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Legitimizing the Dilettante: Teach For America and the Allure of *Ed Cred*

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Abstract

Teach For America (TFA) corps members in reflecting on their experiences, have described their motivations to join the program as idealistic, ambitious, and "profound drives to effect educational change" (Crawford-Garrett, 2012, p. 27) that eventually had to be reconciled with unexpected, harsh realities—both in their placement schools and in the TFA program itself. Matsui (2015) argues that popular culture is the source of this unrealistic idealism about teaching. This hero teacher narrative *is a familiar theme in films such as* Stand and Deliver, Dangerous Minds*, and* Freedom Writers*, as well as in documentaries such as* Waiting for Superman *and* The Lottery*, some of which feature TFA teachers. TFA taps into this vein of popular idealism in its recruitment efforts. This post-intentional phenomenological study sought instances of the hero teacher narrative in the beliefs and motivations of TFA applicants and pre-service corps members—not as post-service reflections, as with many counternarratives, but in pre-service interviews, before conceptions of their initial intentions could be reconstructed by considering actual experiences. Findings suggest that TFA applicants may be pursuing* ed cred*, a unique conceptualization of legitimacy that blends the competence of* professional mystique *and the competitive hero teacher narrative with three new experiential variations: the drive for* credibility, *preference for* convenience*, and need for a* credential*. Implications for policy and leadership are discussed.*

Keywords: ed cred, education reform, hero teacher narrative, professional mystique, Teach For America, TFA

For nearly 30 years, Teach For America (TFA) has contracted with school districts and charter-school networks to place teachers in hard-to-staff urban or rural schools for 2-year commitments; students in these schools are largely from marginalized racial or ethnic groups and/or low socioeconomic backgrounds (Barnes, Germain, & Valenzuela, 2016; Teach For America, 2016). TFA recruits graduating college seniors—usually with majors other than education—from prestigious universities (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Scott, Trujillo, & Rivera, 2016; Trujillo & Scott, 2014). The program is highly selective, and many consider acceptance to be an honor (Cann, 2013; Kretchmar, 2014; McAdam & Brandt, 2009). In the current landscape of education reform, TFA is ubiquitous—it offers a response to staffing shortages in urban and rural schools (Cloud &

Fastenberg, 2010) and teacher preparation reform (Sawchuk, 2015; Veltri, 2012). Several new teacher preparation programs have either adapted or outright copied the TFA model (Kretchmar, 2014; Lincove, Osborne, Mills, & Bellows, 2015; Mehta, 2013), creating a burgeoning new sector of unconventional teacher education options (e.g., The New Teacher Project, Urban Teacher Residency New York City Teaching Fellows) outside the purview of universities, which have traditionally trained and certified pre-service teachers before they enter the classroom.

The dominant narrative around TFA is a heartwarming story of noble white teachers battling long odds in a classroom full of Black and Brown[2] children with no hope (Barnes et al., 2016; Cann, 2013), but a recent collection of tell-all narratives of former corps members (CM) revealed a less idealistic reality (Brewer & deMarrais, 2015). One critique of TFA has been the tendency of its CMs to leave teaching after the 2-year commitment, resulting in a kind of revolving door of novice teachers in schools that need continuity and expertise (Brewer, 2014; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Matsui (2015) developed the theoretical *hero teacher narrative* to explain TFA's failure to keep more CMs in the classroom for more than two years. Adapting a framework for explaining professional burnout from Cherniss (1980), Matsui contended that TFA CMs who entered teaching with romantic and simplistic notions of the profession, paternalistic ideas about marginalized children, and unrealistic expectations of their potential individual impact were more likely to burn out and leave the classroom after their 2-year commitment. When the experience of teaching did not conform to their expectations, these hero teachers stumbled trying to make up the difference, blamed themselves for their lack of success, and eventually lost either the motivation or the confidence to persevere.

Determining TFA's effectiveness depends on whether applicants consider it a teacher-preparation program, a teacher recruitment initiative, or a training ground for political leadership. CMs will likely spend only a brief time in the classroom and then pursue careers in politics, law, or public policy (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Cann, 2013; Jacobsen, White, & Reckhow, 2016), so it is possible that CMs are driven by something more than or different from the hero teacher narrative—something more about convenience and credibility than competence. Because researchers such as Matsui (2015) have problematized the hero teacher narrative, it is important for educators and policymakers to know more about the motivations of TFA teachers who are placed in their schools. In this study, participants appeared to be in pursuit of something I have termed *ed cred*, which I conceive of as a specifically education-related cache with transactional potential in graduate schools and policy careers.

The purpose of this post-intentional phenomenological (Vagle, 2014) study was to describe the initial motivating urge among students who apply to become TFA CMs. For the purposes of this study, this urge was defined as a collection of beliefs, motivations, and expectations of graduates who applied for and were accepted to TFA. Following this introduction, I briefly review the literature on the teaching experiences of TFA CMs, and then describe the frameworks of *professional mystique* (Cherniss, 1980) and the hero

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[2] The capitalization of Black and Brown—and not of white—is a deliberate decision to emphasize and respect the cultural identities that have replaced the ethnic identities of the descendants of enslaved Africans in the Americas and of Latin American people in the US, and to de-emphasize the legitimacy of a singular European American cultural group in the US (Perlman, 2015).

teacher narrative (Matsui, 2015) that have guided this study. I also explain the post-intentional phenomenological methods I used before presenting my findings, and, finally, I consider some implications of this study for research and policy.

To Teach For America

Trujillo and Scott (2014) categorized the TFA literature into four groups: (a) debates about the assumptions and merits of the TFA model of teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Glazerman, Mayer, & Decker, 2006; Labaree, 2010); (b) evidence from standardized tests on the effectiveness of TFA as an instructional intervention (Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2014); (c) CM stories of triumph over hardship (Lanier, 2012); and (d) narratives of TFA leading a larger social movement (Ahmann, 2015; Foote, 2008; Teach For America, 2016). A newer genre of literature, however, has emerged in recent years—counternarratives of former TFA teachers (Brewer & deMarrais, 2015; Lanier, 2012; Lapayese, Aldana, & Lara, 2014; Matsui, 2015). This counternarrative literature has not only challenged the heroic narratives of TFA alumni, but also added nuance to considerations of the effects of TFA on students, schools, and TFA participants themselves.

Counternarrative is a methodology that focuses on the experiences of people and groups whose stories are excluded from grand, majoritarian, and master narratives (Brewer & deMarrais, 2015; Matsui, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counternarrative is central to critical race methodology but is also part of other critical and postmodern approaches to researching the experiences of marginalized and minoritized people and perspectives (Giroux, 1991). For example, former CMs of color have contradicted dominant narratives of equity and social justice with counternarratives of racial discrimination and segregation between CMs and among cohorts (Lapayese et al., 2014). Similarly, counter to the TFA narrative of the "best and brightest" CMs (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016, p. 13) coming from the most prestigious universities through TFA into the neediest schools, Brewer and deMarrais (2015) present former CMs who felt woefully unprepared for the classroom and developed significant mental health issues as a result of their job demands. These counternarratives suggest a major discrepancy between some CMs' expectations of TFA and their experiences as TFA teachers.

There is little research on CM motivation, but some studies have touched on aspects of the motivating urge to apply to TFA. For example, a strain of exceptionalism characterizes some CMs' self-concept, who may describe their specific contexts and motivations as unique but are actually rather typical compared to other TFA CMs (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Gautreaux & Delgado, 2016). CMs have demonstrated similarly managerial ideas about how to address educational inequity, strong-armed conceptions of what constitutes effective leadership (Trujillo & Scott, 2014), idealistic expectations of what teaching will be like (Veltri, 2012), and potent vulnerabilities to recruiter flattery (Brewer, 2014). These characteristics suggest an inward, individualist focus on the part of CMs, rather than the outward, more idealistic focus suggested by hero narratives.

These existing counternarratives constitute a context for the current study—the personal experiences, beliefs, and motivations of CMs before they became CMs. Aside

from issues of effectiveness in the classroom and impact on schools, districts, and communities, other arenas will benefit from more knowledge of applicants' initial interest in TFA. Many school turnaround initiatives, charter networks, and state takeovers of schools and districts utilize TFA teachers as part of a comprehensive reform strategy (Brewer, Kretchmar, Sondel, Ishmael, & Manfra, 2016; Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014; Mungal, 2016). The TFA model also proliferates in international education reform as Teach For All (Ahmann, 2015; Gautreaux & Delgado, 2016; La Londe, Brewer, & Lubienski, 2015). Existing studies (Brewer & deMarrais, 2015; Lapayese et al., 2014; Matsui, 2015) have only asked the question, "Why did you apply to TFA?" to current or former CMs, whose experiences with the organization doubtlessly influenced their responses. Given the increasing importance of TFA in education reform, this question bears asking people who apply to TFA before they begin their service. After beginning their service, CMs participate in trainings and programming that socialize them to the values and priorities of TFA (Barnes et al., 2016; Brewer, 2014). Therefore, interviewing pre-service CMs before these onboarding and culture-building activities may yield a more accurate picture of their personal beliefs, prior to being influenced by organizational values. It also bears asking the people whom TFA recruits and accepts who decline their appointments.

Conceptual Framework

CMs, upon reflecting on their experiences, have described their initial motivations to join TFA as idealistic (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Matsui, 2015), ambitious (Jacobsen et al., 2016; Ness, 2004), and "profound drives to effect educational change" (Crawford-Garrett, 2012, p. 27) that eventually had to be reconciled with unexpected harsh realities—both in their placement schools and in the TFA program itself. Matsui (2015) argues that popular culture is the source of this unrealistic idealism about teaching. This hero teacher narrative (Matsui, 2015), in which the success of "at-risk" students comes from the grit and determination of a teacher, is a familiar theme in films like *Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Freedom Writers,* as well as in documentaries like *Waiting for Superman* and *The Lottery*, some of which feature TFA teachers. This study sought instances of the hero teacher narrative in the beliefs and motivations of TFA applicants and pre-service CMs—not as post-service reflections, as with many counternarratives—but in pre-service interviews, before conceptions of their initial intentions could be reconstructed by considering actual experiences.

To be sure, the hero teacher narrative is also common among teachers who have never applied to or considered TFA (Cann, 2013; Dumas, 2013). As pop culture tropes, these conceptualizations of individual (usually white) heroism in education have broad appeal and may shape the assumptions of many people, whether or not they work in education or policymaking. The difference, however, between university-certified teachers with hero mindsets and CMs with hero mindsets is that CMs are part of an organization that uses this mindset to recruit teachers (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Popkewitz, 1998; Scott et al., 2016), influence policy (Jacobsen et al., 2016), mute critics of its effects on communities of color (Barnes et al., 2016; White, 2016), and solicit financial support for its construction of a shadow teacher-preparation system (Mungal, 2016). Additionally, university-certified teachers have ostensibly prepared for a career,

while CMs are merely enrolling for a Peace Corps-like gap year service experience before starting a career in policy or advocacy (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016). TFA has acknowledged this trend by focusing more on leadership development in recent years (Jacobsen et al., 2016), in effect training CMs for their post-TFA experience even as counternarratives suggest that CMs remain underprepared for their in-service TFA experience. A potential problem with this approach is that former CMs risk informing policy with bad experiences from the classroom, transforming maladaptive coping strategies and an improvisational approach to teaching into policy structures that may undercut best practice. For example, an inexperienced teacher with few classroom management skills may develop a perspective that overemphasizes discipline and behavioral problems because that reflects their own experience.

Matsui (2015) adapted the conceptual framework of the hero teacher narrative from the validated sociological construct of professional mystique (Cherniss, 1980). Cherniss cited professional mystique as a type of rose-colored consciousness that contributes to professional burnout when it encounters brutal realities in human service organizations, such as medicine, law, and education. The components of professional mystique are based on expectations that people have about the professions to which they aspire concerning professional competence, autonomy, stimulation, collegiality, and clientele (see Figure 1).

