

Learning on Other People's Kids

Becoming a Teach For America Teacher

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PART I

BECOMING A TFA CORPS MEMBER

CHAPTER 1

COACHING THE CORPS

A VIEW FROM THE FIELD: ON LOCATION

I secured a “visitor” spot in the faculty parking area of the Jacobson School in South Phoenix’s Randolph District. My destination, on that mild January morning, was the classroom of Laurie Brooks, located at the far end of the campus near the junior playground. Dr. Williams, the principal, spotted me walking and, with his voice magnified by a portable sound system, he commanded, “Barbara, get inside! *Now!*”

“What’s going on?” I wondered. With my heart racing, I quickened my pace to a jog, even in high-heeled pumps and a business suit. Wide-eyed, I surveyed the unexpected scene ahead: yellow-and-black police tape crisscrossed the school grounds and law enforcement officers surrounded the playground area.

Just minutes earlier, a gun-wielding suspect in a liquor store robbery had jumped the barbed-wire fence encasing the school’s perimeter, seeking refuge in the vicinity of the primary playground area. Uninformed of the danger, I served as the perpetrator’s lone target by walking into harm’s way during a midday lockdown at an inner-city elementary school.

Laurie, my graduate student and first-year Teach For America teacher, was visibly concerned and anxious when I arrived in her classroom. “Are you okay?” she questioned, empathetically. “We all know the code that came through, ‘Mr. Locker is in the building.’ So, this isn’t a drill, right?” she asked rhetorically. “When I signed up for TFA [Teach For America], I

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never expected this. But, hey, now you're here going through it with the rest of us.”

She shook her head, let out a sigh, and comforted a teary-eyed second grader.

THE RESEARCHER'S JOURNEY: SEEING MYSELF IN MY STUDENTS

The principal escorted me to my classroom, handed me a roster with the names of my second graders in the Northeast Bronx, and left me to survey my surroundings, alone. Forty desks were shoved against the radiator. A wall of textbooks rested on the windowsill. I did not yet know the range of challenges that would face me as an untrained “teacher”—I was hired in late August, shortly before school began. I left a banking job on Wall Street a week earlier because I wanted to teach.

I knew that I lacked student teaching experience, as well as pedagogy and education coursework, yet, I took the job anyway, believing that my degree and desire would suffice. My only experience in an elementary classroom had been during my own years as a student and time spent “playing school” with my five younger siblings. I held onto the teacher guidebooks for dear life, assigning workbook pages as both an assessment of students and self—a sort of barometer to assure that the required material was taught.

Although I was enthusiastic, passionate, and determined to make a difference in the lives of my students by arriving early, staying late, and building relationships, I was forever consumed by guilt. I felt that I was masquerading as a trained teacher. At times, I feared that parents and colleagues would soon realize that I was learning how to teach ... on *their* kids. I survived with late-night lesson preparation, and I graded papers every evening, all weekend. Then, in the spring of my first year, I began to take courses in pedagogy, methods, and remediation in the content areas of math and literacy. The extra instruction helped to direct me while I was drowning, yet, I was still entirely consumed by my job, in spite of what society considers “teachers’ hours.” Even though I possessed strong content knowledge and a high GPA, I kept asking myself, “Am I qualified or even effective as an untrained teacher?”

Twenty-eight years later, almost to the exact day, I arrived in Phoenix during the blast-furnace heat of August. I had spent over 18 years as a teacher and teacher educator in New York and Connecticut specializing in preparing career-change adults who desired to enter teaching. Because of my background, I was hired by Arizona State University to teach a graduate-course for beginning teachers. My class was comprised of 20- to 23-year-olds. Some hailed from all over the country and had arrived in

the region only a week before me. They trained to be teachers during a five-week summer institute between their college commencement and the beginning of the next (fall) academic year. They were assigned to high-poverty schools and were members of Teach For America.

