

Teach for America as an Alternative for Teaching Licensure: Addressing the Teacher's Shortages in Urban and Rural Communities

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1. Introduction

Teaching is a meaningful career pathway for many individuals, particularly for those who want to make a difference in the next generations of school communities and environments (Decker et al., 2004). For decades, pre-service teachers in the United States have tended to gain their teacher's licensure via (1) a bachelor's degree with initial licensure requirements (e.g., a Bachelor of Education), (2) graduate-level qualification with initial licensure requirements (e.g., a Master of Arts in Teaching) and (3) alternative-based programs with initial licensure (e.g., Teach for America). Although coursework-based programs and qualifications significantly prepare pre-service teachers for the transition from university to classroom environments, not all pre-service teachers can spend two academic years on full-time studies, particularly those who have financial and personal responsibilities.

The shortages of qualified teachers have become a significant challenge for many American school districts, particularly in urban and rural communities where resources and long-term development are often questionable (Dos Santos, 2019). Due to this shortage, schools could not maintain the quality and effectiveness of students, teachers, staff, and even parents. Teach for America (TFA) is one of the leading programs that allow pre-service teachers to gain their teacher's licensures via the alternative pathway for their classroom teaching, particularly for young adults considering a career change who wish to contribute their energy to the underrepresented, urban, and rural communities in the United States (Glazerman et al., 2006).

During the late 1980s, TFA was established by Wendy Kopp as a non-profit organization with the mission to "enlist, develop, and mobilize as many as possible of our nation's most promising future leaders to grow and strengthen the movement for educational equity and excellence." Unlike traditional credit-based or degree-based programs, participants are considered university students. Participants of the TFA program are listed as Corps Members who are required to attend an intensive summer

training program for their year-long commitment in the given school districts. The following outlines the three-step procedure for how the TFA program could exercise its mission.

(1) Recruitment

Originally, the TFA program sought to recruit pre-service teachers and applicants from top-ranked universities who could express their interests in social justice and commitment to their communities (Xu et al., 2011). However, over the past few decades, TFA has indicated that all university graduates who can demonstrate their extraordinary curricula, experiences, and academic achievements are welcome to pursue social justice in underrepresented, urban, and rural school districts.

(2) Training and Support

Corps Members need to complete the intensive summer training program to gain essential skills and understanding (e.g., foundational knowledge and context, diversity, equity and inclusiveness, leadership development, and culturally relevant pedagogy) (Decker et al., 2004).

(3) Services to the Underrepresented, Urban, and Rural Communities

Corps Members are required to serve in one of the designated placement regions for at least two years after they have completed the program. Currently, over 40 regions are available for selection, including, but not limited to, urban areas in California and rural communities in the Appalachian regions. Corps Members may continue to teach in the school districts and communities after their service period.

2. The Context of Teachers' Human Resources Shortages

(1) Urban Teachers' Human Resources Shortages

Unlike other East Asian and European urban regions and cities, American urban school districts and communities typically receive less than average resources and support from local, state, and federal governments due to diverse populations, including immigrants and English language learners (ELLs). Due to limited resources (e.g., outdated technology and textbooks), only a few qualified teachers and pre-service teachers pursue long-term career development in urban school districts

and communities (Weiner & Jerome, 2016). Although some city and state government agencies may offer sponsorships to teachers, many educators often seek long-term career opportunities in suburban regions.

(2) Rural Teachers' Human Resources Shortages

Like many countries and regions, rural communities (e.g., remote islands and villages) often struggle to attract qualified teachers and pre-service teachers for long-term development due to inconvenient locations, limited resources, and fewer opportunities. Due to their remote locations, individuals and groups report that they are unable to access public healthcare services, which significantly reduces their incentives to remain in these areas (Dos Santos, 2019).

(3) Limited Opportunities and Career Development with Overloaded Responsibilities

Regardless of location, becoming a teacher is not an easy decision or career path for many individuals. Unlike other professions with clear career advancement opportunities, the prospects and financial growth for teachers are constrained by their overloaded responsibilities. It is not uncommon for teachers and school staff to experience stress, burnout, and mental health disorders due to these demands. Many studies (Teacher Turnover: What You Need to Know, 2020; Weiner & Jerome, 2016) indicate that less than 30% of junior-level teachers continue their career development in teaching after their first few years of service.

3. Teach for America: Addressing Teachers' Human Resources Shortages in Urban and Rural Communities

The TFA program offers an alternative way for pre-service teachers to gain their teacher licensure beyond the traditional two-year-based Master of Arts in Teaching program (MAT), particularly for those who have already gained their bachelor's degree in fields other than teaching and education.

(1) Immediate Teachers' Human Resources Solutions

Many American urban school districts and communities, such as downtown New York City, experience significant shortages of qualified teachers, particularly in their Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), inclusive, special

education, vocational, and English Language Learner (ELL) classrooms (Weiner & Jerome, 2016). School districts often need to suspend classes due to these shortages. First, Corps Members can fill these vacancies and maintain classroom operations. Second, Corps Members with diverse sociocultural backgrounds and language abilities can further enhance the inclusiveness of students from various backgrounds. Although Corps Members may leave their placement schools after their service, their immediate contributions help many school districts and communities overcome these vacancies.