Central to the hero teacher narrative are (a) the idealism of a social-justice-minded person seduced by popular images and discourse around Black and Brown communities that are perennially underserved by failing schools, (b) innovative start-up charter schools, and (c) unorthodox young teachers battling bureaucratic obstacles to education reform (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Matsui, 2015; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2014). Idealism is important to the professional mystique, as well (Cherniss, 1980). However, although both of these lenses describe an orientation to a specific aspect of the professional workplace, professional mystique is developed during training and intensive preparation and acclimation to the norms and skills common among professionals within a particular sphere. Cherniss specifically cited medicine and law as lines of work where the professional mystique is particularly strong. These professions require years of highly rigorous post-baccalaureate study, and therefore the construct is developed in a years-long induction process. The hero teacher narrative, on the other hand, wholly results from TFA marketing (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016). In other words, professional mystique is socially constructed by individual professionals, and the hero teacher narrative is projected by an organization in its recruitment efforts. Professional mystique is bottom-up; hero teacher is top-down. These are important differences because they seem to reflect a paternalistic mindset built into the TFA project, which specifically staffs schools in which students hail from racially and socioeconomically marginalized communities.

Matsui (2015) connected the broader concept of professional mystique to the hero teacher narrative, but, for this study, I have drawn direct relationships between the specific elements of Matsui's definition of the hero teacher and the dimensions of Cherniss's (1980) professional mystique. I have synthesized these two frameworks by aligning their dimensions according to the individual's orientation to work (i.e., competence for professionals, effort for hero teachers), orientation to authority (i.e., autonomy for professionals, romance for hero teachers), orientation to outcomes (i.e.,

stimulation for professionals, idealism for hero teachers), orientation to peers (i.e., collegiality for professionals, solo hero for hero teachers), and orientation to clients (i.e., grateful clients for professionals, savior complex for hero teachers). It is important to note that these orientations are oppositional, contrasting individualistic and idealistic improvisation with professional competence and collegiality. In this way, the hero teacher is an explicitly de-professionalized notion of teaching.

Orientation to Authority and Work

Autonomy and romance. New professionals expect to have a certain amount of control over their work and freedom from administrative supervision and constraint (Cherniss, 1980). Matsui (2015) claims that believers in the hero teacher narrative have a romanticized view of teaching that is divorced from the context of administrative and bureaucratic regulation, especially in the kinds of high-need schools in which TFA places teachers. Some TFA counternarratives have described experiences that were less collaborative than the CMs would have liked (Brewer, 2014; Brewer & deMarrais, 2015; Steudeman, 2015). These counternarratives distinguish TFA applicants from other professionals in an important way: They are not trained professionals. The belief that, despite this lack of preparation, a TFA CM can, if left alone, individually accomplish miracles is the romantic teacher delusion (Matsui, 2015). Autonomy in this case should not be understood as the opposite of collaboration, but as freedom from supervision and administrative constraint. Collegial collaboration could conceivably happen between autonomous professionals. For professionals who have undergone extensive training and who possess expertise, the need for autonomy likely arises from self-efficacy and the desire to practice without constraints from an administrative bureaucracy with no expertise. For TFA CMs—who may have little to no professional training—the need for autonomy likely arises from a simplistic understanding of professional work.

Competence and hard work. For Cherniss (1980), professional competence is the expectation that certification guarantees a level of proficiency that is required for immediate success in a profession. In the hero teacher narrative, this element takes the form of a *work hard, keep heart* ethic (Matsui, 2015; Trujillo & Scott, 2014). In other words, one of TFA's chief premises is that the best graduates from the best universities are already highly qualified to be teachers, and that CMs will develop specific competencies from implementing the skills and procedures that they learn during the 5-week summer institute (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Kretchmar et al., 2014; Steudeman, 2015), which is a hallmark of the TFA preparation model. Implicit in this ideal is the belief that student success is solely dependent on the individual effort of the teacher as well as its logical corollary—that student failure is the result of the individual teacher's lack of effort.

Stimulation, fulfillment, and idealism. Professionals expect "interesting, challenging, and varied" (Cherniss, 1980, p. 253) work—a constant source of intrinsic motivation. Graduates of prestigious universities may expect a level of intellectual engagement and affective payoff from teaching students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Jacobsen et al., 2016). However, the expectations of student achievement gains that many CMs have are unrealistic, and the methods that TFA requires CMs to use to produce such gains are more directive than

interactional (Matsui, 2015; Scott et al., 2016; Trujillo & Scott, 2014). Matsui critiqued the improvement arcs presented in popular hero teacher films as unrealistic and simplified, comparing them directly to the inflated expectations that CMs have upon entering the classroom and that TFA as an organization has of its CMs. Cherniss's claims about professional burnout are that it follows from similarly unrealistic expectations, such as those regarding autonomy and collegiality.

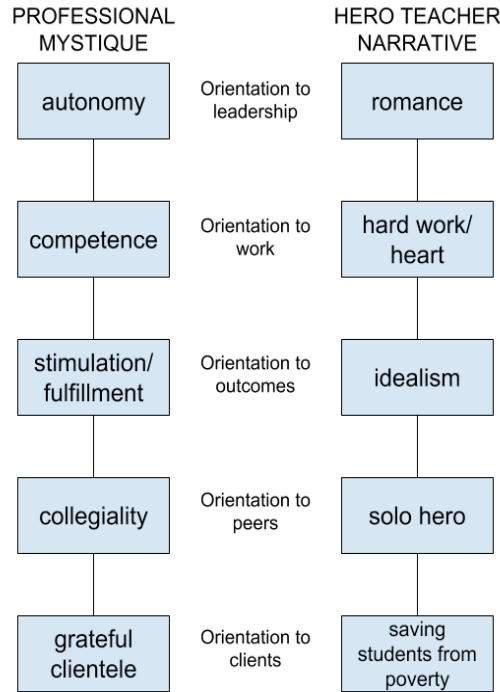| PROFESSIONAL MYSTIQUE		HERO TEACHER NARRATIVE
autonomy	Orientation to leadership	romance
competence	Orientation to work	hard work/ heart
stimulation/ fulfillment	Orientation to outcomes	idealism
collegiality	Orientation to peers	solo hero
grateful clientele	Orientation to clients	saving students from poverty

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of Professional Mystique and the Hero
Teacher narrative, adapted from Cherniss (1980) and Matsui (2015)

Orientation to Peers and Clients

    Collegiality versus the solo hero. Professional collaboration and support between colleagues is rare, although often idealized in cases where groups of professionals are threatened (Cherniss, 1980). Ideally, collegiality might involve veteran teachers helping socialize a new teacher to the norms of the profession and the school (Oplatka, 2009) or fellow teachers offering technical support and sharing resources (Dean, 2012). In reality, entering professionals, including teachers are frequently blindsided by the "undercutting rivalry, competition, and distrust" (Dean, 2012, p. 253) present in professional organizations. For CMs, the problem is not so much open distrust and rivalry as a singular focus on individual performance in a collegial vacuum (Matsui, 2015) in which

student achievement in the solo hero's classroom is the result of the teacher's hard work and heart, not of collective effort or assistance.

Grateful clientele and the savior complex. The fifth element of professional mystique is the grateful clientele, idealized as cooperative and thankful for the opportunity to be served by a professional. The ideal client is honest and earnest and believes that the professional has her best interest in mind (Cherniss, 1980). The corollary to the grateful client is the needy client. A hero teacher may demonstrate a deficit perspective of students, expecting that they need to be rescued from the perils of their neighborhood, family life, or anti-academic value system. TFA teachers are frequently ill-prepared for the students they will teach, who are more vulnerable to marginalization by the deficit-based assumptions and control-focused practices of teachers with little training (Anders, 2011). Further, because CMs' training is in a style of directive management, lack of compliance among students is a fundamental worry (Matsui, 2015; Steudeman, 2015).

The preceding frameworks informed this study from the beginning. From a critical perspective, Matsui's framework (2015), in particular, was intuitively appealing. However, as a phenomenological inquiry, this study attempted to complicate the notion of idealistic college graduates having their hopes dashed by reality. In that narrative, the CMs can almost be seen as naïve victims. But from a critical perspective, their participation must be interrogated for the ways in which it may victimize others (Parker & Stovall, 2004). The significance of the hero teacher narrative and the professional mystique was in their intuitive appeal, which posed a threat to the originality of my observations. As I explain below, I foregrounded these frameworks in my analysis to deter merely confirming them to the detriment of other emergent meanings. I included the professional mystique because it was the framework that Matsui identified as an inspiration for the hero teacher narrative; in my search for novel explanations I did not want to stumble on aspects of the professional mystique and mistake them for something new. The difference between the generic hero teacher (an abstract framework) and the pre-service TFA CM (an actual person) was the focus of this post-intentional study. What, in addition to heroic idealism, might drive applicants to pursue a TFA appointment?

Method

TFA's effectiveness as a reform initiative and as an alternative approach to teacher preparation and staffing is mixed at best (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Part of the explanation of this uneven success may be the hero teacher mindset, which Matsui (2015) claims sets CMs up for burnout. But there are other factors at play, such as TFA's training program, recruitment strategy, and target CM population. What if the "best and brightest" (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016, p. 1) are not all fit to be teachers? This study investigated the best and brightest in pursuit of answers to the following questions: (a) Why do some college students apply to Teach For America? (b) What applicant characteristics are revealed, or appealed to, in the selection process? and (c) What role does the desire to teach play in some applicants' decision to join TFA?

Post-Intentional Phenomenological Approach

Husserl's initial purpose for phenomenology—or the study of the meanings people make of and from the world around them—was to combat "centuries of Western philosophy and, in turn, social science, that situated knowing and understanding either in minds or out in the world" (Vagle, 2014, p. 115). The mix of conservative market ideology (e.g., school choice, privatization) and deficit-based liberal approaches to closing "achievement gaps" (e.g., standards-based assessments) that dominate current reform discussions is the kind of hegemonic thinking that phenomenology was created to combat (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Vagle, 2009). In addition, the motivation to apply to TFA is not a static phenomenon, unchanged since the founding of TFA nearly 30 years ago. Motivation varies across applicants and contexts, and it interacts with dynamic policy and reform conditions. This assumption is known as *post-intentionality*, in which a phenomenon has no essential structure but instead a contextualized and dynamic essence (Vagle, 2014). The post-intentional phenomenological method is ideal for this study because it accounts for the shifting contexts of phenomena.

Counternarratives illuminate the difference between implicit, commonsense, idealistic notions of TFA and the actual lived experience of CMs. The Gramscian idea of contradictory consciousness—the basis for a post-intentional, process-oriented phenomenology—problematizes and complicates the common sense, not simply the distance between it and lived experience (Gross, 2011). By studying narratives from college students with the intent to join TFA, I investigated how the commonsense ideas undergirding the hero teacher narrative influenced TFA applicants. Matsui (2015) asserted that the hero teacher narrative was the hegemonic concept at the root of TFA's success and failure. The purpose of using the hero teacher narrative and the professional mystique in this study was to acknowledge how they affected my interpretation of data about TFA applicant motivation. By accounting for these frameworks in my analysis, I was able both to reflect upon their contributions to the motivation to apply to TFA *and* develop a framework that goes beyond and is distinct from the explanations offered by the hero teacher narrative. Vagle's (2010) three tenets of post-intentional phenomenology illustrate why this approach suits a study of this nature. These tenets are: (a) connection to the context in which people find themselves, (b) connection between a researcher's conception of the phenomenon and the participants' experience of it, and (c) the constantly shifting nature of phenomena. Below, I consider each of these tenets in light of this study.