I had never heard of Teach For America until I met corps members during the fall semester in 1999. I was not aware that emergency-certified teachers were hired in such high numbers by schools in low socioeconomic districts in the metro-Phoenix region and other regions across America. During that first year of exposure to TFA, my work involved teaching bimonthly seminars for 42 beginning Teach For America teachers from three urban districts. The 3-hour instructional sessions, which spanned the entire year, were conducted on-site in one district's governing board conference room. One third of each district's teachers were new hires, and half of them were Teach For America novices.

Over the first few weeks of class, my TFA teachers shared their classroom experiences and their reasons for applying to Teach For America. Since I was new to the Phoenix region, and also began my career in education without education training when I was about their age, I unabashedly expressed an allegiance to the TFAers who were beneath my wing. I saw a rise in their students' self-esteem, which would not have occurred with a continuous stream of substitute teachers. In one corps cohort, 26 members were fluent Spanish speakers, facilitating communication with their students' parents during conferences and during home visits. TFAers wrote wish lists for classroom supplies and spent thousands of dollars of their own money to enrich their students' experiences. TFAers examined the "free and reduced" lunch offerings at their school's cafeteria, exposed health violations (such as expired products and moldy pizza) to the district administration, advocating for healthier foods, and monitored the government's subsidized lunch program's daily menus for an entire year. I observed TFAers building relationships as they coached, cajoled, and encouraged their students with high-fives and incentive gatherings.

And while the presence of TFA seemed preferable to the alternative—a steady stream of substitute teachers—after a few months of observation, I began to notice patterns that illuminated specific and recurrent needs that most of these beginning teachers brought with them to subsequent class sessions. Although Teach For America teachers were working alongside other new teachers in challenging districts, their situation was unique for a number of reasons. In the first cohort I worked with, 99% of TFA beginning teachers were new to both the assigned geographic region *and to teaching*. Second, unlike other beginning teachers whom I taught, the TFAers had undergone specialized training, known as "Corps Training Institute," which served as the only point of reference for almost every

educational theory, practitioner idea, and justification for teacher thinking that found its way into our class discussions and their repertoire of teaching strategies. Third, TFAers were mostly young, intelligent, recent graduates; some were alumni from the most competitive 4-year universities, including: Duke, Stanford, Harvard, The University of Michigan, The University of Pennsylvania, and Cornell. Regardless of one's undergraduate alma mater, the TFA teacher prototype remained constant. Teach For America wanted high-achievers in academic, leadership, and professional capacities.

During course seminars for all beginning teachers, I noticed a unique peer relationship dynamic among TFAers who supported each other by forming cliques, even when grade-level groups would have been more effective. Corps members' collective high-intellectual and verbal abilities did not mask their naiveté and inexperience with school culture or the other realities that faced teachers who were assigned to poor, urban schools. During class discussions, I learned that corps members' ideas were fed through the "TFA grapevine." In other words, if something worked for one corps member, it was offered as a solution for others. When problems arose, the group collectively kicked into problem-solving mode and collaborated to interrupt the issue. Sometimes group support was appropriate, but in most instances, "rookies were helping rookies." Action plans were not based on "best practice" research or previous guided practice with a mentor teacher. I felt concern when I learned that second-year corps members were routinely mentoring the first-year corps members. The TFA teachers also noted why the lack of experienced mentors was problematic:

I was assigned a TFA mentor. She was a second-year corps member who was also teaching Special Education. I thought, "Well, she must know what she is doing." I listened to her during TFA's Learning Teams. She talked about what worked in her classroom. Then at TFA's social gatherings she told me that she didn't really know what was going on and I should find someone at my school with experience in Special Education. (Sania)

I empathized with my floundering TFA students and continued to teach early evening classes for beginning teachers. I wondered why some corps members feigned boredom when I assigned opportunities for practitioner reflection periods, which served to elucidate issues that beginning teachers experienced. Other TFA students spent too much time discussing pressing events in their own classrooms, which frequently had little bearing on the academic topic at hand. Moreover, I observed recurring unprofessional behaviors, from high school pranks, such as throwing snacks to one another across the room, to sleeping on the conference

tables, sprawled out in front of the group. I thought to myself, "Would this be happening in a graduate business class?"

