



## Alternative Routes to Teacher Professional Identity: Exploring the Conflated Sub-identities of Teach For America Corps Members

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**Abstract:** Research on the development of professional identity for teachers who enter the profession through alternative routes is still in its infancy. In contrast to their peers who complete traditional initial teacher education programs, these teachers are exposed to different conditions and constraints that produce a range of sub-identities previously unidentified in the literature. This paper draws on interviews with 27 teachers who entered teaching through Teach For America and wrestled with these sub-identities as they considered their emerging professional identity. We argue that these sub-identities point to structural challenges embedded within Teach for America, and we highlight the need for additional research on the growing cadre of teachers entering the teaching profession through alternative routes, and subsequently influencing policymaking processes.

**Keywords:** teacher professional identity; alternative routes; educational policy; Teach For America

### **Rutas alternativas y caminos hacia la identidad profesional de los maestros: Explorando las identidades diversas de los miembros de Teach For America**

**Resumen:** La investigación sobre el desarrollo de la identidad profesional de los maestros que ingresan a la profesión a través de vías alternativas todavía está en su infancia. A diferencia de sus colegas que completan los programas tradicionales de formación docente inicial, estos maestros están expuestos a diferentes condiciones y limitaciones que producen una multitud de identidades no identificadas previamente en la literatura. Esta investigación se basa en entrevistas con 27 maestros que ingresaron a la enseñanza a través de Teach For America y lucharon con estas subidentidades cuando consideraban su identidad profesional emergente. Presentamos argumentos que estas subidentidades apuntan a desafíos estructurales integrados en Teach for America, y destacamos la necesidad de investigación adicional sobre el creciente grupo de profesores que ingresan a la profesión docente a través de rutas alternativas, y que posteriormente influyen en los procesos de formulación de política.

**Palabras-clave:** identidad profesional de los maestros; rutas alternativas; política; Teach for America

### **Rotas alternativas e caminhos para a identidade profissional dos professores: Explorando as diversas identidades dos membros Teach For America**

**Resumo:** A pesquisa sobre o desenvolvimento da identidade profissional dos professores que entram na profissão através de meios alternativos ainda está em sua infância. Ao contrário de seus colegas que completam os tradicionais programas iniciais de treinamento de professores, esses professores estão expostos a diferentes condições e limitações que produzem uma multiplicidade de identidades não identificadas anteriormente na literatura. Esta pesquisa é baseada em entrevistas com 27 professores que entraram no ensino por Teach For America e lutaram com essas subidências quando consideraram sua identidade profissional emergente. Apresentamos argumentos de que essas subentendências apontam para desafios estruturais integrados no Teach for America e destacamos a necessidade de pesquisas adicionais sobre o crescente grupo de professores que entram na profissão docente através de rotas alternativas e que posteriormente influenciam os processos de formulação de política.

**Palavras-chave:** identidade profissional dos professores; rotas alternativas; política; Teach for America

## **Introduction**

A wealth of research has explored the development and mediation of teacher professional identity among early career teachers (for example, Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Schepens, Aelterman, & Vlerick, 2009; Weiner & Torres, 2016). Within this literature, initial teacher education is generally thought to be a significant force in the shaping of early career teacher identity, and the majority of this research uses traditional, initial teacher education programs and their concomitant courses, practicum experiences, and certification requirements as the touchstone for this discussion. Yet an increasing population of teachers is entering the profession through alternative routes and pathways that do not include initial teacher education as traditionally conceptualised. For example, the percentage of new hires in U.S. public schools holding alternative certification rose from 13 to 23% from 1999-2000 to 2007-2008 (Warner-Griffin, Noel, & Tadler, 2016). Scant research has explored the professional identity of these teachers who, in many instances, face remarkably different circumstances. Like their

‘traditional’ early career peers, these neophyte teachers must navigate the usual range of discourses about what it means and feels like to be a teacher (Crawford-Garrett, 2009); however, due to a variety of factors, including compressed timeframes (Matsui, 2015), and a multiplicity of roles, they experience additional layers of complexity in developing teacher professional identity.

This paper explores and theorizes the development of teacher professional identity amongst a unique but growing body of new teachers who enter the profession through elite, fast-track programs such as those under the umbrella organization, Teach For All. Programs associated with the Teach For All network—including Enseñá por Argentina, Teach for Armenia, Teach for Australia, and Teach for Austria, to name a few—now operate in more 45 countries around the world, and additional expansion plans are underway (Teach For All, 2018). Although these programs vary in the extent of their adaptation to the different sociocultural and political contexts in which they operate (Straubhaar & Friedrich, 2015), they share remarkable similarities in their structures, discourses, and ideologies, in that they generally recruit primarily ‘highly-selective’ recent graduates to complete condensed teacher training programs and ‘close the achievement gap’ (Blumenreich & Gupta, 2015; La Londe, Brewer, & Lubienski, 2015). Furthermore, and most closely connected to the focus of this paper, the programs themselves aim to strongly shape perceptions of what it *means* and *feels* like to be a teacher. Yet limited scholarship has examined how this cadre of teachers experience and navigate their own identity development, including the multiple sub-identities they maintain and reconstitute.

This study draws on interview data with 27 corps members (CMs) enrolled in the original program upon which Teach For All is premised—Teach For America (TFA)—to analyse the mediation of teacher professional identity. In this paper we identify five sub-identities subscribed to by these CMs and argue that these sub-identities may constrict the development of a more holistic sense of teacher professional identity, at least as historically understood. We posit that these sub-identities point to structural conditions in the TFA program design, and ultimately create additional ‘identity-wrestling’ as CMs navigate their conflated roles as representatives of the TFA program, full-time teachers in the schools where they complete their two-year TFA commitments, and often, as graduate students advancing progress toward state licensure requirements. Finally, we suggest that these factors might also be in play for those who take other alternative routes to teaching. Thus, we contend that it is vital to consider the shifting terrain of initial teacher education and educational policymaking in theorising teacher professional identity.