First, Vagle (2010) describes phenomenology as a study of the connection between individuals and the world around them. I conducted this study under the assumption that the urge to apply to TFA may be understood as a link between participants and several other worlds in which they find, or will find, themselves. For example, the decision to apply to TFA may link undergraduates to their post-university selves by putting a label on their future work. Alternatively, applying to TFA may connect them to the larger educational reform movement, linking them in a practical way to their own former school experiences. It may also connect their experience to popular narratives of urban blight and privileged heroism. Finally, TFA may link them to a future profession—if not teaching, then law, government, public service, or business. In sum, applying to TFA

links graduating college students' lives directly to other ideal worlds. Much meaning is tied up in this performance and in these relations across worlds.

Second, Vagle contends that whatever understanding results from a phenomenological study "moves with and through the researcher's intentional relationship with the phenomenon" (p. 399). This means that my conceptualization of applicants' motivation is inseparable from my meanings of the above linkages, both for myself and for my participants. As a non-traditionally prepared teacher with experience in a charter school for at-risk urban students, and having attended a college from which TFA recruits, I have experiences and understandings that affected my interactions with participants, my interpretation of the data, and my description of this phenomenological encounter. The post-intentional phenomenological approach accounts for my own experience's impact on data analysis (Vagle, 2009).

Finally, in Vagle's (2010) post-intentional phenomenology, lived experience has no stable essence, and is understood instead as "performances within relations" (p. 399) with tentative meanings in need of constant critique. TFA has existed since 1989, which means the urge to apply to TFA is nearly three decades old (Barnes et al., 2016). Before TFA existed and became central to the national education-reform movement, this motivation was likely directed at something else. The transformation of this urge over at least three decades is not only a window into the lived experience of undergraduates at elite colleges and institutions, but also into the lived experience of education reform in this country.

Participant Recruitment

This study used a convenience sample of five students (three undergraduates and two master's students) who were accepted to TFA in the fall of 2015. A description of the desire to apply to TFA in its multiple, partial, and varied contexts demanded that data collection not be restricted to those who accepted their placements (Vagle, 2014). Thus, not all participants accepted their appointments (see Table 1 for participant characteristics). The purpose of interviewing applicants prior to their service as TFA teachers was to ascertain the beliefs and motivations of applicants before the realities of teaching influenced them as TFA CMs.

Participants were recruited from a medium-sized mid-Atlantic elite public liberal arts university in a politically moderate, suburban region of a politically right-of-center state with no collective bargaining for teachers and no school choice or charter school program. Most students at the university were from a more densely populated, politically left-of-center region of the state. I recruited participants through social media (e.g., membership in education-related Facebook groups), traditional print fliers posted on bulletin boards in common areas on campus, and personal networking. I did not recruit through TFA websites or TFA-related websites (e.g., campus Facebook pages) because I did not want hand-selected participants from TFA. I received leads from some personal connections and interested inquiries, and I followed up with introduction emails about the study. I informed participants of the time commitment and topical nature of the study, after which they chose whether or not to participate.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender/sex	Race/ ethnicity	TFA response[a]	Teaching preparation	Post- graduate plans
Cassie	Female	White	Declined	University- based	Teaching
Jada	Female	Black	Joined	None	Teaching
Kristen	Female	White	Declined	None	Undecided[b]
Mario	Male	Hispanic	Joined	University- based	Teaching
Mel	Female	White	Declined	University- based	Teaching

[a]All participants were accepted by TFA; "declined" here means they declined their assignment.
[b]Undecided, but specifically stated she was not entering teaching.

Participant Profiles

Cassie was a white elementary education undergraduate from Florida, where she had attended public schools. She came from a small town and felt the pressure of her family's and hometown friends' high expectations of someone who went out of state for college. She was active in the university's student government, as well as several service organizations. In her interviews, she frequently reflected on lessons she was learning as a student teacher and from working with other people in student government. Cassie was introspective, earnest, and pragmatic. She wanted to teach in an urban school but thought her university preparation program was geared more toward suburban teaching. Given the shortcomings of her program in preparing teachers for urban schools, Cassie had resigned herself to some years in a suburban school before teaching in a city. She ultimately declined her offer from TFA and took a teaching position in a large suburban district.

Jada, a Black interdisciplinary studies undergraduate with a focus on social justice, was originally from a Boston suburb, where she attended a K–12 private school. In her teenage years, she volunteered as a tutor in local public schools. Throughout her undergraduate career, she had completed internships at several nonprofits and policy-focused firms in Washington, DC. She was involved in education-related activism and had taken some education courses, though she was not pursuing teacher certification along with her college degree. Jada was ambitious, savvy, and well-informed of education reform policy. A natural networker, she was aware of and ready to make the necessary personal connections with those she considered important to her success. Jada took her TFA appointment to an urban middle school and concurrent enrollment in a master's program.

Kristen, who was white, was a history major and a private school graduate originally from San Diego. She was very active in her sorority, having served in a number of leadership positions throughout her undergraduate career. She was also the leader of six other organizations during her senior year. She had initially planned to apply to master's

programs in history, but had become disillusioned with academia. Kristen was visibly exhausted during her interviews and reported being burned out by taking on too many extracurricular responsibilities. She ultimately declined both her TFA offer and the prospect of teaching.

Mario was a Hispanic master's student majoring in English and a former Marine who had enrolled in the teacher preparation program at the university. He grew up in southeastern Virginia and attended K–12 public schools. He was married, and he and his wife had a new baby at the time of the study. Mario had faced much adversity in his life, some of which he preferred not to discuss. He was committed to education with an almost mission-driven fervor, some of which he attributed to his training as a Marine. He would ultimately take a TFA appointment thousands of miles from where he lived at the time of the study.

Mel was a white elementary education master's student and a public school graduate from outside Washington, DC. She felt strongly that she was going to be a teacher, whether through TFA or not. She was very serious and determined to learn what she needed to serve her students well. She had been a camp counselor and was a leader in a performance-based troupe at the university, as well as a varsity athlete. Mel was suspicious of some people's reasons for applying to TFA and very vocal about what kind of person it takes to be a teacher and the level of skill teaching required. Mel declined her TFA appointment.

Because this study was an investigation of the experiences of a narrow set of participants, findings are not necessarily representative of the broader population of accepted TFA applicants or applicable in contexts outside this study. The sampling method was convenient, not purposive, so the demographic makeup of the sample may not represent that of the applicant pool at the institution in the study, much less the national TFA applicant pool. Further, the fact that three participants were enrolled in a teacher preparation program, and that three participants declined their TFA appointments, makes the sample unusual.

Data Generation

Data consisted of in-person interviews and an asynchronous online focus group with the five participants. Interviews occurred in a "clear, yet flexible process" (Vagle, 2014, p. 129), designed to elicit detailed explanations of and reflections on the participant's application, selection, and acceptance or rejection of the TFA offer. Interviews were conducted over a period of 5 weeks in the fall semester of 2016, in a private student study room in the library on the university campus, and each interview lasted about two hours. Every participant was interviewed twice. In the first round, they were asked to describe their experience, from their first awareness of TFA to their decision to accept an appointment. Examples of interview questions include:

1. Tell me about how you first became familiar with TFA.
2. Tell me about your decision to apply.
3. Talk about your experience with TFA recruiters.
4. What did you do during the interview process(es)?
5. How did it feel to find out you were accepted?
6. Describe how you decided to accept or decline your appointment.

In the second round, questions were different for each participant, depending on his or her first-round responses. Some were clarifying questions, some were probing questions, and some were elaboration questions. Before the second round began, I asked all participants to review a summary of their first-round responses, which I had written in first-person narrative form (e.g., "I am proud to have been accepted to TFA," "I think many people apply to TFA for the wrong reasons"). Based on their reviews, I made corrections to the summaries, which I later analyzed along with the interview data.

Following the second interview round, I conducted a focus group with all five participants, during which they responded to initial tentative themes drawn from the individual interviews, including broad summations and individual first-person paraphrases of interviews. Participants also asynchronously and digitally responded in writing to a series of images related to education, personal struggle, emotional intelligence, and current events. The purpose of this visual elicitation was to generate discussion among participants based on nonverbal cues. I analyzed participant responses to the images along with their interview transcripts.

Bridling and member checks. Throughout the data collection, generation, and analysis, I "persistently critiqued" (Vagle, 2014, p. 127) my own knowing because the development of my understanding of the phenomenon is also a part of the phenomenon itself. The act of bridling my own biases and preexisting understandings constituted a recursive and continual process through which both study participants and peer debriefers exhibited, interrogated, and validated my thinking. This is in contrast to a bracketing approach, in which I would have identified my biases in order to clarify what is new and rooted specifically in the data I generated (Dahlberg, 2006). Peer debriefers were two colleagues from a phenomenological research group at my home institution; neither had any specific expertise in TFA or education reform. I asked them to evaluate the congruence of my code definitions with corresponding excerpts. In parallel, member checking my interpretations and thematic assignments with my participants accomplished the same goal by continually checking my interpretations against their own understandings and my representation of them.

Data Analysis

I transcribed interviews and focus groups verbatim, and then coded each according to a hybrid process based on van Manen's (1990), Vagle's (2014), and Saldaña's (2016) procedures for drawing themes from data. I began with an initial holistic reading of the data, without coding, in addition to the initial reading that occurred during transcription. This is consistent with the first step of Vagle's whole-parts-whole process. In initial reading, I highlighted significant portions that I thought were poignant or "particularly essential or revealing", according to van Manen's (1984, p. 21) guidelines. I wrote memos of my initial responses to each interview or dataset, both to bridle my current thinking and to record emergent themes as they occurred. Follow-up questions for each participant's second interview were formed from this initial reading. I developed questions for the focus group from initial readings of second-round interview transcripts.

I utilized four coding processes in different analysis stages. These processes served unique purposes. All data were coded according to at least three methods—open descriptive coding, versus coding, and a priori provisional coding. I initially analyzed

data in an emergent line-by-line process of open descriptive coding to record my first impressions of the data. I then organized these descriptive codes, over 300 of them, into categories and themes, which I entered into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, and attached to the chunks of data to which they referred.

Then all data were coded in NVivo a second time in a round of versus coding (Saldaña, 2016), in which important statements were assigned an either/or type of code (e.g., long term versus short term, competition versus convenience, social versus individual). The purpose of versus coding in the second round was to highlight the dichotomies that participants constructed during their decision-making processes. Heightening the contrast in their motivations and beliefs exposed the conflict between the professionalism of Cherniss's (1980) framework and Matsui's (2015) anti-professional idealism of the hero teacher narrative.

In the third round, I coded the data according to the a priori tenets of the professional mystique and the hero teacher frameworks, to extract the data's original theoretical framework and analyze the remaining data for something novel. The purpose of this third round of coding was twofold: to check against any tendency to unduly contort existing TFA promotions or original participant descriptions of their experience to fit the conceptual framework of my study, and to filter out that interpretation, leaving leftover material for the fourth and final round of coding.

In the final round, I coded data that did not fit the professional mystique or hero teacher frameworks in an iterative chunk-by-chunk convergent coding process that compounded and synthesized thematic utterances from previous coding rounds. The themes of the central phenomenon of this study emerged from this fourth-round coding.

