

## **From Normal Schools to Teach for America**

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Influenced by imperial agendas and impulses, education is often justified as a “quick fix” to remedy problems. Following a cyclical pattern in history, teacher preparation programs emerge that offer solutions to mitigate the political, social, and economic concerns that plague the nation. In the 1830’s, the normal school was initiated in an effort to address an influx of immigrants, the need to educate voters, and a call for standardization; similarly, Teach for America surfaced a century and a half later in 1990, with the intent to address the needs of inner-city schools and provide equity to America’s students. Although well intentioned, these deviations from traditional, university-based preparation have yielded teachers who are inadequately prepared for the demands of the classroom and have demonstrated that short-term solutions will reveal teachers who lack pedagogical knowledge, have minimal training, and are ill equipped to address the needs of their students. While the normal school provided more practical experience than Teach for America, these two programs were insufficient to meet the needs of students in the classroom. This paper serves to examine the historical origins of two alternative routes to teacher licensure, specifically the normal school and Teach for America, and compare the complications that have emerged as a result of their expedited implementation.

### **Missions and Origins**

The normal school, which was a product of the common school reform movement, was first established in the 1839 as a teacher education program. One of the movement’s main components was education of the common man and woman. Several changes took place after 1830 including the increasing number of Roman Catholic immigrants, the opening of the voting rights to all white males, industrialization, and the “increase in disparity between the rich and the poor” (Winslow, 2012, para.1). Fear of political and social unrest caused

leaders to focus on promoting tolerance through assimilating immigrants into American culture and preparing emerging generations of working class citizens for an industrial society (Ogren, 2005).

The need for quality teachers was necessary to develop a professional teaching force for the common school that was intended to standardize education (Ogren, 2005). Although education before the reform movement was free to all those who sought one, schooling in urban and rural areas lacked uniformity and was the responsibility of the governing local bodies of cities and towns (Tobin, 2006). Students with only a high school diploma were eligible to teach, and in most rural schools, teaching was in the hands of young men who were waiting for a ministry or a more lucrative position or by farmers or men who had other side businesses. In urban areas, communities, led by parents with higher incomes, designed independent schools to match their societal needs. Political leaders needed a quick solution to produce quality teachers with some formal training to educate and socialize the rapidly growing nation, characterized with a rising discrepancy in religion, social, and economic status. Reformers, including Horace Mann, widely regarded as the founding father of American education, advocated for the normal school to train teachers (Ogren, 2005). He explained the purpose of the normal school as follows, “Common schools cannot prosper without normal schools. As well we expect to have coats without a tailor and houses without a carpenter or a mason, as we have adequate supply of teachers without normal schools” (Wimpey, 1959, p. 207).

Mann, who was one of the Massachusetts state senators, recommended a “state controlled education to instill republican virtue, Protestant morality, and capitalist sensibilities” (Ogren, 2005, p. 10). He elevated the responsibility for education to the state level and eventually obtained funding for public schools (Tobin, 2006).

The first normal school opened its doors in Lexington, Massachusetts in 1839. Massachusetts was the pioneer of normal schools, opening ten schools by 1894 (Tobin, 2006). Other states such as New York and Connecticut followed suit, and by 1910, there were approximately 180 normal schools in the United States. The goal of the two-year normal school was to train students in content, pedagogical, and practical knowledge in order to prepare them for classroom teaching. However, when normal schools first began, they were not very popular and were often perceived as an inferior option to higher education. Their curriculum was considered weak and underdeveloped. Not until the 1870's did the normal school gain acceptance, which was when the general public realized that the normal schools were exposing students to higher education that they otherwise would not have had access to, such as young farmers and women, who were not well received at many colleges and universities. The normal schools were referred to as "non-traditional," because they were pioneers in teacher education and by 1915 there were 119,000 students enrolled compared to 29,100 in 1875 (Ogren, 2005).