The paper is in five parts. The first section outlines prevailing conceptualisations of teacher professional identity, which have been framed primarily using traditionally-trained teachers as the assumed population for analysis. The second section outlines briefly the TFA program before exploring the how conceptualisations of teacher professional identity mesh with the ‘TFA experience.’ The third section describes the research methods, which utilized in-depth interviews, while the fourth presents the research findings. In this section we use the data to highlight five sub-identities that are arguably unique to teachers who enter the profession through alternative pathways, including but perhaps not limited to TFA. The final section of the paper discusses how these sub-identities point to structural conditions that may manifest as barriers to the development of teacher professional identity as conceptualised in previous research. It concludes by raising critical questions about the role of TFA in the educational milieu as well as the need for additional research on teacher professional identity among teachers who enter via alternate pathways.

## Teacher Professional Identity

'Identity' is aptly recognized as a slippery concept, both in research literature related to teacher professional identity as well as further afield. In our discussions of teacher professional identity, which we understand as the means by which teachers, individually and collectively, view and understand themselves as 'teachers' (Mockler, 2011b), we acknowledge the inherent 'slipperiness' of identity, drawing upon Judith Butler's eloquent account of identity formation:

Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give way. (Butler, 1993, p. 105)

Research on the formation and mediation of teacher professional identity has generally worked with this notion of the constant reconstitution of professional identity over the course of teachers' careers. Professional identity is said to be shaped by teachers' personal narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Murray Orr, Pearce, & Steeves, 2006; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999); by the interplay of professional, personal and contextual/political dimensions (Day & Kington, 2008; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006), and by the processes associated with professional learning and development (Mockler, 2011a; Popkewitz, 1998).

Furthermore, identity is generally understood as a richer, more nuanced concept than 'role'. Deborah Britzman, in her groundbreaking work on learning to teach, explains the difference in this way: "role speaks to function whereas identity voices investments and commitments. Function, or what one should do, and investments, or what one feels, are often at odds" (Britzman, 1992, p. 29). The formation of professional identity, then, might be seen to be connected to the development of *praxis*, of 'morally informed action' (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), as teachers negotiate and renegotiate over the course of their careers the space between their 'investments and commitments' and their role expectations. MacLure (1993) draws attention to this negotiation as a particular struggle "as the old models and exemplars of teacherhood disintegrate under contemporary social and economic pressures" (p.311), a question to which we shall return later in this paper in considering the formation of teacher professional identity in light of TFA.

Initial teacher education is generally seen as a primary site for the formation of teacher professional identity. For example, some research constitutes initial teacher education as the site for the development of pre-service teachers' 'core beliefs' about teaching, which form the foundation of beginning teacher identity (Mayer, 1999; Walkington, 2005). Other research (for example, Dang, 2013) has explored the role of the practicum in the formation and mediation of professional identity, while other approaches have explored the interplay of personal, role and social identities in the formation of teacher professional identity for pre-service teachers (Friesen & Besley, 2013), or the development of teacher professional identity as 'voice' (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Furthermore, research into the development of teacher professional identity among early career and beginning teachers generally emphasizes the mediating role of initial teacher education (usually as one of a number of elements of past experience) in shaping professional identity, and the importance of the formative experience of initial teacher education in the formation of robust teacher professional identity (Flores & Day, 2006; Freedman & Appleman, 2008; Pillen, Den Brok, & Beijaard, 2013). Some recent work on teacher professional identity does acknowledge the growing population of teachers who have taken alternative certification pathways into the profession (see Weiner & Torres, 2016), though much of this work focuses primarily on the role of school context

(e.g., charter or public school) in shaping professional identity for beginning teachers rather than the influence of alternative certification pathways on the shaping of teacher professional identity.

## TFA and Teacher Identity

While the research on teacher professional identity generally points to professional development in the form of pre-service and in-service teacher education (see, for example, Dang 2013; Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2016), this presupposes a ‘traditional’ form of university-based initial teacher education, rather than alternative forms such as those under the Teach For All banner or the *School Direct* program in the United Kingdom. Indeed, these programs typically function outside or alongside traditional teacher education systems; therefore, the teachers they prepare and place largely circumvent both the support networks and the sustained period of professional formation described in the literature on professional identity. Although TFA, most specifically, has borrowed some of its materials and concepts from traditional teacher education (see Schneider, 2014, for a nuanced review), much of its fundraising and recruiting success is due to its perpetual branding as an elite organization dedicated to education equity but distinctly different from the status quo of initial teacher education. Perhaps paradoxically, TFA itself promises to train and support CMs, who generally have not completed a traditional teacher education program (TFA, 2017a), “in the practices of great teachers and leaders” (TFA, 2017b).

Unlike most initial teacher education programs that require future teachers to complete content and pedagogical coursework in addition to multiple teaching practicum experiences, TFA utilizes its own corporatized criteria for selecting CMs, which situates leadership and achievement at its core (Kavanagh & Dunn, 2013; Straubhaar & Gottfried, 2014), rather than prior experience in the field of education (see Whitman, 2012). Indeed, the deeply ingrained logic of TFA positions the characteristics of CMs, namely “their elite education, leadership capacity, and idealism” as the secret to success in the classroom (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016, p. 4). Moreover, given its general reliance upon a shorter-term training model that has been historically five-weeks in length, known as Summer Institute, and an entrenched resistance to requiring more than a two-year commitment (see Hopkins, 2008a, 2008b; Kopp, 2008), it is undeniable that CMs face a myriad of experiences largely foreign to teachers who complete traditional initial teacher education programs. For example, at Summer Institute CMs typically spend several hours (co-)teaching students enrolled in summer school programs during the days and attending professional development sessions on teaching and learning in the evenings (Veltri, 2010). This training constitutes the core of pre-service education for these TFA teachers, although they are also often exposed to other TFA materials, including supplemental readings (Schneider, 2014) and the *Teaching as Leadership* text and rubric (Farr, 2010), which guides CMs towards their emerging understandings of teaching and the profession.