Barb, it's Thursday and I'm tired. How long is this class going to be?
(Cornelia)

While teaching in the heat of Arizona could exhaust anyone, the TFA Top-10 Beginning Teacher Needs Surveys reflected a deficiency in both training and clinical experience. I was informed that each Teach For America corps member underwent a unique student teaching practicum and teacher training, which differed in length, scope, and field experience from traditionally prepared beginning teachers. The primary difference is that TFAers do not complete the standard 15-week classroom internship, required application, or reflection in essential areas, such as: (a) classroom management; (b) curriculum and pedagogy; (c) time management/stress; (d) accommodating student needs; (e) navigating school culture; (f) legal issues; or (g) planning lessons.

I learned that Teach For America's 5-week Corps Training Institute was held in one of TFA's regional training sites. From Institute, TFA sent corps members to all domestic regions in the United States. My students told me that Institute was systematized, rigorous, and headed by former and current TFAers. Unlike the credentialed beginning teachers in my classes, "Institute" training left corps members without a cooperating teacher or university supervisor "lifeline" to contact when questions arose during their rookie year. Having a "lifeline" is essential in the educational field. The lack of experienced "go-to" educators that Teach For America teachers trusted enough to provide immediate feedback or practitioner-tested solutions was a real concern. My readily-available-teacher-educator self, who was not affiliated with TFA or the district, provided an opening for a barrage of queries, such as this one:

Can I speak to you privately? I have a question, I need to ask you because you are someone who knows more than other corps members do. I would ask someone on my campus, but I'm only here a month and I get the idea that I'm not supposed to ask questions from non-TFA people, and I don't feel comfortable with my school-site mentor. (Dana)

Corps members were aware of my own entrée into teaching. It became widely known that I held K-12 certification, was approachable, and willing to support any novice TFAer who wanted to tap my base of experience, borrow materials, or request strategies for immediate use with students. The TFA corps members thrived on feedback and suggestions, such as this:

Barb, that idea you gave me ... it really worked with my kids! (Joe)

When TFAers asked questions related to their own practice in class, I often told stories of my first year teaching to help them see how I, too, struggled with pedagogy and classroom management as an uncertified beginning teacher. However, I learned quickly that what corps members needed, above all, was to know that their discussions and queries would be kept private. Exposing one's difficulties and asking me for help might be construed as going outside TFA's organization. It did not take long for me to realize that the TFAers' spontaneous "appointments" after class or questions via e-mail were occurring with regularity.

In one instance, an athletically built 22-year-old University of Michigan alum helped to transport course materials to my car one evening in exchange for advice on solving some "issues" with his female students who were pushing behavior limits. He clearly felt uncomfortable but was uncertain of the appropriate actions to take to eliminate the problem. He said:

Barb, I have this group of seventh-grade girls in my English class. They are giving me a hard time. The principal says I'm doing great. She is never around. These girls are always coming into the classroom when I am working and calling out in class. Two of them keep coming up to my desk. What do you suggest I do? I know you said before not to be alone in the room with them. I'm taking that advice. (Michael)

After another class, my student, Marla, who had expected to be placed in a high school setting, instead of the fourth-grade class she was unprepared for, decided that quitting TFA in October was her only option. Providing a pep talk and age-appropriate materials stashed in my closet for a curriculum emergency, I encouraged her to finish what she started. I guided her in completing the school year, but she could not endure her 2-year TFA commitment.

Over the academic year, I noted that these were not isolated instances. With no one to run interference for the TFAers, who found themselves overwhelmed and teaching in high-poverty schools in the region, frustrations surfaced. Similar to my own first-year experiences, the majority of TFAers were surprised by the difficulty of teaching. I noted to myself that teaching in high-poverty communities and teaching without certification were not their only challenges; teaching through TFA presented another set of pressures.

