



Research paper

“I knew I had to leave”: A Bourdieusian analysis of why Teach For America teachers quit early

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ABSTRACT

Educational stakeholders have long been concerned about teacher attrition's negative effects. Teach For America (TFA), in particular, has garnered attention for this reason, yet many of its teachers quit even before the program's two-year commitment ends. Drawing on Bourdieu, this longitudinal qualitative study explores heretofore neglected insights from TFA teachers ($n = 5$) who leave early. We find that while quitters are motivated to teach, their forms of cultural and social capital within the educational field lead many to quit. The paper argues that some of these limitations are attributable to TFA's programmatic design, raising critical questions about its continued approach.

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1. Introduction

Each year, approximately one third of U.S. teachers decide to leave the profession, and teacher attrition is particularly acute in schools with higher percentages of low-income and minoritized students (Boyd et al., 2011; Heineke et al., 2014; Ingersoll et al., 2018). Teach For America (TFA) was launched in 1990 in part to address teacher shortages as well as perceived problems with the educational system, *writ large* (Kopp, 2001). One of the criticisms levied most frequently against TFA, however, is that its corps members (CMs) rarely stay beyond their two-year commitment; indeed, most leave the profession within five years (Boyd et al., 2012; Redding & Henry, 2019). As such, TFA may contribute to – rather than ameliorate – the problem of teacher turnover (Anderson, 2013, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2018). Yet these critiques presume that CMs complete their two-year commitments. While research suggests that most do (Boyd et al., 2012; Redding & Henry, 2019), this accounting of the relationship between teacher attrition and TFA has

frequently neglected the significant number of CMs who fail to teach for even two years. For a variety of reasons – and often operating against immense organizational and social pressures – many CMs quit.

In focusing closely on the narratives of TFA ‘quitters’, this paper makes a unique contribution to research on TFA and similar alternative certification programs. It draws on longitudinal interviews conducted across two time periods with a group of CMs ($n = 5$) to highlight the complexity of their experiences working with and eventually quitting TFA and their teaching placements. The paper further contributes to the literature by employing a Bourdieusian lens to analyze the habitus and capital possessed and utilized by CMs within their particular social field (or not). We argue that the degrees and forms of capital these CMs could access – shaped by their dispositions, practices, and experiences, as well as the TFA program itself – significantly informed their decisions to quit before the completion of their two-year commitments.

2. Teach For America

2.1. History and structure

In 1989, Wendy Kopp used her senior thesis to draft a plan for a national Teacher Corps that would take the form of TFA, placing its first cohort in 1990. As Kopp (1989) then noted, the organization would “bill itself as an emergency response to a shortage of experienced, qualified

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teachers” (p. 50). These CMs, initially recruited from elite higher education institutions, were espoused to be America’s ‘best and brightest’ (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016, 2021). Since then, TFA’s “aura of status and selectivity” (Kopp, 2001, p. 8), bolstered in part through the perceived ‘elitiness’ of its recruits, as well as its emphasis on a particular form of habitus – embodied in the “relentless pursuit” of results (Thomas & Lefebvre 2018) – have constituted key components of the program’s approach to teacher recruitment, retention, and educational reform. These emphases may also factor into the attrition rates of its teachers.

Once admitted, TFA CMs complete a fast-track summer training, typically five weeks in duration. It is notoriously intense and involves instructors and coaches – almost exclusively comprised of current or recent CMs – supporting the learning and development of the incoming cohort as they apply “just-in-time” knowledge to summer school courses (Carter et al., 2011, p. 878). CMs then move to their assigned region and are supposed to teach for two years in high-poverty rural or urban contexts. Here, managers of teacher leadership development (MTLDs) observe, track, and support CMs as they (learn to) teach. Many CMs simultaneously complete licensure coursework, often at more traditional teacher education institutions, thereby occupying a liminal role as ‘synchronous-service teachers’ (Thomas & Lefebvre, 2020), positioned between pre-service and in-service teachers but requiring the demands of both.

Overall, TFA teachers reflect a small but significant percentage of the nation’s teachers; conversations surrounding their recruitment, placement, and tenure reflect and shape broader educational discourses and practices (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2021; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2019; Thomas & Baxendale, 2022). As Donaldson and Johnson (2010) note, “although their national numbers are small, the local effect of TFA teachers in low-income settings is potentially great” (p. 300), particularly in large, urban school districts that partner with TFA (e.g., Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia). Indeed, because they are concentrated in under-served districts and “instruct some of the nation’s poorest students” (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010, p. 303), CMs constitute an important cohort of teachers to study empirically. TFA and its alumni have also become major players in the realm of educational policy (see Jacobsen et al., 2016; Trujillo et al., 2017). In sum, TFA has influenced comparable programs, as well as broader policies and debates within education (Thomas & Baxendale, 2022), all significant reasons to better understand the experiences of CMs.