Although discourse among CMs has in some instances appropriated the language of student teaching to describe Summer Institute, many CMs rightly acknowledge that its nature is decidedly distinct from a traditional teacher education student teaching experience (Thomas, 2018), wherein pre-service teachers would work with a master cooperative teaching during the normal school year in a phased release experience, eventually teaching all content lessons by themselves. In sum, as teaching neophytes (or novices), educational outsiders, TFA insiders (Ahmann, 2016), and, in many cases, graduate students (Carter, Amrein-Beardsley, & Hansen, 2011), CMs face considerably more challenges than their traditionally-trained peers who had longer pre-service practicum experiences, additional coursework in educational theory and pedagogy, and will not likely begin graduate work concurrently in their first year of teaching (as CMs in many states are required to pursue additional

licensing/coursework during their first year of teaching). Indeed, CMs must consider and contend with more than just their ‘roles’ as teachers during their two-year commitments.

For these and other reasons, recent scholarship on TFA has characterized CMs as distinct from the population of traditionally-trained teachers. For example, Stern and Johnston (2013) describe how CMs discuss their decision to *do* Teach For America, not *become a teacher* (p. 1). This categorization necessarily suggests different forces at play in the development of CMs’ professional identity, and at the very least raises questions concerning the positioning of TFA in the mediation of CM identity. Indeed, research by Ahmann (2016) as well as Thomas and Lefebvre (2017) highlight the sustained power of CM socialization and the TFA discourse, or “script” (Matsui, 2016, p. 21), which often impresses itself upon CMs in a manner analogous to cult-like behavior. Implicit pressures to ‘drink the Kool-Aid’ (see Anderson, 2014) and tell “redemptive stories” (Ahmann, 2016, p. 124) can lead to immense personal, social, and mental health struggles (Matsui, 2016; Thomas & Lefebvre, 2017). CMs are therefore simultaneously navigating their involvement in the powerful culture of TFA at the same time as their emerging sense of professional identity as they work as full-time teachers in schools, often in discipline areas in which they have minimal expertise or formal education.

Thinking about the realm of personal professional knowledge, and taking their lead from the work of Bromme (1991), Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) argue that “teachers derive their professional identity from (mostly combinations of) the ways they see themselves as subject matter experts, pedagogical experts, and didactical experts” (p. 751). Interestingly, none of these three characteristics may hold true for CMs, who are often teaching beyond the realm of their undergraduate education, and undergo only basic ‘training’ in what Beijaard et al would regard as pedagogical and didactic knowledge in their Summer Institute. Thomas (2017) illustrates the potential for this disconnect, highlighting how “an accounting major who co-teaches sixth grade math during a 5-week Summer Institute does not have requisite background knowledge of approaches and processes to begin a placement in Grades 7 to 12 special education” (p. 17). Indeed, given this trajectory, it would be challenging for most to see themselves as experts. For CMs, the dominant personal educational knowledge brought into practice is more likely to emanate from their own personal experiences as students rather than an initial teacher education program.

In subsequent work, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) argue that teacher professional identity is comprised of ‘sub-identities’

...that more or less harmonize. The notion of sub-identities relates to teachers’ different contexts and relationships. Some of these sub-identities may be broadly linked and can be seen as the core of teachers’ professional identity, while others may be more peripheral. It seems to be essential for a teacher that these sub-identities do not conflict, i.e., that they are well balanced. During initial teacher training, student teachers often experience such conflict (e.g., Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). Experienced teachers may experience such conflict in cases of educational change or change in their immediate working environment (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). The more central a sub-identity is, the more costly it is to change or lose that identity. (p. 122)

In the same way as it appears that professional identity for CMs cannot be framed in terms of professional knowledge, neither can it be framed in terms of experience in the way Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop contend. Our discussions with CMs suggest that their sub-identities interplay in a complex way in the formation of their professional identities. Our exploration of these sub-identities

has applicability beyond the CMs in this study, and extends to the many teachers who enter the profession through similar alternate routes.

## Research Methods

### Context and Data Collection

This paper draws on interviews conducted with CMs from a TFA region in the Midwestern United States. The CMs were actively enrolled in graduate-level courses at a higher education institution—known by the pseudonym of Greenwood University—while they completed their two-year TFA commitments between 2009 and 2013. Author 1 taught core courses at Greenwood, including several comprised partially or completely of CMs, and quickly realized that many CMs were confronted and conflicted by the ways in which they represented TFA both personally and professionally. After completing institutional ethics approvals, he invited all CMs enrolled in his courses to participate in an interview after the conclusion of their course, with 27 participants opting into the study. This particular data collection technique was employed in the study because of the desire to “enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2015, p. 426) beyond that which could be perceived via other means, such as observation. The semi-structured, in-depth interviews allowed for extended “conversation with a purpose” (Dexter, 1970, p. 136) to take place, which generally lasted one to three hours in duration and yielded on average more than 18,000 words per interview. These interviews led to a large corpus of data comprised of rich descriptions of participants’ perspectives on their experiences as early career teachers.

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed based on a review of the literature on TFA as well as Author 1’s personal experiences working with CMs in graduate courses. In-class discussions with CMs about behavior management, educational philosophies, and generic TFA experiences were particularly beneficial in informing interview questions that reflected Author 1’s positionality as an insider/teacher educator familiar with some of the inner workings of the organization and experiences of CMs, but as an outsider/researcher who was not officially or otherwise affiliated with TFA. The CMs were encouraged in the interview to reflect on how it ‘felt’ to be called a teacher as they answered questions related to the development of their teacher professional identity, as well as ancillary probing questions based on emerging themes, such as how they balanced and conceptualized these different identities and sub-identities throughout their time in TFA.