Findings: Convenience, Credibility, and Credential

Many of the beliefs and motivations exhibited by participants were consistent with Matsui's (2015) hero teacher framework, Cherniss's (1980) professional mystique framework, or both (see Appendices A and B). Although applicants differed with respect to their emphases on certain aspects of the frameworks—or whether their profile aligned more with the professional mystique than the hero teacher or vice versa—there was a set of invariant structures (Vagle, 2014) in the interview data that confirmed that all participants held notions of the hero teacher. But the hero teacher narrative did not tell the applicants' complete stories, their decision-making processes, or their respective urges toward or away from TFA. The notion of the hero teacher was but part of a larger phenomenon arising from a contextually specific array of influences, pressures, and motivations. This new phenomenon that I identified in the data, *ed cred*, is conceived of as a kind of education policy-related cache—incorporating "street cred" for young policy entrepreneurs and philanthro-capitalists—and will be discussed later in this section. First, I present the results of analysis according to the tenets of the professional mystique and the hero teacher narrative frameworks. Second, I describe the context as it manifested in participant descriptions of their experiences. Contextual description is central to post-intentional phenomenology because it helps ground the variability of a phenomenon between and across contexts and individuals (Vagle, 2015). Finally, I describe the observed elements of the ed cred framework: credibility, convenience, and credential. It is important to remember the post-intentional nature of all of the themes and frameworks

identified in the data. There is no fixed structure to the elements of professional mystique, the hero teacher narrative, or ed cred. Instead, meanings and emphases shift between individuals and across contexts, and themes look different in different participants' responses (Vagle, 2014). Contrast, then, is not necessarily contradiction, but may be confirmation of the dynamic nature of these phenomena.
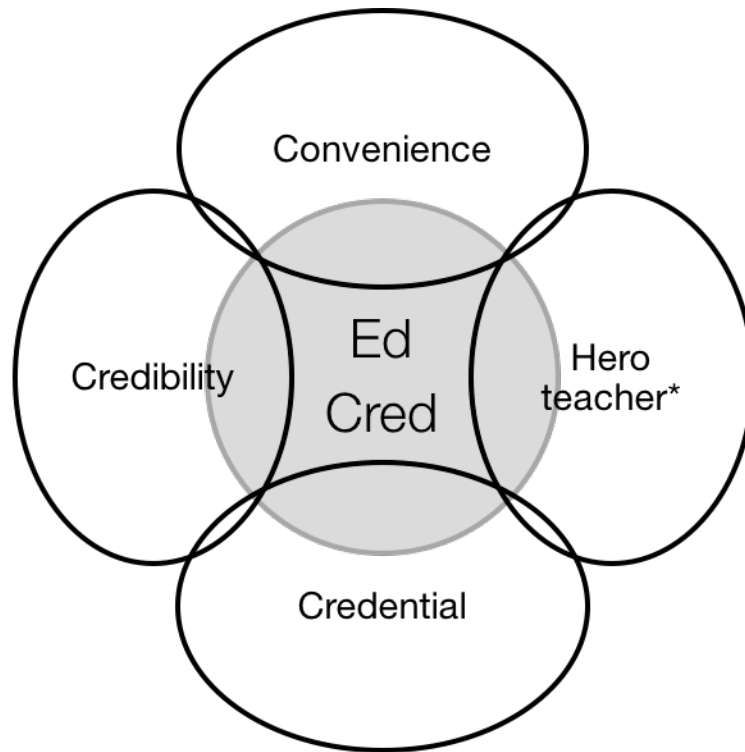
Figure 2. Ed Cred Framework
*Hero teacher includes components of Professional Mystique and the hero teacher frameworks.

Bridling the Professional Mystique and Hero Teacher Narrative

In order to post—or move through—this hero teacher narrative, I will first describe how the narrative manifested in the data. Then I will turn to the portions of the data that were not explained by the hero teacher narrative. These remaining threads—distinct from the hero teacher narrative but in confluence with it—appear to comprise ed cred, a motivating urge for the TFA applicants who participated in this study. These post-intentional variations (Vagle, 2014)—or variant themes—are what legitimize the dilettante, and I discuss these in the next section. As *bridled* frameworks (Vagle, 2009), the hero teacher narrative and professional mystique were not set aside conceptually, as is the case with bracketing. Instead, they influence the emergent framework of ed cred as a contextually dependent corollary of invariant structures that were as much a part of the ed

cred phenomenon as the new, emergent structures (e.g., convenience, credibility, credential). In these data, ed cred does not compete with the hero teacher narrative, but instead may offer more detail about how the notion of the hero teacher interacts with these applicants' individual circumstances and shared context. Below, I describe the components of the hero teacher framework that emerged in this study: grateful clientele and deficit mindset, individual autonomy, romantic pedagogy, and personal exceptionalism.

Grateful clientele and deficit mindset. The expectation that clients will be grateful for the services of a professional is one of the components of the professional mystique that, in Matsui's (2015) framework, becomes a savior complex at worst and a benevolent paternalism at best. The hero teacher is saving students from whatever at-risk circumstance they are in or toward which they are headed. This is associated with the concept of deficit mindset, which foregrounds perceived shortcomings in students and communities as explanations for the problems they face in school (García & Guerra, 2004). A deficit mindset is how empathy, privilege, and paternalism temper the rigor in a participant's notion of competence. These applicants' deficit mindset was, simply, a casual first premise. This prima facie assumption of encountering every deficit imaginable in a TFA placement was typical among the participants in this study. As Cassie explained, there exists "the knowledge that if you're doing TFA, you are definitely going into a bad area . . . most likely an impoverished area, most likely in a Title I school, most likely with Title I kids, most likely minorities." Similarly, according to Mel, the scary thing about teaching was having to take the students "as they are," implying the way "they are" is without things taken for granted by other kids—breakfast, supportive parents, a conducive study environment, an encouraging neighborhood, a dominant language background, and so on. Both Mario and Jada specifically mentioned grocery shopping for their hungry students while trying not to get emotionally pulled into their struggles at home. The assumption on their part—before knowing their appointments—was that they would need to provide food and solace to their students, implying not only an expectation of deficits that need to be overcome but also an assumption that they would be able to to alleviate those deficits.

Individual autonomy. Participants demonstrated a conception of professional autonomy laced with competition against (a) themselves (i.e., either past performance or persistent limitations); (b) externally imposed constraints on personal freedom (e.g., from rules or supervisors); or (c) preexisting situational challenges (e.g., the deficits of colleagues or clients). In contrast to Cherniss's (1980) notion of collegiality, all of the participants in this study were very self-motivated individuals with significant leadership experience and a preference for being in charge. For example, as Kristen explained,

> A lot of times in group settings, people get really wishy-washy. They're just like, "Oh, I don't know, sure we can do this, what do you think?" and I'm just like, "Argh, let's get rid of this bullshit and just figure it out right now!" So I think I just naturally tend to take over.

For Cassie, being avowedly self-reliant brought with it an ironic challenge: the need for a close circle of colleagues who could recognize her needs without her having to state them explicitly. For Mario, on the other hand, one's level of autonomy was an indicator

of competence. Mario described his independence from his colleagues by relaying a situation in which a broken copier caused meltdowns among his fellow student teachers, while he simply adapted and carried on. This level of personal performance was a product not only of independence, but also of individual competition—the idea of pitting what one is capable of against what others merely expect of them. Mario explained,

> I think the more you are micromanaged, the less productive you're going to be. If you micromanage someone to the extreme, they're only going to produce the exact output you're looking for. They're never going to break through that and create something new because you're breathing down their neck.

Mario envisioned a line of hypothetical competitors—teachers, husbands, fathers—waiting for him to make a mistake or not do his best, ready to swoop in and replace him as the head of the classroom or even the head of his own family. In this respect, his biggest competitor was his own expectation of defeat.

Similarly, Jada's fierce competitive nature seemed to fuel her need for unlimited professional freedom, even in the absence of the experience or competence that might justify that freedom. As a retail store manager in her late teens, she was expected to lead a staff of older and more experienced sales associates. She did so successfully, which contributed to her strong predilection toward independently improving her innate abilities, as opposed to acquiring new skills through training and supervision (e.g., teaching). Jada said,

> I don't like the idea that I'm being constantly watched. Teaching is an art form, so it's the ability to develop and hone skills over time. . . . If you're taking away a teacher's autonomy, it kind of creates this idea that we're all robotic and standardized when that's not the case at all.

Other participants were also confident in the efficacy of the independent teacher. Mario believed that the efficacy of the good teachers he had known was based on their individual abilities, not the fact that they may have "had an administration breathing down their neck telling them how to get there." Similarly, Mel believed the most effective teachers were those who were allowed to teach in their own style: "There are maybe other professions where everybody following the same method produces the best outcome, but I do not think that happens in teaching . . . teaching isn't routine or formulaic." Cassie's idea of autonomy was more tempered, but still reflected an underlying commitment to the freedom of competent professionals to make their own decisions.

Participant individualism was not a monolith, however. The source of Kristen's individualism was, interestingly, rule-based. As the president of her sorority, she felt isolated from her peers because of her duty to enforce rules, and she was comfortable with this personal isolation because the rules justified her stance. In her opinion, the inability of others to follow rules was a deficit, and instead of requiring compromise or capitulation on her part, it required enforcement. All participants in this study similarly demonstrated—to varying degrees—an underlying belief in the legitimacy of the

educational shortcomings of the student populations they expected to serve. They saw these shortcomings as material and deterministic outcomes of either structural or cultural factors, and their solutions to these shortcomings were individual leadership and uncommon diligence.

Professional and romantic pedagogy. The professional pedagogical ideals manifest in the data concerned student learning and outcomes and being a good teacher. Participants' romanticized pedagogical ideal was more affective and concerned the teacher-as-friend or parent stand-in. Jada, for instance, saw it as "not necessarily friendship, but the next best thing." For the romantics, Jada and Mario, it was fundamentally about a passion for caring for the kids. For Jada, caring involved building relationships with parents "in case [she] need[ed] to do home visits" or being "at their practices and games." Mario planned to be caring by having snacks in case they "d[id]n't eat breakfast." Jada expanded,

> I think if you can get people who are . . . really passionate—I think that almost trumps qualification, because you can learn qualifications, but you can't just teach passion. . . . I can learn classroom management. I can learn the material. I can learn those type of things, cultivate that. . . . I don't necessarily think about, like, "Alright, we're gonna learn about such-and-such today." I think much more about the little things I can do to be a different teacher and be much more engaging and engaged in ways that I can get to know them as people. . . . That's where I go naturally.

Although all of these romantic notions were present in the professional approach, they were the foundation of a broader system of values, not the chief components of teaching. Illustrating the intersection of romantic and pragmatic concerns in the professional approach, Mario expressed romantic notions of, "that mother hen nature, you want to protect your ducklings." However, he also demonstrated a higher level of concern, approaching anxiety, about being fully prepared for class, knowing what to do in any given instructional or behavioral situation, and teaching at the level of an imaginary veteran expert teacher whom his students might have had instead of him.

Opposite the spectrum from the idealistic notions of the romantic, Mel's professional orientation—much like Mario's but without the snacks—bordered on performance anxiety. Pulling from her own experiences with success and failure in youth camp counseling and student teaching, Mel clearly continued to struggle with instances in which she had, in her view, failed her kids because of her inability to handle specific situations successfully. These instructional and behavioral situations in which, according to Mel, "you feel like you've done everything, and you feel inadequate to help them," hardened her resolve to improve her skills and dispositions and to reflect upon the inevitable failures that come with teaching—instead of being stalled by them.

Mel was just as concerned with impacting children as Jada, but for Mel, it was a matter of skill level, not emotional connection. In her TFA interview, she was angered by the inability of her interviewer, a TFA alumnus, to "identify a time where he had made an impact in a child's life." Her indignation that his concerns were with her leadership qualities and ambitions, instead of her experiences and abilities working with children, was a chief reason she declined her offer: "I think that we're in classrooms to teach kids. .

. . I was disappointed there was never any emphasis on that." Indeed, it was a similar professional pedagogical ideal that prevented Kristen from accepting her TFA appointment as well. Kristen admitted, "I realized I have no experience teaching kids; I have no idea. I didn't think I could provide them with the best experience, and I didn't think that was fair to them." These varying notions of professionalism—in which the participant is concerned or anxious about the outcome—and pedagogical romanticism—in which the participant is confident of the outcome—reflect two kinds of pedagogy, one in which preparation is important (and lack of preparation is enough to disqualify one from teaching) and another in which expectations (or idealistic notions of what will be) are paramount.