Looking ahead one hundred and fifty years later, another teacher preparation program emerged as a rapid response to the needs of inner city schools and the demands of political mandates such as No Child Left Behind. Just as the normal school was driven by rapid changes in society, the development of TFA was also largely driven by societal needs and demands. Teach for America (TFA) originated with the mission to serve the needs of students in low income communities while providing a quality education (Teach for America, 2011). Wendy Kopp (2011), founder of TFA, described the premise behind her vision for the alternative licensure program:

When I first dreamed up the idea of Teach for America, I envisioned our generation rallying to address the unjust reality that even in our nation—a nation that aspires so admirably to be a place of equal opportunity—the neighborhood into which children are born still largely predicts their

educational outcomes and, in turn, opportunities in life. (Kopp, 2011, p. 1)

To attain this goal, TFA enlists academically distinguished undergraduates with a propensity for leadership who are willing to dedicate two years of service by teaching in an impoverished school setting (Teach for America, 2011). TFA's objectives are to provide talented students to address the needs of low performing schools, but also provide longstanding change (Graves, 2010). To tackle the achievement gap that persists in American education, TFA provides teacher education while also ensuring that students perceive how to bridge the achievement gap (Teach for America, 2011).

TFA recruits talented individuals who would not teach if TFA did not exist (Glazerman, Mayer, & Decker, 2006). In a case study that followed one teacher's induction into Teach for America, the former corps member described the program's "intention to recruit Corps Members who were 'untainted' by the influence of teacher preparation" (Telez, 2011, p. 22). This perception, by one of its own members, is indicative of the program's rejection of the merits of traditional teacher preparation. This member recounted, "They kept telling us, 'You're going to be amazing, you are going to have such an impact on the kids'" (Telez, 2011, p. 22). This philosophy suggests that its members developed confidence based on intrinsic characteristics, not due to a solid background in pedagogical knowledge.

Teach for America, a program conceived through a senior thesis by Kopp during her time at Princeton University, now boasts 46,000 applicants (Kopp, 2011). TFA was given \$500,000 in grants by H. Ross Perot to initiate this optimistic program (TFA: A timeline, n.d.). Congress endorsed the program with the Teach for America Act that provided annual federal dollars (TFA: A timeline, n.d.). In 2009, The U.S. Department of Education endorsed TFA with an Investing in Innovation grant (TFA: A timeline, n.d.). What began as the fledgling idea of a graduate student has now impacted the lives of three million students, spanning 43 diverse communities in the United States (Teach for America, 2011).

A variety of historical influences could be cited to explain the changes in teacher preparation. Examination through an economic lens poses a potential explanation for the increasing popularity of this program because TFA is seen as a low-cost solution to quality education. Teach for America seeks to fill voids in districts where there is an inadequate supply of qualified teachers, and often substitutes or alternatively licensed applicants fill the vacancies (Viadero, 2004). From a financial standpoint, Teach for America has been seen as a more cost-effective strategy than a reduction in class sizes because a reduction in class size would require hiring more teachers, but instead, TFA seeks to provide qualified teachers in every classroom (Viadero, 2004; Glazerman et. al., 2006). TFA is also financially appealing to its members in its commitment to provide funds towards student loans (Tellez, 2011). TFA is listed as one of Fortune Magazine's Top 100 Companies to Work For (Teach for America, 2011). While many celebrate its merits in this economy, critics argue that a two-year commitment to TFA contributes to the nation's loss in seven billion dollars annually as a result of teacher attrition, according to Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (Heitin, 2011).

In addition to addressing the nation's economic concerns in America, TFA also provides an alternative to traditional teacher preparation that can be examined in the political realm. No Child Left Behind necessitated that all teachers become 'highly-qualified' by 2005-2006 (Viadero, 2004). NCLB has heightened our understanding of data disaggregation and the disparities between different racial and socioeconomic groups, and TFA provides corps members in schools where these populations of students comprise a majority. Government officials seek to supply communities of low socioeconomic status with highly qualified teachers and to comply with NCLB (Glazerman et al., 2006). University preparatory programs have been challenged, with critics claiming that "the best of teacher education programs are being lumped with the worst" and "there is a growing sense among critics that it would be more fruitful to replace university-based teacher education than to attempt to reform it" (Levine, 2010, p. 21).