Last year was a nightmare. I'll admit. I did not reach the 80% achievement gains TFA tells us we are supposed to meet. (Brandon)

The first group of TFA teachers that I instructed insisted that it was not enough for me to hear or read about their teacher landscape during class meetings or assignments. They urged me to visit their classrooms consis-

tently to see for myself the realities to which they referred in our seminar discussions, which often carried over into coffee shop or parking lot meetings. This open invitation from corps members provided me with a *view from the field*, which thickened the collection of my e-mail and journal conversations with the TFA teachers. Later, I decided to use this information to set the stage for each chapter of this book to illustrate examples of our shared experiences. I chronicled my own reflections through field notes about the days spent in TFA classrooms and conversations with mentor teachers and administrators, both within and outside the original study region. My findings led me to suggest to the university's assistant dean that a Teach For America cohort be developed to specifically gear instruction toward TFAers, resulting in a K-8 master's degree in education with teacher certification. My Teach For America teachers spent countless hours preparing lessons to teach the next day and most were juggling professional development courses twice a week during their first year. This tight schedule proved to be both a blessing and a curse, since the learning curve to process the complexities of teaching was steep and time was short. The TFA teachers were bombarded with paperwork from TFA, the district, and their graduate courses.

I didn't know what anything was about. All of a sudden, TFA was giving me a package of things and then the University was giving me a package of things because we started at the University immediately. I didn't have any time. (Nan)

My conversations with TFAers and their mentors generated questions relating to training, professional development, and support. Some corps members took the initiative to contact TFA's national administration, resulting in visits from Teach For America's New York leadership. Still, TFA novices insisted that I meet with TFA district personnel, so I did during those early years. These meetings expanded access and broadened my view of what the journey to becoming a Teach For America teacher entailed. I was privy to a culture that extended beyond TFA classrooms. This added a personal dimension to my professional relationships with corps members. It became commonplace for me to interact with Teach For America's executive and program directors. I would visit TFA's local offices without prior notice because it was en route to corps members' site schools, and, at one time, TFA's regional offices hosted our weekly university classes. Because of my work, I had an insider's view.

In late August, 2000, one of my university students, a first-year corps member, introduced me to TFA's founder, Wendy Kopp. We spoke briefly during a TFA fund-raising event held at Bank One Ball Park, renamed Chase Field, prior to an Arizona Diamondbacks' game. TFA's executive

director invited me to the game and mentioned to Ms. Kopp that I was instructing and supporting corps members as a liaison to both the university and local school districts.

I recall telling Ms. Kopp that TFAers were “trying” but they needed strategies, supplies, and additional support. She thanked me for my efforts on behalf of the corps, but then she responded to my concern in an even tone, explaining that corps members were expected to be proactive in finding what they needed—including help from their on-site school-based mentors.

At the conclusion of the 1999-2000 academic year, I shared concerns from the mentor teachers who worked with TFA, the district administrators who hired TFA, and more importantly, the TFA beginning teachers themselves, with the university administrators. My job description changed from course instructor who met with TFA students weekly, to “the coach of the corps” and TFA/University liaison. This title meant that I would be in TFAers classrooms every day of the week. I had a defined role but no precise format to follow—there was no handbook, course outline, nor curriculum guide for coaching TFA’s alternatively certified teachers. Based on the firsthand knowledge and information acquired from TFAers during my first year, I adapted course requirements. I also structured my guidance based on recollections embedded in my psyche, from what I needed to know as an uncertified urban teaching novice decades before. Determined to support the corps members as much as possible, I made myself available to the new cohort before they even set foot in their classrooms. At a meeting held at a second-year corps member’s apartment complex, I noticed the faces of TFA newcomers. They sported the now-familiar glazed expression that I noticed on cohort members the year before, which they attributed to the intense TFA Institute Training that the group had recently completed. I learned that their training consisted of 18-plus-hour days that spanned over 5 weeks.

Training was really intense. Like we were up at 6:00 every morning at the latest, and working until midnight, one o’clock every day. (Curtis)

I met some novice TFA teachers who arrived in their teaching region after a flight or three-day road trip to begin the task of readying their classrooms for students.

We arrived from TFA training and had to begin teaching the following day. People said, “Don’t worry.” But, it was a disaster. How could they do that to us? (Gloria)