(2) Long-term Teachers' Human Resources Solutions

Corps Members can gain their teacher licensure after completing the TFA program via the alternative pathway, similar to other teachers who complete coursework-based programs (e.g., MAT) (Dos Santos, 2024). It is not uncommon for Corps Members to enhance their knowledge and skills for upper management positions (e.g., school principals). These contributions and pathways can create long-term sustainability in the educational profession, particularly as Corps Members understand the issues and challenges in underserved urban and rural school districts and communities (Dos Santos, 2019). More importantly, their diverse experiences and insights can significantly encourage Corps Members in further educational development and reforms within current educational systems (e.g., social justice and equity).

(3) Community Involvement with Teach for America Corps Members

Community involvement and understanding are key components of the TFA program. Understanding sociocultural, socioeconomic, and racial contexts and backgrounds is a significant learning outcome for each Corps Member. Beyond the school districts and communities, parental involvement and volunteer services to local communities are essential for establishing relationships within the given cities and regions.

4. Challenges of Corps Members

Although Corps Members completed their intensive summer training programs before they started their placements, many of them did not have solid experience or coursework training before their classroom teaching. Therefore, many Corps Members expressed concerns about their placements, particularly in different

geographic locations where diversity and backgrounds are not the same (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011).

(1) Underrepresented and Urban School Districts and Communities

Sociocultural diversity is a significant element in the American educational system. First, it is not uncommon for Corps Members to face foreign languages and unfamiliar cultural practices with limited support and resources (Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Kwee et al., 2024). Due to the limited knowledge and duration of the intensive summer training program, Corps Members may experience stress, burnout, and anxiety during the early stages due to overloaded responsibilities and classroom management issues with their supervisors and upper management. Although supervisors can be valuable resources, many supervisors also need to manage responsibilities beyond supervision (e.g., administrative work and classroom management) (Blumenreich & Blumenreich, 2021).

Second, urban school districts and communities typically face large classrooms with limited resources, high rates of student turnover, and outdated technology and textbooks (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011). Junior-level and pre-service teachers often encounter challenges in diverse classrooms where effective classroom management is difficult to achieve.

Third, socioeconomic factors play a significant role in the American educational system and regional development. The enrollments in public schools in urban districts usually consist of children from low-income families. Not all Corps Members have experience managing the psychological and physical issues faced by these students, such as self-esteem and emotional regulation.

(2) Rural School Districts and Communities

In rural school districts and communities, Corps Members may encounter different issues and challenges.

First, unlike urban school districts, rural classrooms may not have sufficient enrollment for each grade due to the limited population. It is common for only one school to serve multiple counties in rural communities.

Second, limited enrollment often leads school management to combine different

grade levels into one classroom (e.g., first-, second-, and third-graders in the same English classroom). Corps Members need to develop a specialized curriculum to meet the needs of students at different levels, particularly for those who have already completed the same course using the same textbooks (Blumenreich & Blumenreich, 2021).

5. Suggestions and Contributions to Practice

(1) Suggestions for TFA Management and Development

First, school-community partnership is one of the keys to establishing community engagement with Corps Members (Sanders, 2005). TFA should actively engage and interact with local organizations, community leaders, NGOs, and schools to establish effective partnerships that offer help and support Corps Members, schools, and communities that they serve. Although many Corps Members may leave the school communities after their TFA programs, it is not uncommon that some Corps Members may continue to serve and eventually become internship supervisors. Therefore, community engagement and partnership could further enhance the effectiveness of the TFA. By establishing effective partnerships among TFA programs, Corps Members, and school communities, TFA could enhance the support and professional network for Corps Members, upgrade better management in the school communities, and enhance educational experiences for students, teachers, and even school leaders.

Second, establish support programs for Corps Members based on the unique backgrounds, experiences, challenges, and situations of their intern school communities (i.e., urban and rural school communities) (Adams & Woods, 2015; Hardwick-Franco, 2019). Unlike school communities with effective support and resources, Corps Members may spend time with minoritized and marginalized students (e.g., Special Educational Needs). It is important to create a special curriculum and plan for Corps Members to handle such unique challenges.

(2) Suggestions for Educators, Researchers, and Management in East Asia

First, teachers' human resources shortage is significant in East Asia (e.g., South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Macau, etc.). For example, in Hong Kong and Macau, traditional degrees and/or qualifications (e.g., Bachelor of Education, MAT, Postgraduate Diploma in Education) could satisfy the human resources and demands

in the cities and regions. However, it is important to consider establishing alternative teacher licensure pathways similar to TFA that allow pre-service teachers with diverse and professional backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge to transition into teaching as second-career-changing teachers (Dos Santos, 2024).

Second, stress, burnout, anxiety, and negative well-being are some of the important issues for teachers and educators in East Asian school communities and environments (Yang et al., 2018). Both first-career and second-career-changing teachers also face similar challenges and situations in their classroom environments. Researchers and practitioners could further invest in workshops and programs for teachers to manage their stress, burnout, and well-being to increase teachers' satisfaction and reduce turnover rates.

6. Conclusion

Currently, in East Asia, many teacher licensure programs tend to be coursework-based and degree-based programs that pre-service teachers must complete to obtain their degrees and/or qualifications (e.g., Bachelor of Education, MAT, Postgraduate Diploma in Education). Although coursework-based programs provide a solid foundation for pre-service teachers before their placements, it is important to create alternative pathways for those who cannot return to schools and universities for two-year degree programs.

Unlike other academic-oriented programs, teaching is a vocational career that significantly relies on hands-on experiences and supervision for learners' development, management, skills, and understanding. TFA offers an alternative pathway for second-career teachers to transition into teaching, particularly for those with professional experience in other industries. Both pathways (i.e., traditional coursework-based and TFA) provide options for pre-service teachers who wish to contribute to their long-term career development in classroom environments.

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