The reform of TFA as an alternative route to teacher licensure can also be attributed to the need to address social change and equity within American public schools. Kopp (2011) believes that equal opportunities in education will be a vehicle for opportunity for disadvantaged students. "I hesitate to say it, because it sounds so lofty and superficial, but I really believe education is the key to everything," Ms. Kopp said. "There is an enormous amount of idealism on college campuses" (Bradley, 1990, para. 5). TFA attempts to target college-aged students who share a similar mindset in order to unite to bring about social change. Recognizing that academic achievement is indicative of effective teaching, TFA attempts to make a difference as it recognizes that even "in a bad school with no textbooks and crowded classrooms, a really good teacher can make music" (Koerner, 2008, "Obstacles," para. 1). TFA continues to appeal to college graduates because of its commitment to providing equitable education for students across the nation. With public education in the national spotlight, TFA emerged as a program that would address the mandates of NCLB and provide equity to students in underprivileged areas; instead, its members' lack of training did little to narrow the achievement gap. An analysis of training required for the normal school and TFA reveals how ill-equipped teachers were to address the nation's needs discussed above as a result of participation in these programs.

### **Training**

When the normal school first opened its doors, the curriculum was underdeveloped with very little pedagogical instruction (Ogren, 2005). According to a personal account by Marguerite Mettlin, who attended normal school in 1935, the expectations was that teachers knew how to teach because they had recently graduated from high school and had an understanding of the content; "I had gone to a rural school so I knew all those routines" (personal communication, March 17, 2012). Perhaps because the normal school was originally focused on educating the newly diverse and fast changing industrial population that more attention was centered on the delivery of academic rather than pedagogical understanding. Brown

(1919) explained, “According to Merle Borrowmen, ‘an excessively technical concept of the professional sequence caused the normals to instruct future teachers in little more than ‘tricks of the trade’” (p. 21). Additionally, because those applying into the normal school were at various academic levels, knowledge of the core academic subjects was necessary to maintain a common standard (Ogren, 2008). A focus on content detracted from their time spent learning pedagogical knowledge. Separate life certificates for elementary and high school were granted in some states based on the passing of examinations in general content areas such as English, arithmetic and science (biology, chemistry and astronomy), as well as the following subjects: orthography, penmanship, drawing, music, Latin, and theory and practice of teaching. Furthermore, teachers were expected to teach a large range of grades in the same classroom (Meriam, 1906). A planning journal of a one-room school house teacher, Anny E. Innes, (1909) revealed a schedule that displayed application of differentiated lessons, approximately ten to fifteen minutes long, for children from the fifth grade to the eighth grade. In addition to large group activities, which encompassed all grades, the majority of her day was designed around these small group lessons to match the content requirements for each grade. An analysis of this daily schedule reveals that the normal school emphasized breadth, not depth of knowledge. A personal account by Margurite Mettlin, who first taught in 1934 displayed a similar experience, “I was in a one room school house with forty two pupils from first grade to eight grade. I took each class one at a time. I had a long seating bench” (personal communication, March 17, 2012).

The normal school was an ephemeral solution to the nations’ social, political, and economic needs, and its flaws emerged as its popularity increased. Before the 1870’s, instruction at normal schools did not seem to be at a professional level. However, from 1870 until the early 1900s, as more graduates with field experience were appointed to the faculty of normal schools, the general direction moved towards a more professional state (Ogren, 2005). According to Brown (1919) of Oshkosh, Wisconsin State Normal school, the aims of teacher education were as

follows: (1) “*The teacher must be a person of sound scholarship within the range of his work*” (p. 277). He argued that teachers needed more depth in their subject matter and that two years of training were not sufficient to obtain sound scholarship. (2) “*The teacher needs a knowledge of the facts concerning the mental processes of children and the laws of their growth and development*” (p. 278). He stressed the importance of obtaining a solid understanding of child development in order to apply the content knowledge appropriately and gain a cohesive understanding of the adaption of learning. (3) “*An intimate knowledge of the best methods of teaching so far as they have been established at the present time*” (p. 278). He discussed methods of teaching that have been known to be effective and that through experimentation better methods surfaced to improve instruction in the classroom and help teachers learn how to teach. (4) “*The teacher needs to know a good deal about the best methods of school organization and management*” (p. 279). Brown (1919) encouraged normal schools to train teachers in the comprehension of the school organization as well as acceleration, retardation, elimination, standardized tests, hygiene, physical education, and the value of athletics. Investigation of this primary document reveals the following interpretations: *elimination* referred to students dropping out of school and *retardation* referred to children with special needs. Brown’s statements indicated that leaders of normal schools began to re-evaluate the program to produce more highly qualified and well-rounded teachers with the capacity to support other issues in addition to the academics. This was a necessary shift as the number of high schools increased, which implied that the level of education was not adequate and as such needed to be raised to higher standards.