### Research Participants

Three cohorts of CMs participated in this phase of the study. The vast majority of the CM participants entered TFA immediately after their undergraduate programs. They were mostly white, and 21 of the 27 were female. Perhaps most relevant to the focus of this paper, a small number of the CMs in the study had some previous experience as a tutor or paraprofessional in schools, but none of the CMs had studied education as a major in their undergraduate degree or completed an initial teacher education program. Rather, their undergraduate majors ranged from Spanish to biology to gender studies, and more. Thus in the absence of substantial, or any, prior coursework in education, their perspectives on education and the teaching profession, other than those gleaned in their own ‘apprenticeship of observation’ (Lortie, 1975), were necessarily shaped primarily by TFA through the TFA-produced materials mailed to CMs and, more significantly, by Summer Institute and continued interactions with TFA staff members.

## Data Analysis

While additional findings from the broader study can be found elsewhere (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017; Thomas, 2017, 2018; Thomas & Lefebvre, 2017), the findings presented in this article stem from CM responses to three specific interview questions focused on the development of teacher professional identity. Each CM was asked the following:

- a) How does it feel to call yourself a teacher?
- b) How would you describe your sense of teacher identity?
- c) How do you balance the various identities and roles throughout the 2-year TFA commitment?

All interviews were conducted by Author 1 and audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Both authors then independently coded the transcripts, exploring themes related to teacher professional identity and other salient concepts. The authors discussed the themes that emerged over time from their independent analyses, seeking points of convergence and divergence. Through this process, we engaged triangulation strategies, using the multiple sources of data to constantly compare and cross-check emerging ideas and themes, and also in peer evaluation, as we opened our independently developed ideas up to the scrutiny and critique of each other. Both of these strategies are understood to help build credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research of this kind (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From continued discussions and examinations of data excerpts emerged a series of sub-identities that highlighted structural conditions which contributed to the constrained cultivation of teacher professional identity among CMs in the study. This study does not aim to be generalizable; however, we offer this conceptual framework as a means to highlight and analyze policy contexts and professional working conditions that may constrain the development of robust teacher professional identity, and be at work in different ways across TFA regions in the United States and within other alternative licensure pathways within Teach For All organizations and similar programs around the world.

## Research Findings

This section presents the research findings in the form of five sub-identities that seemed to mitigate the development of teacher professional identity for the CMs in the study. In order to examine both the breadth and depth of this collection of conditions, in some sub-sections below we draw on a range of quotations from different CMs and in others we examine in closer detail the particular circumstances of a single CM. In so doing we aim to explore the themes in-depth to adequately elaborate these sub-identities. Yet the themes that emerged from our coding processes were generally consistent across the three TFA cohorts included in the study. In sum, in the section that follows we highlight the five sub-identities of CMs in these forms: 1) all-stars, 2) outsiders, 3) apprentices, 4) TFA Corps Members, and 5) free agents.

### CMs as All-Stars: Prior Successes Prohibit Professional Identity

Due at least in part to the strong emphasis on recruiting campus leaders and highly accomplished students, or America's 'best and brightest' (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Kavanagh & Dunn, 2013; Schneider, 2011), most CMs have experienced a considerable amount of previous success academically, socially, and in some cases, economically. Many of the CMs in the study mentioned these prior successes in contrast to how they *felt* as a teacher, and were stymied by the experiences of moving from their experiences of success in previous endeavors to the immensity of



challenges of teaching. One CM, Lisa<sup>1</sup>, noted that “you’re used to succeeding, not just succeeding, but succeeding *greatly*.” She contrasted this experience with being “kinda shut down very frequently and very publicly in the classroom” in the early days of her teaching.

This historical pedigree of success for CMs was a consistent theme that appeared to inhibit their development of teacher professional identity in different ways. Brooke, for example, was one CM who struggled significantly to identify as a teacher because she was not recognized for her efforts or successes. She completed a challenging bio-science undergraduate program and expected to experience, and receive, the same types of accolades in her new role as a high school teacher at a challenging alternative school. Yet Brooke quickly realized that the teaching profession was different because she would not garner the same attention:

...it's kind of hard because nobody holds me accountable for anything until I mess up and then all of a sudden this is a really big deal. And so I have to, like, motivate myself to do well and to get better and it doesn't come from anybody else noticing. Nobody else notices what I do and that's been hard because I am kind of like a gold star kind of person and I don't really get that [from teaching]. That's why this year has been hard.

Here she contends that she must be more self-motivated because her work will not provide the same “gold stars” as she experienced previously. In reflecting on her simultaneous roles as a teacher, TFA CM, and graduate student at Greenwood, Brooke first addressed her role as a student: “I’ve always been, like, a student and that’s what I feel like I can be good at”. She also referenced her comfort in identifying as a graduate student because she could “get out some products”, such as “writing papers”. For Brooke, the quantifiable results provided by her graduate school instructors offered clear confirmation of her identity and provided the affirmation she desperately sought.

Georgia—who initially noted that “it feels good” to call herself a teacher—likewise suggested that she had been socialized into assuming she possessed an ability to produce successful outcomes. In reflecting upon her own experiences as a novice teacher, she noted,

...I am just kind of failing half the time and I mean, that is frustrating to me because I have been accustomed in my life to feeling comfortable with the things I am doing and feeling like I can control *what I do and control successful outcomes* if I put in the work and the time.” [emphasis added]

Here Georgia captures a wide range of emotions and sentiments, including how her previous experiences of success were informing her current teacher identity. As Georgia was discovering, and most pre-service teachers learn in initial teacher education programs, teaching is a complex process that transcends causal links between narrowly defined inputs and outputs; rather, it is an intensely subjective and contextual act. Juxtaposing prior experiences of success with current experiences of failure led to considerable identity-wrestling for Georgia and others. This condition was perhaps enhanced by messages from TFA itself, as other research has highlighted how the onus for student learning is placed squarely, and solely, on the shoulders of CMs (Brewer, 2014). As Nina summarized, she just wants to “*feel* like a competent teacher.” Over time, years of accrued success become the norm. This ‘norm of success’ has the potential to become entangled in the identities of CMs, and by extension, influence their perspectives on teacher professional identity. The desire to be ‘All-stars’ relates closely to the next condition, which highlights the university experiences of CMs.