Personal exceptionalism. Participants had a firm notion of what the typical TFA applicant was like, and also believed themselves to be an exception from this. As Cassie stated, "They see it as a route to take, that there's all these different routes. But for me, this is my route. I'm not seeing other routes." In a response to follow-up questions about the reputation of TFA, each participant understood—and to an extent agreed with—the negative aspects of TFA's reputation, and each participant wanted to make clear that they were not—or would not be—part of the problem. Asked about his notion of what the other applicants were like, Mario said,

> I think the traditional TFA applicant is someone that is using TFA as a platform for other career goals. So, "I have great grades in my undergrad, I can apply to TFA, teach for two years in 50 different locations. But then afterwards I can go to law school, and a really good law school this time, because I did TFA for two years." I don't identify with that, but in my head, that is the traditional TFA applicant, and it's also a big reason why I want to join TFA.

Mario's response was unique, because he not only saw himself as independent from the typical motivations of TFA applicants but also saw his performance in TFA as necessary to improve TFA and rescue it from its own reputation. He continued,

> I don't plan on leaving education in two years. I don't want to. . . . I don't want to be another statistic, a "I'm just one more person that gave TFA a bad name, that's keeping TFA from their mission." That's the only doubt I have. That's the big one.

Mario was the oldest of the participants, and the only participant who did not complete his undergraduate education at the institution from which all participants were recruited. He was also the only career-switcher in the study. He demonstrated a fear of failure and feeling of inferiority far more pronounced than any other participant. He was aware of his own imposter syndrome (Bernard, Dollinger, & Ramaniah, 2002), but perhaps unaware of how it may have contributed to the grandiosity of his expectations. Other participants considered themselves exceptional, but not as mission-driven.

In contrast to Mario's idealistic mission drive, Mel's exceptionalism arose from her commitment to students and to teaching. Mel's commitment to education and to children was, she believed, distinct from other people's reasons for doing TFA: "I know I intend to remain teaching. That's what I want, so if that's not what most people in the program

do, that doesn't matter, because I know what I am doing. . . . I know my means and motivations." This exceptionalism—the idea that one is not susceptible to the pressures that have influenced others' performance—was not the same kind of unrealistic expectation that Matsui (2015) found in her counternarratives, where the focus was on transforming the academic, social, and life trajectories of students. Rather, this study's finding on exceptionalism was about one's personal potency, not the idealistic dreams of a hero. This suggests there could be more to the hero teacher's (Matsui, 2015) motivation than acting out an idealistic pop culture storyline; instead, maybe the TFA classroom is seen as a proving ground for demonstrating one's abilities or testing one's limits.

Unlike the other participants, Kristen recognized the exceptionalism held by the other TFA applicants whom she knew, but she did not consider herself exceptional. She saw herself as typical:

> I hate to say it, but I think I am just the typical applicant. Like the person who— I'm exactly who they go after, like I've had academic success, I've had social success, I've been in charge of stuff, but now they're just attaching onto me because I don't have a plan for my future.

The findings above are consistent with Matsui's (2015) conceptualization of the hero teacher, as well as with aspects of Cherniss's (1980) professional mystique. Participants generally assumed an acceptable level of *competence* on their part; the exception was Kristen, who declined her TFA offer because she lacked confidence in her teaching abilities. Participants also demonstrated a preference for *autonomy* from administrators. But they spoke little of *fulfillment* from working with marginalized communities, and their conceptions of collegiality and grateful clientele were distinct from those presented by Cherniss. Self-reliance replaced *collegiality*, and the expectation of *grateful clientele* looked more like the assumption of needy clientele. However, there were a great deal of data that did not conform to the orientations to work, authority, outcomes, peers, and clients that comprise the hero teacher narrative or professional mystique. Applicant motivation may be more complex than can be explained by heroism.

The Context of *Ed Cred*

Ed cred is a special characteristic that I observed alongside—but distinctly from—the expressions of professional mystique and heroism. Ed cred is a credibility that appeals to graduate- and professional-school admissions committees and potential employers in policy-related fields. It is a credibility that people perceive to be convenient to obtain and a sufficient credential to qualify for academic and career advancement. Ed cred also seems to be related to the elements of professional mystique and heroism that were not as pronounced in the data. Notably missing or, more often, only marginally present across these participants was a need for stimulation or fulfillment, unrealistic expectations, a strong commitment to collegiality, the explicit expectation of grateful clientele, or a strong savior complex. These are all important elements of the hero teacher and the professional mystique that were not heavily represented in the data. It is possible that data generation methods contributed to the dearth of data confirming these components of the frameworks. It is also likely that these components of the frameworks were not as

prominant in this study's self-selected sample. That said, the context of this study—an elite and highly selective undergraduate institution—provided the performance expectations and pressures on decision-making for these young people planning their first move into the world after college. It is possible that this strong performance focus affects most students at this institution at this point in their education, regardless of what route they are taking after they graduate. If that is the case, however, then it is important for educators and policymakers to ask why TFA is briefly pulling them into the classroom before they pursue more permanent career paths.

Performance expectations. In this elite institution with high performance expectations, individual potential appeared to arise from the participants' highly internalized sense of personal excellence, including (a) a specific concern for cultivating and/or protecting a prestigious reputation, (b) a desire to be challenged by anything they pursue, and (c) a sense of personal exceptionalism in both past performance and future potential (see Appendix C). Participants took the prestige of their options into account in their decision-making (e.g., Jada, specifically, knew which universities partnered with which TFA appointment sites), and the degree to which they believed that peers and future employers would find each route held credible and legitimate. Many of them, said Jada, "came here because they could've gone to Ivy League schools," but for financial reasons could not pursue that route. However, they expected to continue to have the options that Ivy League graduates have. This mentality manifested as imposter syndrome (Bernard, Dollinger, & Ramaniah, 2002), in which they wondered if they, like Mario said, "fell through the cracks" and deserved to be there in the first place.

In this context, however, the participants did not expect prestige without effort. Students wanted a challenge; as Kristen noted and very much believed, "This will be the hardest thing you ever do in your life, so be ready for that." In a culture of achievement and success, these applicants and their peers relished the challenge. Jada said they "do 80 million things, and they're good at all of them, and people know it." This drive propelled them toward challenges and put them face-to-face with the threat of failure and burnout. Their reward for the "tip of the spear" mentality—Mario's military term for leading the charge into a difficult situation—was a record of achievement. In a context of hard-won reputations for achievement against the odds, participants shared a sense of personal exceptionalism and perceived such exceptionalism to be a trait that they shared with most of their peers. Participants spoke from an idealism in which the usual setbacks and obstacles did not apply to them. Mel said, "I think a person can go through TFA and, through intentional instruction or intentional decisions, avoid allowing those flaws [of TFA] to impact them," and Mario reported having "a little Napoleon complex . . . to try and be bigger than I really am."

Imposed pressures. The contextual pressures that emerged from these interviews were (a) exerted by TFA itself, (b) personally imposed, (c) peer imposed, and (d) related to young adulthood (see Appendix D). TFA exerted pressure on the participants by appealing to their concern for reputation and prestige. For example, one of the first things Cassie knew about TFA was that "they have a lot of pipelines to then go to schools like Johns Hopkins or whatever." Jada also acknowledged the allure of earning a graduate degree from a high-ranking graduate institution while teaching. The context of this study was also one in which participants experienced profound self- and peer-imposed

pressures, such as proving themselves worthy of "going off to that fancy school," as Cassie noted; imposing extra demands on themselves to develop superior competence; and fearing failure.

Beyond the pressures exerted by others and self, participants' context was also characterized by both the developmental and circumstantial peculiarities of young adulthood. In a setting marked by uncertainty and seemingly endless options—"all these different routes," as Cassie described—the study participants experienced palpable pressure to create certainty. This contributed a sense of desperation to the otherwise ambitious and idealistic nature of charting out life plans. Consequently, participants regretted some hastily made decisions. As Cassie explained, "I finally was like, 'You've never wanted to do TFA. Where did this come from?'" This complex context of heightened pressure, outsized potential, and contingent legitimacy shaped the phenomenon of the hero teacher or professional mystique. These phenomena would necessarily look different in other contexts, such as other universities or geographic areas, with less performance anxiety and concern for prestige. The way that unique contextual factors shape lived experience highlighted the need to juxtapose evidence for these pre-identified frameworks with evidence of something novel.

The Invariant Structures of *Ed Cred*

Ed cred is a unique framework of legitimacy that blends the competence of professional mystique (Cherniss, 1980) and the competitiveness of the hero teacher narrative (Matsui, 2015) with three new experiential variations: the drive for credibility, the preference for convenience, and the need for a credential. This new framework emerged from data that did not conform to Cherniss's or Matsui's theories, but it is highly interactive with both. Consistent with post-intentionality, different elements of the ed cred framework may be more present in some contexts or individuals than others (Vagle, 2014). Figure 2 illustrates the post-intentional, changing structure of the proposed phenomenon.

Credibility. The post-intentional conceptualization of credibility in the data seemed to have two sources: one in the competence and knowledge of teachers as they entered the classroom, and another in the experiences and lessons they would take from the classroom into their future careers. Mel's chief problem with TFA was the notion of credibility that it sold, even though she saw herself as immune to it. In an email, after I completed data generation, Mel told me TFA had contacted her again to offer a position in Nashville, where she had originally wanted to work. It took her a week of thinking about it to turn it down. Ultimately, for Mel, credibility was not something one gained from experience in the classroom, but rather something one needed to enter the classroom in the first place. Mel was the only participant whose end goal was teaching. Confident that she had credibility rooted in her own competence, she had no need for TFA. Kristen also thought credibility was needed before becoming a teacher and not something you earned on the job. Since she did not believe she had it, she opted not to try teaching.

Seeking credibility from future experience, Cassie and Jada were headed for leadership or policy positions after their stints in the classroom, and for them classroom experience was something they could leverage for bigger and better things in their careers. Cassie framed her desire for credibility from a teacher's perspective of having to

follow directions and policies made by administrators and policymakers with no educational experience. Cassie said, "It's important to be in the trenches, so to speak, first. I don't think that you can hold any weight as an administrator or as someone who's doing policy if you've not been in the classroom." Jada's idea of leadership preparation was much more top-down. She was explicit about putting in her time: "If I decide I want to work my way up the ranks into a superintendency or something like that, I'm credible enough because I've earned my stripes in the classroom."

The war terminology—"in the trenches," "earned my stripes"—was not lost on Mario, a former Marine and veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He compared learning the technical aspects of teaching with learning how to assemble a rifle: as a matter of muscle memory. Furthermore, he specifically cited his desire for a challenging assignment as a chief draw to TFA: "I want to be shot at—not literally, of course. But I want to have that purpose, to know that my job matters." This individual desire for competition is firmly rooted in the romantic view of teaching from Matsui's (2015) hero teacher framework. However, the kind of credibility that results from it is something Mario respects beyond being a hero teacher:

> I guess the aim is by being in the classroom and being a teacher, when you're in this position to make policy changes, you know what it's like to have been a teacher. And I guess that is the goal. So, all these other careers outside of teachers that influence change and enact all these policies for teachers, if they were teachers before and they know what it's like to be a teacher, then they'll know what's best, what changes are best, to support teachers. If every person that's supporting education policy, has been a teacher and knows what it's like to be a teacher, they know what's best for teachers. If they haven't been in their shoes, then they don't know what's best.

Cassie avoided the kind of war terminology that Mario and Jada employed but still saw credibility as being earned on the job. Despite being an education major and entering teaching without the help of TFA, Cassie admitted that being "introduced" to education through teaching in TFA is considered a more credible route in the eyes of graduate schools and potential employers. Cassie observed, "Instead of just taking the law school path . . . and then going on to run for governor . . . they will at least have had some experience in the classroom." See Appendix E for more examples of participants' quests for credibility.