As the demand for quality teachers increased, so did the need to move the normal school to a more professional level. “The rise of the high school and the advent of accreditation and education-professional associations in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century brought the normal school era to a close” (Levine, 2011, p.1). Higher education adopted teacher training and determined that teaching at the secondary level required more expertise. Therefore,

universities and colleges began to establish their own teacher training programs. At the same time, many normal schools extended their programs to four years instead of the original two-year programs. Eventually the name changed from “normal school” to “teachers college” and provided students with a bachelor’s degree (Ogren, 2005). Therefore, the extension of normal schools to a four-year teachers college and the conception of teacher education programs in universities was a necessary step in the direction of improvement of teacher education.

As a comparison, TFA also emphasized teacher preparation that ignored the need for developing pedagogical knowledge. TFA was also implemented rapidly, and its gaps in teacher preparation are beginning to be unveiled in the research. Teach for America is a stark-contradiction to more conventional means of teacher education. Approximately 90% of educators are taught through traditional university preparatory programs (Levine, 2010). The expectations of first year teachers may be the same for university-prepared teachers and teachers trained through TFA; however, the way to the classroom varies immensely. Training for TFA differs greatly from traditional teacher preparation by presenting the content in an expedited form. Students receive five weeks of training before the school year that targets lesson design and curricular needs (Teach for America, 2011). This is a small amount of classroom exposure compared to traditional student teaching expectations through a university program. As a part of the summer training, students are responsible for practicum experiences in which they teach for two hours on a daily basis (Teach for America, 2011). Half of this time is spent working in small, remedial groups to develop an understanding of small group instruction (Teach for America, 2011). Even within this short time span, corps members are not leading whole-class instruction during the entire time period, providing further evidence of their inadequate preparation. Students are observed multiple times within a week’s span, and they also participate in small group reflections as part of the program’s requirements (Teach for America, 2011). Corps members attend lesson planning clinics and

curriculum sessions as part of their training (Teach for America, 2011).

In addition to participating in the summer training, corps members receive ongoing mentorship through MTLT, an acronym for the Manager of Teacher Leadership and Development as part of the manager of teacher leadership and development (MTLD) (Teach for America, 2011). The program aligns itself with professional development that was introduced by Ball and Cohen (1999) that insist that teaching “must be learned in form and practice. They write that, ‘to propose otherwise would be like expecting someone to learn to swim on a sidewalk’” (p.12, as cited in Gabriel, 2011, p. 976). It should be noted that the professional development of TFA teachers must be ongoing because of their minimal preparation prior to becoming a teacher. Participating corps members also have a wealth of online resources available through TFA Net that are targeted for low-socioeconomic populations of students (Teach for America, 2011). Corps members are also required to comply with certification requirements in order to classify as “highly-qualified” (Teach for America, 2011). TFA boasts its ongoing support for corps members, but reality suggests that this continuous professional development may be necessary for its members due to the inadequacy of training provided. Many corps members satisfy this requirement by receiving alternative licenses, but many states mandate that they must still pass specific entry level exams and work towards pursuing a degree to obtain certification (Teach for America, 2011).

Despite a growing body of research, critics vehemently oppose this non-traditional route to teacher certification. Some have “accused the program of gambling with poor children’s futures because few of its recruits come to the program with education backgrounds” (Viadero, 2004, para. 5). A well respected name in educational researcher, Linda Darling-Hammond (1994, 1995) has stated that TFA corps members struggle “with curriculum development, pedagogical content knowledge, students’ different learning styles, classroom management, and student motivation” (as cited in Glazerman et al., 2006, p. 76). It is no

surprise that current teachers and professors of education opposed this non-traditional route to licensure compared to two years of preparation within a university setting (Koerner et al., 2008). Still, other critics maintain that TFA is merely a means for bolstering resumes for future career endeavors outside of education (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011).