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the ethics protocol, all names used are pseudonyms.

### CMs as Outsiders: Limited Consideration of Teaching Through University

As noted above, none of the CMs in the study had completed a traditional teacher education program during their undergraduate careers. Although a few CMs reported that they had considered becoming a teacher as a child, all of them pursued other majors and therefore invested in other areas of study and professional communities. For example, Quinn always thought of herself as a teacher, and admittedly “took on being a teacher from a really early age”, teaching sports lessons to children and adults prior to entering TFA and thoroughly enjoying this experience. Yet Quinn opted not to pursue teaching as an undergraduate student. Although on one level she perpetually conceptualized herself as a teacher, she had had limited opportunities to explore in-depth what it means to be a classroom teacher. Therefore it is perhaps not surprising that Quinn struggled initially in her teaching and could not clearly identify as a teacher. She suggested that it was not until her second year where she “got a handle on my teacher identity”. As she suggests, “I got my head above water and I had a better understanding of the standards and what I was supposed to teach and when and how I should teach certain things”. While it is certainly true that many early career teachers struggle to make meaning of their positions as teachers, that challenge is magnified without earlier opportunities at the tertiary level to conceptualize themselves as future teachers, or in the absence of extensive experiences in classrooms to gauge student development and content sequencing.

Furthermore, although the Summer Institute may borrow some forms and concepts from traditional teacher education (Schneider, 2014), it remains fundamentally different. For the CMs in this study—who spent hours scripting lessons for their co-teaching during summer school experiences in different cities to those in which they would be placed—arriving at their schools and considering themselves a full-time teacher was jarring. Isaac noted the distinct differences, suggesting “when you’re all alone in a classroom, it’s significantly different than teaching under somebody else”. His experience as a co-teacher for a few hours per day during Summer Institute is contrasted with more comprehensive student teaching or practicum experiences that provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to move beyond their assumptions of what ‘good teaching’ entails. As Tamara noted, “realizing that there has been this whole process set up in order to become a teacher like the ‘traditional route’ and...that, like I know there is validity in that program”. In reflecting on her teacher identity, Tamara suggested,

It is something that I still feel...umm...insecure in I guess just because I, not only am I a first year teacher, I just, there is just so much more for me to learn and so those are kind the two big things.

While there are always more things for early career teachers to learn, especially in their first and second years, most CMs have remarkably little exposure to the teaching profession (other than during their own time as school students) prior to joining TFA.

The final issue related to limited prior conceptualizations by CMs of what it means to be a teacher concerns the decision they must make at the end of their two-year TFA commitments. To quote *The Clash*, CMs ask, “should I stay or should I go?” Unlike students enrolled in traditional teacher education programs, most CMs have alternate career paths for which they have previously pursued tertiary preparation and are therefore readily available to them. These options relieve the pressure to definitively identify as a teacher, and further allow them to play around with the idea of being a teacher without a sustained commitment to the profession (Nesje, Canrinus, & Strype, 2018). If they leave teaching, they have completed their two-year commitment to TFA (and society) and can move on to what they were initially trained to do: it is, in essence, a ‘win-win’ situation for the CMs (Labaree, 2010). Lori notes that this conflates professional identity, wherein CMs have “that identity, too, of what they’re gonna do afterwards...for some people because they always had

this goal that they're working towards like going into medical school or whatever, like they also have that identity, too. Like this is a temporary...". Catching herself, Lori immediately continued, "I don't wanna say, like, 'temporary' because that is one of the main criticisms [of TFA]" and reaffirmed the 100% effort offered by CMs. But she could not deny that many CMs have a lingering sense of their 'long term' career "that is the path that a lot of people take or see themselves taking after these two years", which "is factoring into it [CMs' identities as teachers]".

### **CMs as Apprentices: Teaching How They Were Taught**

Many of the CMs interviewed indicated that their sense of what it was to *be* a teacher was hindered by their lack of experience and inability to 'measure up' to the examples set by their veteran colleagues. In terms of their own teacher identity, this often manifested as a sense that they were masquerading or acting as a teacher, sometimes drawing on their own 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975), in the construction of themselves as 'teacher'.

Isaac, who was placed in a Charter School, for example, expressed it as follows:

I found myself just thinking back to my own experience and when I was working with middle schoolers and high schoolers thinking back to my middle school and high school experience. I think that a lot of my teaching, especially my first year or so, umm...was probably influenced and shaped a lot by how I was taught which is interesting because I taught, or I grew up in a very suburban setting, I was teaching in a very urban environment.

Here, Isaac is overt about the role his own 'apprenticeship of observation' played in the formation of his early classroom practice, as he struggled to "rise to the occasion" in living up to the title 'teacher'.

Where CMs had been placed in Public Schools, the experience was often a little different in that they were surrounded by more experienced colleagues and "veteran teachers" who had not arrived in the profession via alternate certification. Babette, for example, expressed it in the following way:

...because I was so young, because I was doing Teach For America, and because I decided within probably the first year that I care deeply about education, but I'm probably not going to continue as a teacher, I felt a little bit like I was wearing a mask. A little bit like I can play this role, but I don't really fulfill that sort of life-long teacher, like, those people are just magical to me. They're so intensely compassionate and, um, I don't know...balanced. They just seem like wise people who understand how to navigate problems that arise in very graceful ways and very, sort of, elegant fair ways. And I just never felt like I was so on top of my game that I was like those people.

Babette recognizes here the role that both teaching experience and well-honed professional judgement play in the shaping of a holistic teacher identity, as well as an intention to stay in the profession in the long term. As someone who has made the decision to not pursue teaching beyond the two years, she regards herself as something of a 'visitor' to the profession, playing the role of teacher, or wearing the mask of the teacher, for a limited time.