2.2. Research on TFA quitters

A robust body of literature examines various aspects of teacher attrition (see Madigan & Kim, 2021), with some studies including TFA teachers in their samples. For instance, Boyd et al. (2011, 2012) found 80% of CMs in New York City left teaching by their fourth year, with school administrators playing a sizeable role in their decisions. Elsewhere, Redding and Henry (2019) examined teacher turnover during and at the end of the school year, finding that “compared with other entry pathways, TFA teachers are the least likely to turn over during their first 2 years” but then “turn over at incredibly high rates at the end of their 2-year commitment” (p. 229). Finally, Heineke et al. (2014) used mixed methods to examine TFA alumni trajectories *after* their two-year commitments. Their generative typology of leavers (31.5%), lingerers (17.8%), and lasters (50.7%) is useful in considering a range of trajectories, though by design their study excluded those who quit before completing TFA. These and other studies suggest that CMs typically present a stable presence in some of the nation’s most underserved schools, if only for a short time.

Other studies focused specifically on TFA have also addressed attrition, though empirical research on TFA teachers who do not complete their two-year commitment is scarce. In a rare quantitative example, Donaldson and Johnson (2010) included a small number of respondents who quit TFA in their study of teaching assignments. Their findings suggested CMs who failed to complete their 2-year TFA commitment

may have been “especially challenged by the circumstances in which they teach” (p. 319), something explored in more depth below. A smaller, mixed-methods study by Gottfried and Straubhaar (2015) noted one CM quit early, but the authors did not address their experiences. Blumenreich and Rogers’ (2016, 2021) study of CMs from the inaugural 1990 cohort arguably comes the closest to our own qualitative analysis by including six CMs who quit within the first year. The authors briefly discuss how guilt, prior commitments to TFA, and feelings of failure were present in CM decisions; however, the experiences of quitters were neither central to, nor elaborated in this work with the first TFA cohort. The same is true for other research on TFA that references TFA quitters, but does not systematically explore their experiences and perceptions (e.g., Brewer, 2014; Brewer & de Marrais, 2015; Crawford-Garrett, 2013; Ness, 2004; Straubhaar & Gottfried, 2016; Veltri, 2010). Kramer-Holland’s (2023) study is unique in that it focuses specifically on the experiences of one quitter whose contract was not renewed after his first year; however, this work attends primarily to teacher emotions, rather than theorizing and exploring factors that contribute to the quitting phenomenon more broadly. In sum, literature analyzing and theorizing the specific experiences of TFA ‘quitters’ is a notable research “blank spot” (Wagner, 2010) – especially given robust scholarship on other aspects of the TFA program (see Anderson, 2020).

This research ‘blank spot’ is somewhat unsurprising. While data on the size and acceptance rates of TFA cohorts are widely available (see Belsha, 2022; Mays, 2019), recent and reliable data on TFA quitters is not. TFA’s brand value relies in part on its cultural capital and could suffer if higher-than-expected quitting rates were widely known by potential schools, donors, or even future CMs. Of what information is available, Kopp (2001) notes in her first book that depending on the year, “between 85 and 90 percent” of CMs “completed their two-year commitment to teach” (p. 152). Elsewhere and offering a unique, longitudinal, and comparatively ‘recent’ perspective among publicly-available data, Baker (2016) reported TFA’s ‘completion rate by corps year’ in an *Ed Week* piece. We converted these data into a bar graph (Fig. 1), which suggests the percentage of CMs who fail to complete their two-year commitments varies from 5% in 1990, to 21% in 2002.¹ Yet, other sources seem to conflict with these data. For example, Donaldson (2012) estimated that approximately 5% of CMs in the 2000–2002 cohorts left in their first year of teaching. Elsewhere, Chira (1991) reported that nearly 11% of the 1990 corps quit during or after the first year, while Ness (2004) suggests that more than 30% of the first TFA cohort did not complete their two-year commitments.