Statistics on TFA provide validity to the transient nature of the program. Surveys report that approximately two thirds of corps members stay in public education at the conclusion of their two year requirement, but over half do not remain in their low-income placements at the end of two years (Donaldson et al., 2011). After five years, only 14.8% remain in their original school placements (Donaldson et al., 2011). This high turnover of teachers remains a flaw in the eyes of many critics as they recognize that “this revolving door transfer of teachers from the schools that most need skilled, experienced teachers remains a serious problem” (Donaldson et al., 2011, p. 51).

Because TFA differs significantly from traditional university preparation programs, researchers seek to determine if pre-service preparation through Teach for America leads to significant differences in academic achievement among affected students. Glazerman, Mayer, and Decker (2006) conducted a study that used random assignment to compare the mean differences between TFA teachers and novice teachers’ student achievement gains in math and reading. Overall results concluded that TFA corps members were associated with significantly higher gains in math achievement, which equated to approximately an additional month of classroom instruction. Despite this increase in math scores, there was no difference found among the groups on student reading scores, as measured by the IOWA Tests of Basic Skills. In addition, non-academic indicators were also compared among the groups, with no significant differences in student attendance, disciplinary infractions, and promotion. One difference that was noted, however, was that TFA corps members reported more discipline occurrences than non-TFA teachers. These findings are not surprising due to their lack of exposure with whole class instruction

during their practicum experience in the summer. These findings may appear to provide support for the effectiveness of TFA; however, the results must be interpreted with caution. This study did not distinguish between the non-TFA members with regard to their pre-service preparation; some of the teachers were also alternatively licensed and were not students in university-based preparatory programs. Therefore, one might conclude that TFA was being compared to a sample that is not representative of typical university-trained members. Critics must then question if TFA members are actually superior to a typical sample of university-trained members in teaching mathematics (Glazerman et al., 2006).

To provide further support for the negative effects of TFA, the Indiana University School of Education and the Center for Urban and Multicultural Education summarized research of the effectiveness of TFA (IUPUI, 2009). Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) found that alternatively licensed teachers in Arizona had students with lower scores on the SAT9 in all categories than students of certified teachers (as cited in IUPUI, 2009, p. 2). In addition, Darling-Hammond, Hotzman, Gatlin, & Heilig (2005) found similar results for students taking the TAAS, SAT-9, and Aprenda, indicating that teachers who did not finish a certification program had a negative impact on student achievement, as measured by five out of six standardized exams (as cited in IUPUI, 2009, p. 2). The study authors concluded:

Our review suggests that more, rather than less, supervised education coursework and training is associated with positive outcomes for students and teacher retention. It is encouraging and not surprising that TFA teachers who achieved certification performed commensurate to their certified peers after three years. However, the high attrition rates in TFA coupled with inconclusive evidence of student achievement raise serious questions regarding the long-term benefits of the TFA program for urban and rural schools and communities. While some urban and rural schools struggle to fill teaching positions

with certified teachers in high need areas, bringing in TFA teachers for one or two years does not address the persistent challenges facing students and the schools as a whole (IUPUI, 2009, p. 3-4).

### Conclusion

Education will always be a means for addressing societal needs; however, policy makers must be cautious and fastidious when designing teacher preparation programs that serve to address these needs. The normal school, in its fledgling state, and Teach for America are both indicative of alternative licensure programs that developed rapidly and neglected the need for a solid background in pedagogical knowledge, necessary for addressing the needs of a classroom. Have our past experiences informed our current view on teacher education? George Santayana enlightened us with his famous phrase, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Bass, 2011). The normal school eventually transformed into a four-year program when it became evident that its teachers were not adequately prepared. Will the fate of TFA match that of the normal school? Despite their immediate allure, alternative routes to teaching should be approached with caution. Researchers and critics have delineated their flaws, and because of their inadequacies, the problems that plagued our nation when they were developed continue to persist. Because of the cyclical nature of history, policy makers should cautiously approach anything that appears to be a “quick-fix.”

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