Nina similarly indicated that she felt to some extent as though she were acting in the role of teacher rather than *being* a teacher, and this for her, too, was linked partly to her expectation that teaching would not become her career:

It sometimes feels like I am playing a role because...I don't plan on staying a teacher...I think I might stay a third year because, especially as an ESL teacher, I feel

like we come in very unprepared and I don't think I am the teacher my kids deserve, but...every day I think I get closer to being that as I learn more from my colleagues, from Greenwood classes, from the things I read. So I think that I would like to have at least another year...where I feel like a competent teacher and I feel like I am actually helping my kids opposed to hindering them...

Nina also recognized the value of experience in the classroom as a tool for building confidence and competence. Elsewhere in her interview, she noted that teaching in a public school, as opposed to a charter school where many of her fellow CMs had been placed, and where a large majority of teachers might be 'new' as opposed to veteran teachers, had given her a particular insight:

I see people who have been doing this for years and years and years. They really know what they are doing and...they just really know what they are doing and...I also sometimes don't...

Dorian likewise made the link between long-term commitment to teaching and the development of greater skill in the classroom. Of his current experience, he noted "you experience failure every day and successes every so often", going on to say that "comparative to a lot of the other teachers in my school I don't feel like I am a part of the teachers...I think a lot of it has to do with a lot of those people are just really committed to staying in education and continuing on as teachers and for me I am a little more conflicted..."

Tamara felt quite strongly her emerging identity as a public school teacher, and recognized that this was often in conflict with the 'TFA identity'. She regarded TFA as a "loophole", contrasted with the path taken by her partner, who had entered teaching via the 'traditional' route. Furthermore, she recognized the role that her colleagues had played in her professional development and formation to date:

I am more proud of the fact that I work for a public school district and that I am in, that I do work in a school and a team or teachers that I feel like, I don't know, like community with and so it is kind of like I balance the whole TFA identity by picking and choosing when and with who I talk about it with because it is almost like its own little world ... so otherwise I feel like my biggest teacher identity has been constructed like here like in [metropolitan city] public schools like being an ESL teacher and through professional development opportunities and through the people that I work with.

Lucy, who was also placed in a public school with a critical mass of experienced and veteran teachers, was very clear about her role as apprentice to those with greater experience:

I view myself in this organization and in this school as like an apprentice and I kind of have the attitude of like you know a lot more than me and everyone in this building knows more than me so like I kind of, you know, submit to learning and being taught by all of you because you have done this longer than I have...last year especially I was just constantly like 'I don't know what do you think?'

For Lucy and Tamara, both of whom were intending to remain in the profession beyond their two year commitment, veteran colleagues within their schools had played a critical role in their socialization into the teaching profession, despite this not sitting entirely comfortably with the 'TFA way'.

### CMs as CMs: Teaching with the TFA Script

Most of the CMs interviewed touched on the difficulties associated with learning to teach while at the same time navigating their own classrooms. Interestingly, for some of the participants, the tension between the vision of teaching encapsulated in the *Teaching as Leadership* rubric and their own aspirations or ideas about what teaching actually is, was greater than for others. Carly, for example, expressed that “I think my kids are learning by accident”, having already identified that the quality of relationships within her classroom made a strong contribution to the learning that happened there:

They like me and so they...hear what I say and remember it. And that's...why they do well or...do what I am asking them. Because they pay attention to me because...we respect each other very well. But I didn't know if it's...actually working the way it should. Or if it's just like 'good thing we are all getting along because that it is why you are learning in my class'.

While Carly recognized that she had created the conditions for ‘good learning’ for the students in her class, she remained skeptical about whether this counted as ‘real teaching’, noting that “I think I focus on some of the things I am not supposed to”, and elsewhere that “I enjoy this but I don't know if I would say I enjoy teaching...Maybe just because I don't know if I am really teaching”.

While for Carly this tension and conflict manifested as doubts about her own practice and her identity as a ‘real teacher’, others were explicit in their views that the ‘gap’ between TFA-endorsed practice and their own classroom practice was about flaws in the TFA version of good teaching practice. Celeste, for example, expressed it in this way:

I've gotten much, much better about thinking about my lessons in a more conceptual way of like, ‘over the course of a week this is what we're going to accomplish’. As opposed to like what TFA was having you do of like, ‘write down every single word you're gonna say’...that kinda stuff. So just sorta getting, letting go of that nitty gritty I think is important, and just getting used to it, I think...I think now I know what it looks like so I think just like the shock of being dropped into this pond is over now and still fighting to survive but I'm used to it. I think that makes it easier.

Celeste's background as a Teacher's Aide meant that she came into TFA with a sense of ‘good teaching’ beyond her own classroom experience as a student, and was possibly more prepared than other CMs to push back on the ‘TFA way’ as a consequence of this. She displayed a well-developed sense of what good learning looked like for her students, and noted:

I've said on more than one occasion, ‘Wow if all I had to do was just teach, I'd be really awesome!’ But, yeah it's, it's hard because you do feel like so much of it is like pointless and, like, [TFA] get out of my face, please. It's really important to me that these kids are learning and I'm losing sleep over them, and now I have to do all of this other [TFA] stuff.

Georgia's perspective resonated with that of both Carly and Celeste. She questioned whether she was a ‘real teacher’, claiming that “I am more of the verb than the noun”, and noting that those who might claim to be ‘the noun’ were typically more able to navigate the unexpectedness of the classroom. For her, this sense was amplified by the informal mentoring she sought from her father, “a really, really incredible teacher”:

if I were a real teacher I would know what to do when, you know, something crazy happens in the middle of class. Since that is just something I don't know, and I like

guess and I make something up and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't...my dad is a really, really incredible teacher and I...call him up and he is like 'this is exactly what I would have done'. And I am like, 'that is perfect, why didn't I know that?' But I guess it is just sort of this thing that you have to gain it over time... so I feel like every day I come in and I teach but I don't always feel like I being the teacher that I should be.