Convenience. All participants expressed some preference for convenience over challenge at this point in their careers, but this preference had varying origins. For Mario and Jada, it was strategic, but for the others, it seemed to have arisen from desperation or the exhaustion of alternatives. For Mario, it was simply a tactical move. Instead of trying to apply for teaching jobs while he completed his student teaching, Mario chose TFA because the organization would find him a job in an out-of-state location where he could conceivably start a new life with his wife and child. Jada also saw TFA as a convenient job placement service that took the hard work out of planning for post-college life:

> I started to look at TFA as much more of a middleman kind of organization. "They put me in a school. I'm not being paid by them. I have to go to the events

and check the boxes, so that they help pay for x, y, and z,"—but if you can view it like that, it takes a little bit of the pressure off.

Additionally, Jada identified the benefit of making connections with an elite graduate program through TFA. She chose her placement preferences based on their affiliation with highly ranked graduate schools of education: "I was basically choosing them based on their graduate programs. So, I was in it for the grad program and cared more so about where I was than what I was teaching."

In contrast to Jada's tactical planning, Cassie expressed the allure of just having a plan, regardless of what that plan was. Even though, as an education major, she would be earning certification and would likely have her pick of teaching positions when she finished her program, she would not know what she was doing after graduation until sometime in the spring, whereas with TFA, she would know in January. As she described,

> Honestly, I think at that point I was so ready to have a plan. I was so ready to know what I was going to do next year. So TFA was a way for me to feel like I was applying for jobs, I was doing something. I was at least able to be, in my head, like, "Well, you've applied for something; so, if everything else fails, and everything else goes wrong, you could still have TFA," so it was honestly nice to feel like I had actually done something productive for the next year of my life.

Kristen had less of a plan than Cassie, who at least had teaching jobs for which to apply. Having decided not to enroll in a history PhD program, she was convinced to apply to TFA because she had no other post-graduation alternatives. She also reported that a lot of other people she knew had applied for TFA for the same reason: "I think for the most part no one looks down on you if you do TFA. They're just like, 'Oh, okay. They're a successful person who is now lost in their life and needs to find a path.'" Mel felt the same way:

> I do still think you meet people who are doing TFA because they don't know what to do after college, so "I may as well go teach for 2 years, I can help kids, I can be part of this educational movement." I don't think, because I don't have something else to do is a good reason for you to put yourself in a classroom with 20 to 30 kids that you're gonna make a huge impact on. I don't think that's a good reason.

Kristen, Mario, and Jada's approaches were solely with TFA. This was different from Mel and Cassie's approaches, as they considered TFA one option among many. Yet, all participants still recognized the relative convenience of the TFA route, especially when college was coming to an end, and they faced independence. Cassie said,

> I've met multiple people who are really gung-ho about TFA when they're applying, and about education and about helping people, but then they don't get it, and they apply for finance jobs or marketing jobs, or whatever the case may be. So, were those people applying for the wrong reasons? No. But I don't think they necessarily had a true heart for changing education.

Cassie ultimately declined her TFA appointment after receiving another job offer from a school district, and Kristen declined hers out of fear that she would not be a good teacher. Kristen reported, "It was a very, very hard decision because it's so tempting to just know what you're going to do." A summary of excerpts from the data that comprise the theme of convenience is in Appendix F.

Credential. Every participant was concerned with the idea of being credentialed, but each held different views of what the credential meant, what it entitled them to, and where it could take them. For example, Mario was planning to pursue another master's degree through TFA, but he did not mention any concern for institutional affiliation. In contrast, and more than any other participant, Jada wanted an advanced degree and the prestige of an Ivy League or otherwise elite institution. Other participants recognized that a certain amount of prestige came with being accepted to TFA, but Jada was alone in wanting to leverage TFA for further credentials beyond the two-year commitment: "So, my top schools were Hopkins, Miami, U Penn, BU was in there, and the regions associated with them, so I think that really draws someone like me, where I want to get the master's anyways." Jada also cited a friend of hers, who was able to leverage her TFA experience into a master's in public health at Columbia, as evidence of the TFA brand's potency.

Perhaps because Cassie, Mel, and Mario were all students in a teacher certification program at the time of the study, their conceptions of credentialing were more connected to demonstrated competence than labels. Kristen may have felt this way, too, having backed out due to her lack of teaching credentials. Kristen did, however, recognize the authority that participating in TFA could lend her resume:

> I think there's a certain level of prestige. The people I know that have all been accepted, they didn't all necessarily have great academic success, but they all had personal success throughout college, in that they reached high levels of leadership and seemed to be in a good place in their life.

Mel was less impressed by the TFA brand, especially after her interview, in which her interviewer could not identify a child on whom he had made an impact as a CM. Cassie also pressed back against the assumption that merely being involved in TFA provided a de facto benefit for children:

> Are you really helping the kids? Are you really focused on their quality of life, or are you focused on your quality of life after you leave TFA, and you can say, "I did TFA." And that'll help you get into grad school or whatever the case may be.

See Appendix G for more examples of participants' need for a transactional credential.

Discussion

The high-pressure achievement-focused environment of the contemporary elite liberal arts college is the breeding ground for the kind of applicant TFA actively seeks to fill its ranks every year (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016). In addition, these campuses are also crucibles for forging the kind of ambition that, although seeded by idealism and service-minded intent, is ultimately about personal advancement. As more and more

cities and districts sign contracts with TFA, they expect in return a corps of young leaders to infuse their business and public sectors with entrepreneurial vigor (Jacobsen et al., 2016). TFA supplies temporary teachers to these cities and districts, but it also supplies young "policy entrepreneurs" (Scott et al., 2016, p. 15) who have been steeped in "corporate models of managerial leadership" (p. 15) to revitalize their economies. The lure of TFA for some graduating college students is the potential for a resume item that highlights the cache of their highly ranked bachelor's degree and adds practical experience that—in the minds of the public and of future employers—appears more admirable than a mere internship. Having worked in an at-risk school communicates to search committees that one accepts challenges, perseveres through difficulty, and has a service mindset.

The source of this view is likely the deficit-laden perceptions of marginalized communities that the general public, future employers, and many TFA alumni share. The deficit mindset of the participants in this study was less a conviction than an assumption. Among study participants, there was neither a strong commitment to the idea that students served by TFA teachers were languishing in lives of mediocrity nor an overly filmic pity for students such as that depicted in the hero-teacher movies that Matsui (2015) references. Jada's view of teaching was representative in that it was more about "the little things" (e.g., "protecting them," "giving them a good meal," "being at their practices and games") and less about instruction.

Considering some participants' autonomy expectations and leadership ambitions, it is not difficult to imagine that, in a non-administrative role such as teaching, they would expect little supervision. Similarly, if one expects student success to be the result of individual effort, then collegial support may not be a concern. In such an isolated arena as one's classroom, one's chief competition becomes either conceptions of one's abilities (e.g., self-efficacy, self-confidence) or one's past performance. Specifically, Cassie identified the tendency of the romantic pedagogical ideal to veer into hyperbolic idealism when she contrasted people's responses to her traditional entry into teaching to TFA teachers':

> I think people have a perception of teaching in general that it's a noble thing to do. It's honestly something that really frustrates me when people say, "Oh, that is just so great. You're gonna be a great teacher," like "How cute, that's gonna be so fun." . . . I definitely felt like the people who ended up [doing TFA] got a little bit more respect. . . . As an education major, I get the same things, but it's not as amazing a feat because it's not competitive to become an education major or to become a teacher. But it's competitive to become a TFA CM.

The perceived credibility at the center of ed cred arises from CMs' fearlessness in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles to their students' success. But this credibility could conceivably also come from a career in medicine, law, social work, the military, or even teaching via traditional certification. All of these routes require substantial commitment at the outset—years of training and work to build a reputation for excellence. It is possible that some CMs want all the benefits of that credibility without having to devote years of their lives to developing it. The convenient option for these

graduates is to use the prestige of their undergraduate degree to secure a gap year or two of service. In some cases, they may even earn a credential in the process.

Limitations

It should be noted that there is no unitary urge to apply to TFA. Indeed, that is the reason for a post-intentional approach—the urge itself is different among people, locations, and contexts. The context of this study is vital to the phenomenon of ed cred, but it is also a limitation on the applicability of ed cred beyond this study. A host of influences motivate undergraduates to apply to TFA, even within the same context. Therefore, the phenomenon of ed cred must not be seen as a blanket description of all TFA applicants.

This sample was distinct from all TFA applicants, in that it comprised pre-service CMs and accepted applicants who declined their appointments. For instance, Matsui (2015) comprehensively documents the culture of TFA CM preparation and professional development, from the initial training through the two-year commitment and beyond. Existing collections of TFA counternarratives also reflect the interactions of CMs with their classrooms, their trainers, their CM colleagues, and other teachers. Therefore, those counternarratives reflect how TFA inducts its CMs and helps them develop as teachers. Because this study involved pre-service CMs and applicants, their motivations and beliefs were not influenced by TFA's pedagogy. Instead, these participants' pedagogical orientations were minimally influenced by TFA.

Therefore, it is significant that the study participants are among the people who TFA wants, and that they appear to possess the sets of motivations and beliefs that TFA considers most compatible with its mission, motivation, and beliefs. Before buying into TFA's ethos—which includes notions of closing the "achievement gap," and catchphrases such as "work hard," "get smart," "no excuses," "we won't back down," "data-driven," "new civil rights movement," and "one day all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education" (Matsui, 2015)—these young people were moved to apply to TFA and potentially begin the whole process of acculturation Matsui describes. Therefore, although the findings of this study reveal little about TFA itself, they do reveal important details about TFA applicants, undergraduates nearing completion of their studies, and pre-service teachers.

Implications

This study's implications relate to its proximity to those three groups—TFA applicants, undergraduates, and pre-service teachers—and the considerations governing their decisions during the phase of their lives when they are choosing to become teachers. Though conclusions cannot be generalized from these participants, it is worth noting that three participants did not accept their TFA appointments out of concern for competence and effectiveness. For example, Kristen was afraid she would be an ineffective teacher. Mel was concerned that a placement so far from her grandmother would prevent her from becoming as immersed in the community as she thought was necessary for an urban teacher. Cassie felt her teacher preparation program did not prepare her for serving at-risk students in either an urban or rural setting, so she declined TFA and took a job in a privileged suburban school.

There are also implications to be drawn from the participants who did accept their TFA appointments. Like Mel and Cassie, Mario was completing a university teacher certification program. Even Jada—who had a romanticized view of teaching and a shrewd view of TFA's professional benefit for her—had an academic background in sociology and social justice and had demonstrated her concern for education via education courses. This suggests that Mario and Jada would be entering TFA with more of a background in education than many CMs, the majority of whom are not education majors, as previously noted. Mario and Jada, however, did most closely align with the hero teacher narrative in terms of individual exceptionalism and autonomy, and the belief that extraordinary effort can produce uncommon results. They were also the only two participants who ultimately accepted their appointments.

In light of these findings, schools of education with declining enrollments may be better served by investigating TFA's recruitment strategies than its teacher preparation approach. The concept of ed cred may also indicate interest in education policy and practice among undergraduates who are not planning to become teachers. Perhaps course offerings in education-related topics not leading to teacher certification could influence undergraduates' decisions to pursue an education major or an education-related career earlier than in their senior year. Researchers and practitioners in education should also consider whether or not the proliferation of supposed credibility in policy circles is emanating from TFA alumni with only nominal experience in classrooms. The belief that time in the classroom lends credibility to educational leadership and policymaking was unanimous among these participants, making it a strong part of the ed cred framework. Standards of credibility for those in education policy debates and educational leadership should be kept rigorous considering this knowledge.

