and ongoing peer-to-peer support throughout the school year. These alumni advisory boards could also serve as a space for districts to share their concerns freely regarding TFA and how they can work together to address them. While the local TFA office currently works with their respective schools, the alumni advisory board would be able to share different perspectives from their own experience as well as their fellow TFA colleagues. Several participants from the current study shared the interactions with TFA alumni both in and out of their placement school and were a part of the support they valued as a new corps member.

An additional role that has been offered periodically throughout the years is a content specialist who provides quarterly professional development to new corps members. TFA could hire alumni who have strong pedagogy in a specific content area that are willing to provide periodic training to corps members and other teachers who are interested in professional development. The school districts could utilize these content specialists to come into their schools and provide professional development for all

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teachers, not just corps members. The training that corps members receive in alternate route often includes new initiatives and standards that other teachers not in TFA do not receive. This can lead to inconsistencies with curriculum implementation and the quality of instruction that students receive (Mead, 2007; Neil, 2003). To ensure that all students can access the right resources found in up-to-date professional development, TFA and the school districts that they service need to strengthen their collaboration, which will lead to more new teachers having successful early years and choosing to remain beyond their two-year commitment.

### **Student Relationship-Building Training**

Traditional teachers cite a variety of reasons for why they remain in the classroom ranging from being a lifelong learner, summers off, a childhood passion and the opportunity to grow (Waterman & Ye He, 2011; Wong & Wong, 2010). However, a common theme found as a driving factor for many of today's traditional teachers who have remained in the classroom for at least five or more years are the students (Waterman & He, 2011; Wong, 2002). Similarly, more than half of the participants from the study also shared the impact of building relationships with their students and the rewarding feeling they experienced each year that they returned. While content and classroom management training are key components for traditional and non-traditional training programs, another recommendation would be the infusion of student relationship building workshops and courses.

Teachers recognize the importance of building student relationships, but many participants from the study shared having limited access to resources regarding student relationships. In addition, as TFA places teachers in high-stakes environments, new

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teachers encounter a variety of issues both in and out of the classroom that they have to handle when working with their students such as abuse, homelessness, and limited health access. It is important for teachers to feel that they are equipped to work with their students while meeting the academic demands of their job.

Throughout TFA's summer institute and local regional preparation, hands-on student relationship-building training could be infused throughout the curriculum for the new corp members. During these workshops a variety of relationship-building techniques for students across different grade levels, gender, race, and socioeconomic status can be introduced. The corps members would be able to role play in a safe space how to get through to different students whom alumni may have shared as being a challenge. The corp members could also hear from students who have remained in contact with their previous TFA teachers and learn more about the students' perspective on forming positive relationships with a new teacher. Having an emphasis on student relationship building from the onset of the corps member experience may increase the likelihood of the new corps member having an additional factor, such as students, to consider when the time comes to leave or stay beyond their two-year commitment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The current study provides a snapshot of the experiences of 20 TFA alumni in New Jersey. While all participants in the current study are TFA alumni, the results from this study cannot be applied primarily to all TFA alumni, as the regions and school districts vary within the TFA alumni network. Another limitation of the study relates to the demographic characteristics of the participants. There were only three male participants in the study, which does not reflect the actual gender breakdown of alumni

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found across New Jersey. Therefore, while the explanations for remaining beyond the two years were similar for the study participants, there are not enough data to know whether there are gender-based patterns in a broader population. In addition to gender, the age group of the participants is also a limitation, as only one participant began her career in the 1990s while the rest of the participants all began teaching within the last 16 years. While the results of this study can provide explanations as to why individuals who may already be invested in education remain, the findings cannot speak to differences in experiences by time period taught.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Based on the limitations of the current study, future studies on the retention of TFA alumni should consider focusing on specific cohort groups and/or multiple regions. These studies would then be able to collect a wider range of data that could be applicable to a larger population of TFA alumni. For example, the experiences that 20 TFA alumni face from the year 2010 may vary when compared to a group all of whom entered in 2000. Similarly, having a study that spans multiple regions would add the teaching experiences of different school communities, which would provide a wider representation of the many school districts in the United States.

In addition to focusing on cohort groups and multiple regions, future studies may also want to consider a quantitative method of research in order to test certain factors such as placement, TFA support, and specific relationships such as variables for TFA alumni choosing to stay. Similarly, these studies can also have an open-ended section that would allow for participants to enter additional factors that lead to their staying which may not have been captured in a qualitative study. Another study could be a

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national survey that specifically targets alumni who advanced in the teaching profession, as many of the study participants shared that they have, and pose questions surrounding their initial thoughts on education as well as what relationships impacted their decision to stay and to advance in the profession. A quantitative study can also utilize a survey and work in partnership with TFA to access alumni from around the country who could participate independently from their local area, unlike the interviews that must be conducted by the researcher.