Similar to Betty's perspective, Georgia indicated that she was learning to navigate the classroom and support her students in their learning almost in spite of the guidance given by TFA, and like Celeste, was critical of the scripted lesson approach because of the extra workload she felt it created for her, but without substantial 'return' in terms of student learning:

like the solution for TFA is always like, 'Let's sit down and think about our feelings and talk about this and think about what we can do better and maybe if you script your entire lesson? I am like, 'I teach nine classes a day. I am not going to script nine classes.' Like, they have this idea that, like, if you just put in more time or you work harder or you try harder or you want it more, then suddenly test scores are going to appear out of nowhere. And then the flipside of that is that if your test scores aren't appearing out of nowhere, you feel like you are not trying hard enough...I think that there are a lot of legitimate critiques about TFA and I think this is one of them.

All three of these early career teachers demonstrated in their interviews an emerging classroom practice shaped by their desire to 'do well' by their students, and a strong sense of what constituted good teaching practice that went beyond, and indeed brought into question TFA-endorsed 'best practice'.

### **CMs as Free Agents: Age-level and Subject Area Vulnerability and Unpredictability**

One of the unique differences of TFA is its structure, wherein CMs typically are not able to control their placements as a teacher in terms of geographic location, content area, or age level (Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2014). Betty, arguably the most pro-TFA CM in the sample, stated that "being a steward of the movement" was "really important" to her and she "would recommend it [TFA] to someone." However, she immediately identified the inability to control one's teaching placement as one of the most significant factors negatively affecting her experience.

The lack of control over content area and school placement I think is a con. Because I, I've been flexible. I taught eighth grade at [Summer] Institute, came in and taught kindergarten for my first year and then the last 2 to 3 months of the school year I taught K-5 science.

In addition to learning a new metropolitan context—as Betty was not from the city or state in which she was placed—she was forced to move mid-year from one age-level and content-area to another. While this could happen to any teacher in a public school, charter or otherwise, the limited pedagogical content knowledge or previous teaching experience possessed by Betty in her first year of teaching immediately placed her at a disadvantage. Unfortunately she was not able to stay in K-5 science for the second year of her TFA commitment, either:

I was moved to second grade this year, so I have been all over the place and I feel like and I have expressed to TFA that I really needed help with that and I didn't get as much support as I wanted. Their answers [were] sort of, "Well, if you can manage a classroom and create a good lesson plan than you can teach any grade". And that is

not really true you do need content knowledge and in teaching I would say right now I am in most comfortable with lower elementary and how best to teach a K-2 lesson.

Thus despite her efforts to request support from TFA, Betty ultimately relied on her own research, on trial and error, and her colleagues at school.

The effort that went into developing content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge, all while teaching different subjects and age-levels, was overwhelming for Betty as well as many others in the study. In response to an interview question about her own sense of teacher identity, Betty floundered initially before noting that her sense of teacher identity had “kind of taken over.” She continued,

I don't know how much that personal identity is still there. My teacher identity, it's taken over my life. I guess. I don't know how to answer that really. I mean I don't think I can separate them. If that is an answer.

Although Betty's case is not representative of all CMs in the study, it is illustrative of a key distinction that may be found between the development of teacher professional identity among CMs, on one hand, and teachers prepared through traditional routes, on the other. Betty's movement between grade-levels cannot be blamed completely on TFA, as the school where she was working likely played a larger role in making staffing decisions, but TFA's essential recruitment and placement strategy, wherein third- and fourth-year university students are accepted into TFA before schools have hired them (see Brewer, Kretchmar, Sondel, Ishmael, & Manfra, 2016), ensures that CMs have minimal time to conceptualize themselves as teachers of a certain age or content area, let alone cultivate appropriate pedagogical content knowledge or mastery.

## Discussion

Alternative routes to teaching, such as TFA, provide just that: an alternative approach. Accordingly, this means that the development of teacher professional identity among CMs may not follow the more traditional path of their non-TFA peers. Although teacher identity is neither static nor monolithic, as noted previously, here we argue the sub-identities highlighted through this study point to larger structural realities and conditions of TFA, and arguably other alternative licensure programs with similar approaches. As alternative licensure programs continue to grow in the U.S. and beyond, it is imperative that we consider the development of alternative certification teacher identity, and what sub-identities and conditions enable or constrain the development of teacher professional identity for these teachers.

### Policies, Placements, and Professional Identity

The linkage between teachers' sub-identities and alternative certification policies has received limited attention in the research literature despite a consistent belief that teachers' professional identities—as evident through their own self-perceptions—have a strong influence on their classroom practice (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). Due to the fundamental differences between the experiences of graduates from more substantial and sustained teacher education programs, on one hand, and teachers who emerge from TFA and related programs, on the other, we contend that additional research on the construction and cultivation of teacher professional identity among teachers trained through non-traditional routes is both valuable and necessary. In short, we ask what conditions and structures should be considered when the development of teacher professional identity is on the line? Moreover, what are the potential consequences of varied forms

of professional identity for classroom practice, the teaching profession, and educational policymaking?

We suggest that the five sub-identities, which emerged from the study, can ultimately constrain the development of more robust teacher professional identity, and are largely a result of TFA program architecture. TFA has been remarkably successful in recruiting bright, committed, and diverse teachers; it also spends a lot of money recruiting, training, and supporting CMs during their two-year commitments: approximately \$65,000 USD per corps member during TFA's 2015 fiscal year (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Yet in spite of their status as high-caliber candidates as well as the support provided by TFA, the CMs in our study were plagued by external pressures from TFA (Thomas & Lefebvre, 2017) and their own insecurities as neophyte teachers, which were magnified by their perceived lack of preparation and ability. Teacher professional development is in many ways rooted in deep-seated feelings of professional belonging and pedagogical mastery (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). In the absence of longer-term vocational commitment and prior practice with/in teaching, it is perhaps not surprising that these CMs, and perhaps other alternatively-certified teachers, struggle to develop a strong sense of teacher professional identity. The immediacy of their classroom roles largely negates professional opportunities and/or personal desires to more critically examine their own thoughts, actions, or perceptions of themselves as teachers in the classroom.