Conclusion

The findings from this study frame the urge to apply to TFA as a search for legitimacy, possibly indicating that some applicants—and perhaps the general public—believe that current educational leaders and policymakers lack legitimacy. Participants apparently believed that legitimacy could be easily attainable through two years of participation in TFA, not through extended careers in teaching. Young people's idealism can be boundless, especially when they are finishing college and the world seems laid out before them. The participants in this study believed that classrooms could be a testing ground for one's level of grit and an appropriate platform from which to consider broader education policies. Both ideas set up education as a field of dilettantes, where familiarity is presented as expertise and isolated tales of classroom triage are construed as the meta-narrative. Just as not all TFA applicants are heroes-in-waiting, not all classroom experiences may have direct implications for policymakers or school leaders. The perspectives of TFA alumni who end up in policy careers are potentially more vulnerable to anecdotal outliers and a small sample size of experiences. Expertise and understanding result from careers, not stints, in the classroom. More experience contributes nuance to a teacher's understanding of students and education, in much the same way that conversations with TFA applicants—before they are inducted and acculturated into TFA's worldview—contribute nuance to our assumptions about why they were drawn to TFA in the first place. Educators in urban districts and hard-to-staff schools must be wary

of the encroachment of the legitimized dilettante onto the territory of the principled expert, without reducing young idealists to romantic caricatures.

Author Biography

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Appendix A

Professional Mystique

Components	Key nodes	Characteristic responses
Competence	Exceptionalism	"I feel competent when I can see the results." (Cassie)
		"I'm pleased and hoping I'll have a leg up on some of the biology majors, and I'm hoping some of the material will come second nature to them, but I think in terms of pedagogy and stuff like that, I'm feeling much more comfortable." (Jada)
		"I doubted myself, coming here and being surrounded by people I considered to be way smarter than I am." (Mario)
		"There are plenty of people better at what I'm doing than me right now. And for every second I'm not preparing to be a better teacher . . . there's someone out there that's gonna be a better teacher." (Mario)
		"This past year, I've been president of six organizations, which is not really a sustainable lifestyle." (Kristen)
Autonomy	Individual responsibility	"They are handed a curriculum and told, 'This is how you will teach this,' and maybe that's okay for people who don't have an education background." (Cassie) *cross-coded with Competence*
		"You have no choice; you've signed the contract." (Cassie)
		"One of my friends told me recently that I have a problem with authority, but I don't agree with that. I don't necessarily like to be told what to do, who does, but I like to have that freedom of like 'Alright, I'm the manager on duty now; I feel comfortable that no one's breathing down my neck.'" (Jada)
		"If you micromanage someone to the extreme, they're only going to produce the exact output you're looking for. They're never going to break through that and create something new." (Mario)
		". . . to have more and more freedom to run things the way I want to." (Kristen)
		"Every teacher has their own style, and if a teacher is forced to teach in a style that is not their own, they will not be as effective." (Mel)
Stimulation/ Fulfillment	Pedagogy	"It's a lot easier for me to continue going when I have a lot on my plate if it's stuff that I'm passionate about, or if it's stuff I think is meaningful." (Jada)
		"If I feel like it's a waste of my time, then I just get this mental block about it and can't be bothered with it." (Jada)
		"Why would you want to work in a place where everyone agrees with you all the time? That would get boring." (Mario)
		"I want to work in a school that I know is really hard, that I'm not

		ever gonna be bored." (Mario)
		"As long as there is human passion attached to anything, it could be interesting, but as soon as you take away that fire, I'm just not interested anymore." (Kristen)
		"I think being intellectually and emotionally fulfilled, and just content—it was never an issue for me that I wouldn't be making a lot of money." (Kristen)
Collegiality	Idealism	"I'm very loyal. If you're going to be there for me, I'm going to be there for you, regardless of whether you're acting ridiculously or not." (Jada)
		"I want to surround myself with people that are better than me, because that will make me better, right? If my peers are constantly a league above me, that will bring me up." (Mario)
		"If you have a different opinion, that's great, but be willing to at least talk about it, or willing to compromise." (Cassie)
		"We didn't jump back into the same flow that we had. . . . I said, 'This is just a me problem, and I need to get over it.' . . . I asked if we could sit down and talk about it." (Mel)
		"My role in collaborative events is definitely a driving and positive force, but I also work very hard to ensure that my voice is not the loudest voice, that my voice is not the voice that is speaking most often." (Mel)
Grateful clientele	Deficit mindset	"Do you actually believe you can make a difference? Do you actually believe they can overcome the social or cultural things that have prevented them from success in the past?" (Mel)
		"If you're doing TFA, you're definitely going into a bad area, an impoverished area, most likely a Title I school, with Title I kids, most likely minorities." (Cassie)
		"But they don't talk about [placement]'s meth problem, or poverty problem, or [gentrification]."* (Mario)
		"I'm comfortable in chaos, and I know TFA is gonna put me around a lot of chaos." (Mario)
		". . . worrying about the kids, and whether they were getting what they needed at home and at school—I didn't think I was emotionally ready to take that on." (Kristen)
	Pedagogy	"I had a summer camp student say to me one time, 'Why do you give me attention? Nobody does that.' I said, 'What do you mean?' and basically they told me that they're not attended to, they're not paid attention to, they're considered hopeless cases, nobody wants to fight for them." (Mel)

*specific references redacted to avoid identifying location and/or participant

Appendix B

Hero Teacher Narrative

Components	Key nodes	Characteristic responses
Hard work, heart	Exceptionalism	"I'm nowhere near as smart as a lot of people here, but I work harder." (Cassie)
		". . . on their emails, on their phones, very much ready to go. People who are better than me." (Jada)
		"I'm very passionate about things. I get really loud when I'm excited, and I constantly try and overachieve." (Mario)
		"I've never quit something because I was burned out, but I feel burned out all the time . . . but I don't let self-doubt stop me from achieving what I want to achieve." (Mario)
		"Improvise, adapt, overcome. Improvise, adapt, overcome. That's my mantra in life." (Mario)
		". . . too much on my plate . . . I just didn't sleep much. I probably should've cut something out of my schedule." (Kristen)
		"I think that's why I was chosen. I talked about the struggles I went through in the past year and made it out alive." (Kristen)
		"I think because of my experiences I'm much more intentional in terms of my attempts to put my future students first in every decision I make." (Mel)
Solo hero	Individual responsibility	"I had to laugh at myself watching season four of The Wire, and Prez starts making good relationships with his kids, they love him, they're learning through playing dice . . . granted, it was made-for-TV, but I think it spoke volumes to the way we approach education." (Jada)
		". . . unless somebody else rises to that, then I just naturally will do it [take over], because I'm like 'I don't trust any of you.' . . . I have control issues. I realize this." (Jada)
		"There's someone out there now that, if I'm going to compete for a job, that's refining their skills, that's had a head start, a two- or three-year head start maybe." (Mario)
		"A lot of times in group settings, people get really wishy-washy, and I'm just like 'Argh! Let's get rid of this bullshit and just figure it out right now!'" (Kristen)
		"Everyone is like, 'I don't know, what should we do?'—I get very impatient with that. I'm like, 'No. Action steps. What do we do?'" (Cassie)
		"I didn't know what to do. . . . I just fell completely short of my responsibility to help her, and I felt ridiculous about it, because I had been told . . . and it just didn't work. And I don't know what it was

		about, me or about the situation, but I just could not help her get to a better place." (Mel)
Romance	Pedagogy	"I'm not so much excited for like lesson planning and paperwork and stuff, but really like the relationships and connections I'll make, developing a bond with the community. I'm excited for that." (Jada)
		"I'm never gonna lower my expectations." (Mario)
		"I would love to be a role model . . . to influence people for the better. But I don't actually want to teach." (Kristen)
		"What do you do when you have that kid, and you feel like you've done everything, and you feel inadequate to help them? That's definitely a fear, because that can come along in any class." (Mel)
	Idealism	"I wanted to commit to the community that I'd be teaching in." (Mel)
		"I know this is hippie-sounding, but I genuinely want students to feel they are loved by me." (Cassie)
		"If I can develop [relationships] with like two of 30 students, a strong relationship where they're out of my classroom but I'm still there—I go to their games, I see them at Target and things like that . . . those kind of things, I definitely think, are really important to me." (Jada)
		"Whenever I think of great teachers I had, those amazing teachers, I want to believe they're as autonomous as possible in their classroom . . . and that's why they're great. Not because they had an administration breathing down their neck telling them how to get there." (Mario)
Unrealistic expectations	Individual responsibility	". . . helping to break down those behavioral or educational walls." (Mel) *cross-coded with White savior*
		". . . to solve urban education, we need people who are going to be in there longer than two years." (Cassie)
		"I think if you can get people who are—not necessarily highly qualified, I would not say that at all, but really passionate—I think that trumps qualifications, because you can learn a qualification. You can't just teach passion." (Jada) *cross-coded with Exceptionalism*
		"I want to work at something harder, something that's gonna keep me up at night and make me regret this decision." (Mario)
		"I get this feeling of dread, and I feel like I am not capable . . . and that definitely makes me feel inadequate. . . . I should know exactly what to do." (Mel)
White savior	Deficit mindset	"I think a lot of times it kind of perpetuates the idea of the white savior in a lot of ways—the idea that if you come from a good school, come from a wealthy background, you can go into a school that's primarily minority students, and that you can save that child or save that family." (Cassie)

. .

"I see myself as someone who will get into the classroom and see what's wrong with it." (Cassie)

"An idle mind is the devil's workshop; so give a person something to do and they're not going to have time to get themselves in trouble." (Jada)

"I'm very much the type of person who is gonna run into a burning building to see if anybody needs any help, and I think that is evident in . . . my excitement to go to Baltimore." (Jada)

"The [soldier] in me is like, 'I wanna be shot at.' Not literally anymore, but I want to—and maybe it's because I still have a romantic view of teaching—to have that purpose." (Mario)

"She kept asking about my past with underprivileged communities, which makes sense for TFA." (Kristen)

"So much of why TFA was even on my radar in the first place and why I want to be teaching in an urban place, because I was so advantaged . . . it makes me so angry, so that's how my educational experience contributes to this is that I see exactly how privileged I was, and I want to make sure that doesn't keep up." (Mel)

Appendix C
Post-Intentional Context: Performance Expectations

Theme	Key nodes	Characteristic responses
Concern for reputation	Prestige	"Of course I want that degree from Johns Hopkins University, the number one school of education in the country. Of course, like, why wouldn't I?" (Jada)
	Credibility	"A lot of people came here because they could've gone to Ivy League schools or things like that, but it was a financial thing, so I think that perception of being incredibly qualified and could-have-gone to these kinds of places just kind of shapes your perspective." (Jada)
		"A lot of us had a really hard time because we were the best of the best at our high schools, and then it's a humbling experience for the next four years." (Jada)
		"So there's that looming question, 'Did I fall through the cracks and land in TFA?'" (Mario)
	Legitimacy	"I don't tell anyone I'm doing TFA. I wanted it to be very quiet, especially on this campus." (Jada)
		"'You are some sellout who didn't get a job with Deloitte, so you're gonna do this as your backup." (Jada)
		"We have a very cynical population, very opinionated." (Jada)
Wanting a challenge	Tip of the spear	"People I know who do TFA . . . do 80 million things, and they're good at all of them, and people know it." (Jada)
		"I do have a, not like a drive, but a desire to be like at the tip of the spear." (Mario)
		"It's okay to be vulnerable and have hard days, but every day? That's a lot." (Kristen)
		"Everyone was like, 'This will be the hardest thing you will ever do in your life, so be ready for that'." (Kristen)
	Internalized pressure	"Burnout is a characteristic that brings all of us together and will continue to do so." (Jada)
		"I think kids at [college] don't want it to be so desperate. They want to work for it, and I think that really turns a lot of people off." (Jada)
		"I kept hearing extremely negative things about TFA . . . so I figured I would just figure it out for myself." (Mario)
		". . . keeping myself in check and making sure I don't fumble this and mess this up. Like, don't ever get complacent; don't ever get comfortable." (Mario)