Similarly, a future study using qualitative methodologies may want to focus specifically on TFA Managers of Teacher Leader Development (MTLD), who have had a high number of TFA corps members become alumni and stay in the classroom. The MTLD is the TFA assigned coach for each first- and second-year corps member who provides direct observation and coaching with the teacher concerning instruction and data. The relationships that were described by participants in the current study with their program directors now known as MTLD indicate that there may be some data linked to the relationship and the decision to remain. Having the experiences of MTLD analyzed in future studies would allow TFA to replicate the observed best practices for their current and future MTLDs, who have a direct link to future TFA corp members and soon-to-be TFA alumni.

Another focus for future studies could be on specific school districts that have had a long-standing relationship with TFA. These studies could collect data from both the TFA alumni who still teach in these schools and the staff who have interacted with the TFA corps members over the years. These studies may be able to shed additional light on the impact of a school environment and the retention rate of TFA alumni beyond their

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two-year commitment. These studies may be used to understand what factors from the local TFA office contributed to the successful retention rate with the local schools that participate in the study.

Finally, future studies may want to focus on the types of schools in which TFA alumni are choosing to remain as teachers. While there were several district to charter transfers within the current study, more data are needed on the number and characteristics of the charter schools in which TFA placed alumni stayed, those from which they transferred and why. As the education sector continues to change, the presence of charter schools in low-income communities is increasing; but whether or not they benefit from TFA corps members is a question that future studies can begin to answer.

The current study found that many of the TFA alumni experienced the challenges of first-year teachers across the county, yet they found ways to remain in their careers. It is important that as policy makers and stakeholders in education look at solutions for the achievement gap, more work on how to retain the qualified alternate route teachers such as TFA corps members is done so that we can ensure a quality education for all students regardless of neighborhood or socioeconomic status.

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WHY DO THEY STAY

## **Appendix**

# WHY DO THEY STAY



## TFA Study Participant Consent Form

### Purpose:

Shavon Chambers, doctoral student in the Department of Education Leadership, Management and Policy at Seton Hall University is investigating the factors that contribute to current Teach for American (TFA) teachers remaining in the classroom three or more years after their corps member commitment ended. This study will focus on interviewing TFA alumni who currently teach in the 2014-2015 school year on why they chose to remain teaching at the end of their two-year TFA commitment.

### Description of Procedures

TFA alumni participation in this study includes a one-on-one interview about the TFA alum's experiences with TFA and the decision to remain teaching after their two-year commitment ended. This study is open to any TFA Alumni in New Jersey who is currently teaching (during the 2014-15 school year) and who has been teaching for 5 or more years (which can include their initial two year corps member experience). If interested, the TFA alum will participate in one interview. It will take approximately 45 minutes to complete this interview, and with the participant's permission, the interview will be digitally recorded so that the researchers can transcribe it for analysis later on. Participants will be identified on the recordings with a pseudonym and only Shavon Chambers and her dissertation mentor, Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj will listen to the recordings. The tapes will be destroyed 3 years after the study has ended.

Examples of questions asked in the TFA Alumni interview include:

1. Can you tell me about how you decided to stay on as a teacher after your two year commitment with TFA?
2. What are the biggest challenges you experience as a teacher? What are the biggest draws to continuing teaching?
3. What do you think contributes most to TFA corps members leaving after their 2 year commitment is over?

### Voluntary

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Refusal to consent for participation in the TFA alumni interview will result in no penalty or loss to the participant. The

Seton Hall University  
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MAR 18 2015

Approval Date

Expiration Date  
MAR 18 2016

## WHY DO THEY STAY

participant can withdraw from the project at any time and all information will be kept confidential.

### Confidentiality

There will never be a link made between the participant's personal information and interview responses. Only Shavon Chambers and her dissertation mentor, Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj will have access to the information the participant provides. All electronic data will be stored on a USB memory key.

### Risks

There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. However, participants may skip any questions that make him/her uncomfortable. The participant can completely withdraw from the study at any point.

### Benefits:

There are no direct benefits to participating in this project. However, participation will help create a better understanding of what factors can contribute to future TFA alumni remaining in the classroom longer.

### Compensation:

There is no payment and/or incentive for participating in this project outside of contributing valuable information about why TFA alumni choose to remain in the classroom.

### Contact Information:

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, the participant may contact Shavon Chambers at [srchambe@gmail.com](mailto:srchambe@gmail.com) or the dissertation mentor Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj at [carolyn.sattinbajaj@shu.edu](mailto:carolyn.sattinbajaj@shu.edu) or 973-275-2846 For any questions about participant's rights as a human research subject, please contact Dr. Mary Ruzicka, Director of Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Subjects Research at (973) 313-6314 or [irb@shu.edu](mailto:irb@shu.edu).

### Statement of Consent:

1. By signing below, I agree to participate in this project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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MAR 18 2015

## WHY DO THEY STAY

2. By signing below, I also agree to have the interview recorded. Optional.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS

Expiration Date  
MAR 18 2015

Sefori Hall University  
Institutional Review Board

MAR 18 2015

Approval Date