Context does matter, however. Other research by Lefebvre and Thomas (2017) suggests that CMs placed at "like-minded" charter schools experienced a stronger pedagogical and organizational synergy between TFA and their schools. CMs who are embedded within school cultures that resonate with TFA philosophy and include a predominance of other CMs and TFA alumni in both teaching and leadership positions will likely develop a sense of teacher professional identity more quickly and thoroughly, albeit a sense of identity linked strongly to the norms and assumptions of TFA and the charter school movement. This finding is also supported by Weiner and Torres (2016), who argue that professional identities may become polarized for early career teachers who enter the profession via alternative routes and teach in traditional public schools. Teachers who 'clock-in' and 'clock-out', generally assumed to be older teachers in traditional public schools, are pitted against energetic teachers who are 'truly' dedicated to teaching and therefore willing to do 'whatever it takes' (Farr, 2010), even it means sacrificing their mental and physical well-being (Matsui, 2015; Thomas & Lefebvre, 2017). These dedicated teachers are, of course, generally assumed to be younger teachers in non-traditional schools. The school context, then, likely plays a significant role in the socialization of CMs and their identifications with teaching and the teaching profession, including how they *feel* to be called a teacher. The sub-identities addressed above do not definitively preclude CMs from identifying as teachers. Indeed, the data revealed that some CMs appreciated being called a teacher and identifying as a teacher, which we aim to explore in future work. We do suggest in this paper, however, that their sub-identities and the structures that reinforce them present challenges to the development of teacher professional identity.

### **Teacher Professional Identity Beyond TFA**

For TFA, it seems the constraint of teacher identity development is not necessarily problematic. For years the organization has decried calls for extended practicum experiences in the field as well as longer commitments to the profession (i.e., more than two years). The organization has long articulated a two-pronged approach for the program: remain a teacher, or move on to advocate for educational equity through other work (e.g., lawyer, doctor, policymaker; Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Scott, Trujillo, & Rivera, 2016). As Labaree (2010) rightly assessed, for CMs this presents a no-lose situation. For TFA it presents an answer to the challenge from critics that CMs



do not stay in the teaching profession. Indeed, this was never definitively expected of them. Most recently TFA rhetoric and structures have highlighted clear desires for TFA alumni to move into policy arenas and affect change from these vantage points (Jacobsen, White, & Reckhow, 2016). The Leadership for Educational Equity, a partner organization of TFA, serves as a primary example. It is “free and open to all TFA corps members and alumni” and seeks to support CMs as they pursue leadership roles in politics, policy, and beyond (Leadership for Education Equity, 2017, para 3). Michelle Rhee, former D.C. Chancellor and shortlisted in 2016 for the position of Secretary of Education within the Trump administration, is perhaps the most famous, and most celebrated, TFA alumni involved in education policy.

We contend that for these very reasons it is vital to understand the development of teacher professional identity, especially among CMs and other teachers who enter teaching through similar programs and alternative routes. As more and more CMs enter educational policymaking, some with two years of teaching experience and limited exposure to the field before or after their TFA commitment, the political prominence and power of TFA and related programs are likely to grow. Indeed, we concur with Scott, Trujillo, and Rivera (2016), who seek to reframe TFA as more than ‘just’ a program, but as an increasingly powerful and transformative presence in the educational sphere, particularly as alumni move into influential roles across diverse social, financial, and political spaces:

As more alumni move into these roles, through the policy networks carefully cultivated and sustained by TFA, they help to create the policy and fiscal conditions favorable to TFA’s stability and growth as well as help to support the career trajectories of fellow alumni. (p. 9)

We therefore posit that understanding the formation and mediation of teacher professional identity for alternatively certified teachers holds critical implications for more than classroom practice. Understanding, to return to Britzman’s work, the “investments and commitments” (1992, p. 29) voiced in the emerging professional identity of these alternatively certified teachers is increasingly important when we consider their capacity, current and future, to engage as policy actors.

Yet limited research has explored the impact of TFA alumni, particularly in relation to teacher identity, and we therefore suggest a call for longitudinal research on TFA experiences. It would be beneficial to know how professional identity can develop over time among CMs and other teachers trained through alternative pathways by investigating their professional identities after five or more years of teaching. Perhaps more important in the short-term is understanding how the sub-identities described above influence the internal logic of policymakers and other educational reformers who are TFA alumni. We argue that the impressions left with CMs about teaching, developing through their experiences, matter. This is particularly true for those who are involved in TFA’s Leadership for Educational Equity and aim to influence public policy through their future work – how they think about teaching has the potential to influence future iterations of educational policy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our research highlights the limitations of literature on teacher professional identity. This body of scholarship is based primarily on traditional pathways to becoming a teacher and the associated experiences in classrooms. We concur with Weiner and Torres (2016) that, for the many teachers who increasingly enter the profession through alternative routes and policies—including TFA CMs—teacher professional identity includes unique sub-identities, each of which

deserves careful exploration. This study identified five sub-identities, linked to the structural realities of TFA, and to some extent, other alternative certification pathways that can shape the cultivation of robust teacher professional identity. In addition to developing their own sense of teacher identity or ‘voice’, these CMs contended with sub-identities as all-stars, outsiders, apprentices, CMs, and free agents. While the sub-identities that might exist for other teachers who enter through alternative programs remain to be seen, our research suggests that the conditions under which these teachers develop a strong sense of what it is to be a teacher, and the consequent shape and mediation of their professional identity, challenge orthodoxies in our understanding of teacher professional identity, and require further and sustained consideration.

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