Exceptionalism	Independence	"Anything people want to accomplish . . . they go out there, set it up, and accomplish it." (Kristen)
		"I was valedictorian of my high school, so it was like, 'She's going off to this fancy school, but no one had heard of [college] because my home state is an education sinkhole and people don't leave." (Cassie)
		"I finally was like, 'You've never wanted to do TFA. Where did this come from?'" (Cassie)
		"I think that a person can go through TFA and, through intentional instruction or intentional decisions, avoiding allowing those flaws to impact them." (Mel)
	Above the rest	". . . a little Napoleon complex in me, honestly, to try and be taller than I really am." (Mario)
		"I don't want to be another statistic, a 'I'm-just-one-more-person-that-gave-TFA-a-bad-name' keeping them from their mission." (Mario)
		"She flattered me, I guess. She talked about how she thought I would be a great fit." (Cassie)

Appendix D

Post-Intentional Context: Pressures on Decision-Making

Theme	Key nodes	Characteristic responses
TFA pressures	Reputation	"They have a lot of pipelines to then go to schools like Johns Hopkins or whatever." (Cassie)
		"There are good and bad things about TFA as an organization, definitely." (Mel)
		"TFA's flaws sort of play into how teachers teach very often, and that's very significant." (Mel)
	Recruitment	"[The recruiter] keeps emailing me saying, 'Can you simply reply with a Y or an N if you're interested?' They're literally groveling." (Jada)
		"'Hey, we're gonna pay for your graduate degree, do you wanna come?' Absolutely. Especially in a climate where kids are graduating with $200 grand-plus in loans." (Jada)
		"She had done her homework on me, too, so she knew my involvements on campus." (Cassie)
		"I think in a way I was manipulated." (Cassie)
		"I was tricked when I applied to the military, I'm trying my hardest not to be tricked this time. I've gone down that road before." (Mario)
		"I guess she was trying to get me to say certain things, but I didn't. She kept on rephrasing the questions." (Mario)
Personal pressures	Potential	"It's like 'Oh, she's going off to that school; it's gonna be great to see what she does,' and I think that's a lot of what played into me becoming a business major and stuff like that, because I wanted to prove myself." (Cassie)
		". . . and she's like, 'Coming from [college] and being the type of student you are, that is enough for you to then be able to go to some of those schools'." (Cassie)
	Performance	"I guess it's redundant being a trained teacher going into Teach For America. I look at it as like five more extra weeks of training." (Mario)
		"One of the TFA girls I talked to on the phone, who was teaching in Indiana, was telling me that she'd come home crying every day from work. That was terrifying." (Kristen)
Peer pressures	Prestige	"I also think that it's been really reinforced by the people I've been around here . . . that perception of being incredibly qualified." (Jada)
		"[The application process is] one of the only processes I've gone through where I've been able to talk about what I've accomplished in college without being weird about it." (Kristen)
	Politics	"I think this campus, more so than literally any other that I know of, has such a negative view of TFA." (Jada)

Pre-adulthood	Need for certainty	"No one looks down on you if you do TFA at [college]. They're just like, 'Oh, okay, they're a successful person who is now lost in their life and needs to find a path." (Kristen)
		"I have friends who rejected their TFA, and I'm like, 'Well, what are you applying for now?' And it has nothing to do with education. They see it as a route to take, that there's all these different routes." (Cassie)
	Temporariness	"It's just that right now, nothing in my life is permanent. . . . I'm not tied down to anything. I don't have a husband, I don't have children, I don't have a career yet." (Cassie)

Appendix E

Credibility

Participant	Theme	Key nodes	Characteristic responses
Cassie	Source of credibility	Experience	"I also recognize that it's important to be in the trenches, so to speak, first. I don't think that you can hold any weight as an administrator or as someone who's doing policy if you've not been in the classroom."
			"The university supervisor told me, 'You have the gift for teaching,' and that was just really nice to hear."
			"How will this benefit me if I already have my education degree? Why would I do this?"
Jada	Value	Leverage for leadership	". . . ended up doing The Hill thing . . . doing an MPP or JD program or something like that, rather than going the education route."
	Source of credibility	Experience	"I'm credible enough because I've earned my stripes in the classroom."
			". . . a bunch of lobbyists whose schools were amazing, and were very reputable, and who knew everybody on The Hill, but I didn't get the impression that they had classroom experience."
Kristen	Value	Job prospects	"But all the people I know are just doing it for 2 years and then going off to do their own thing, and I don't think that's really affecting anyone positively, because they're not staying in the system."
	Source of credibility	Experience	"I think any time you throw yourself into a stressful or hard situation and you make it through, you come out stronger and with more of a knowledge of yourself."
			"I realized I have no experience teaching kids. I have no idea—I didn't think I could provide them with the best experience, and I didn't think that was fair for them." (Kristen)
Mario	Value	Leverage for leadership	"Even if half of them left the classroom, that's 25,000 people that are now committed to enacting educational policy change in their careers."
			"You'll be equipped with all the tools to change education from wherever you end up afterwards."
			"I guess the aim is by being in the classroom and being a teacher, when you're in this position to make policy changes, you know what it's like to have been a teacher. I guess that is the goal."

	Source of credibility	Skill	"The Marine Corps felt natural once I learned my job—constant training and muscle memory. [Student teaching] is starting to feel natural. . . . I have the plan. I can do it."
			"I was never gonna do TFA or any program without doing teacher training first."
			"I don't personally feel comfortable with only 1 year, with 10 weeks of student teaching. I don't know how I could do 5 weeks."
Mel	Value	Preparation	"Sometimes those policymakers TFA provides are maybe not the best prepared for the educational fight."
			"They have this experience in a school that isn't representative of overall education in America."
			"I was very excited about having both sets of preparation . . . to see what the TFA preparation actually looks like. I do have friends who have done TFA . . . and what they told me was that they did not feel they were as prepared for the classroom."
			"I feel like I'm a very interesting case because I see a lot of TFA's good intentions, and I also see a lot of ways that it kind of fails. . . . I think no matter how good-intentioned and good-acting a program TFA is, regardless, it deprofessionalizes the profession of teaching, because it says you can learn how to be a teacher in 6 weeks plus some professional development, and I think that's wrong."
	Source of credibility	Skill	"I wasn't asked any questions about my experiences working with kids. . . . They wanted to hear about me as a leader more than as someone who had worked with kids."
			"I don't care that you went into that classroom with the best intentions in the world as part of a positive program. I want to know what you actually did. How did you actually make a difference, other than just standing in front of those kids with a good mindset?"
			"I think the idea is to find people who will be good teachers for a while and then will become policy advocates. So I think they're kind of looking for the best of both worlds, but ultimately the majority of the time end up finding people who will be the policy advocates, instead of necessarily the best classroom teachers."

Appendix F
Convenience

Participant	Theme	Key nodes	Characteristic responses
Cassie	Benefit	Plan/no plan	"I think at that point I was so ready to have a plan. I was so ready to know what I was going to do next year."
			"… at this point I'm like, 'Whomever wants to give me a job, that'd be great!'"
			"It was honestly nice to feel like I had done something productive [to prepare] for the next year of my life."
			"Well, you've applied for something … if everything else fails … everything else goes wrong, you could still have TFA."
		Job search	"I'm not the normal applicant. Because I have been in the classroom, I do have my education degree, so really what they can offer me is an early placement, because I would've known in January."
			"I was like, 'This is something I could do. I could find out early. I could know in January. If I can teach in an urban area, I can teach anywhere.'" *cross-coded with Deficit mindset*
Jada	Benefit	Plan/no plan	"'Alright, let me do this, have it in my back pocket just in case I don't find something else that tickles my fancy even more.'"
		Graduate admissions	"My interest area is urban discipline programs and how it contributes to school push-out, and this is what I want to do my research on in my PhD program, and this is why I want to get the JD as well to work on policy."
			"I was really excited about Philly because their program was Penn—and I have a sick obsession with Penn."
		Job search	"I sort of had this epiphany where I started to look at TFA as much more of a middle man kind of organization. . . . They put me in a school, I go to the events, and check the boxes so that they help pay for x, y, and z."
Kristen	Benefit	Plan/no plan	"I've always had a strict plan for myself, and now I suddenly don't have that, and it's really freaking me out. . . . Now I'm just applying to things left and right, seeing what's happening."
			"I applied to TFA on a whim, so I was never really very gung-ho. I jumped straight from randomly filling out an application online to the final interview in 2 weeks, which was terrifying."
			"It's something to do after school if you've been involved on campus and don't really have a life plan."
			". . . a time filler while you figure out what you want to do with your life."

Mario	Benefit	Job search	"I wanted to leave [the state], but I wanted to go some place that matters."
		Graduate admissions	". . . then afterwards go to law school, and a really good law school this time, because I did TFA for 2 years—I don't identify with that, but in my head that is the traditional TFA applicant."
Mel	Benefit	Plan/no plan	"Like, just apply, why not?"
			"I do still think you meet people who are doing TFA because they don't know what to do after college, so 'I may as well go teach for two years, I can help kids, I can be part of this educational movement.'"
			"I think it's very rare that a TFA applicant is deciding whether or not to take the position or preference this city, or so on, because they're thinking about their students. They're thinking about themselves."

Appendix G

Credential

Participant	Theme	Key nodes	Characteristic responses
Cassie	Against	Authenticity	"Are you really focused on their quality of life, or on your quality of life after you leave and you can say, 'I did TFA,' and that'll help you get into grad school or whatever?"
			"I think [TFA] encourages the idea that if you are intelligent and you go to a good school, you can go into a bad area and make a difference." c*ross-coded with Deficit mindset*
			"They're going to ask me really pointed questions about education, like, 'What's your theory of discipline? How do you feel about this and that?' They didn't really ask those questions, but I think that's what caused me to be apprehensive at first. . . . I didn't feel like you had to have any educational expertise to answer them."
		Reputation	"I remember constantly being congratulated, people saying 'That is so noble!'"
Jada	Meaning	Prestige	"I'm here because I want to be here, treat me fairly and I'll be a great name for you; I'll be the next—I don't know, they have so many very impressive alums, so."
			"The alumni network is absurd. Like, lots of very famous people have done TFA and you don't even know it."
	Transaction	Ivy League degree	". . . these kind of AmeriCorps-type programs that give you that grit that you can launch yourself into a really reputable graduate program, top-tier graduate program."
			". . . put you through the wringer for a year or several, and then . . . go on to master's programs, PhD programs."
Kristen	Meaning	Prestige	"When I got accepted, [my mom] was like, 'I was talking to people at work, and they talked about how great TFA is and how employers think so highly of it, so I think you should do it.'"
			"I think there's a certain level of prestige."
	Transaction	Job prospects	"What really appealed to me was the fact that they said that after the two years, they would help me find a job or help me with the next step."
Mario	Meaning	Mission	". . . the people that joined to get their MBA and how they're principals and executive vice presidents of companies. Hopefully they're in positions where they're enacting the change they want in education through their career now."

	Transaction	Master's degree	"TFA is really committed to continuing your education. . . . For students that probably wouldn't have gone to graduate schools, that's there—the resources to do that."
			"I don't view myself as like a traditional TFA applicant. . . . The traditional TFA applicant is someone that is using TFA as a platform for other career goals." *cross-coded with Exceptionalism*
Mel	Against	Authenticity	"I wanted to get my master's degree before I went and taught."
			"I wanted to have that preparation and not have the stress of going through programs while I was teaching."
			"I applied to TFA and for the master's program both at the end of my junior year, so I had applied for both simultaneously."
			"[The interviewer] couldn't identify a time where he had made an impact in a child's life, and yet he was somehow qualified to determine what people would make good CMs."
		Reputation	"I just had my mind absolutely blown when my interviewer told me he couldn't tell me of a time when he had made a difference in a kid's life, and I was very angry."