Suffice to say, even as TFA’s corps size has shrunk considerably since 2015 (Mays 2019), understanding the experience of TFA quitters remains essential to considering its impact. As Redding and Henry (2019) and others have found, while CMs may initially be less likely to leave their placements than other traditionally-prepared or alternative-entry teachers, they still quit in significant numbers. Moreover, as Matsui (2015) notes, “both as individuals and as a sizeable group they [quitters] would have much to contribute to the discussion on TFA and reform movements” (p. 14). Our study therefore speaks specifically to the quitter phenomenon and seeks to explore in detail their processes and reasons for exiting TFA. Ultimately, the experiences of these ‘quitters’ explicate some of the nuances of teacher attrition, expanding what we know about the entangled set of factors that lead novice teachers to leave or persist in the profession.

3. Theoretical framework

To achieve these ends, we draw on Bourdieu’s mutually constitutive concepts of cultural and social capital, habitus, and field. Together they form an interdependent theory of practice that helps explain how individuals accrue, deploy, and benefit from particular assets across

¹ This seems to be the most recent data available.

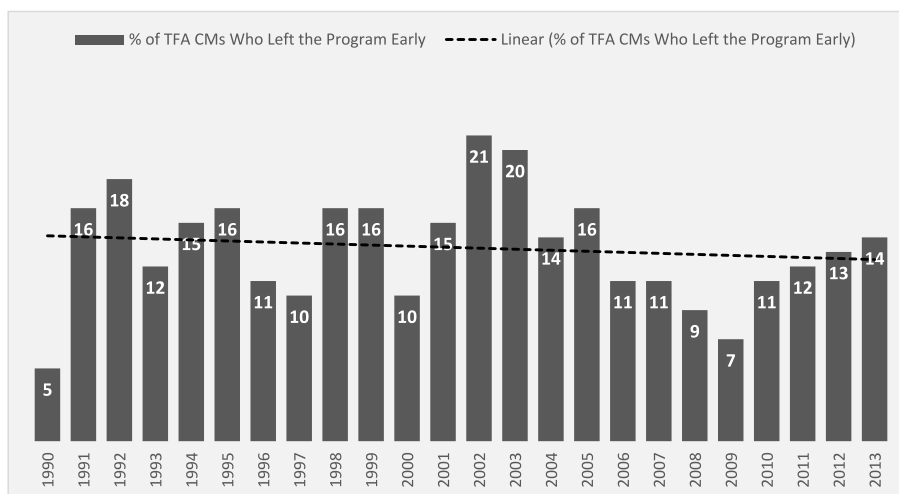


Fig. 1. Percentage of TFA CMs who did not complete their 2-year commitment. Source: Teach For America, retrieved from Baker (2016).

different contexts (i.e., fields). Bourdieu's theories also help us analyze how certain patterns and structures are maintained over time (e.g., across varying experiences of quitting), sometimes in conjunction/contrast with individual agency. Actions and choices made by individuals therefore reflect the complex intersections of their personal dispositions and access to various opportunities (see Bourdieu, 2002). In this section, we define core concepts, applying them to our exploration of CM decisions to quit TFA.

At its most basic, conceptions of capital concern the assets one can use and exchange within a particular field. There are multiple forms of capital, however, and many different fields within which they have value. Bourdieu (1986) describes cultural capital, for example, as resulting in part from educational outcomes, conferred on an individual through a combination of their endogenous (e.g., inherited) and exogenous (e.g., financial, locational) characteristics. Here, Lareau and Weininger's (2003) explication of Bourdieu's work is particularly helpful; they contend that cultural capital constitutes "simultaneously two forms of competence on the part of the holder ... a technical dimension and a status dimension" and that "these two forms of competence cannot be disentangled" (p. 581). Moreover, what makes cultural capital valuable – or as Bourdieu terms it, 'profitable' – is its perceived scarcity and relevance to a particular social field or environment (e.g., a school or community). To look at a classic example, an educational degree confers on its recipient both status – relative to the granting institution – and technical skills. Yet how a person presents themselves and is perceived by others within particular social fields, reflecting or diverging from expected norms, also plays a role in their successful use of cultural capital. Thus, cultural capital is not necessarily transferable across settings.

For the purposes of this study, these conceptualizations are especially helpful because TFA's discursive and programmatic approach is deeply rooted in this assumed transferability: CMs are recruited because they are perceived to be the 'best and the brightest' based largely on cultural capital accrued while completing an undergraduate degree (see Anderson, 2013; Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016, 2021; Kopp, 1989, 2001). Still, a TFA recruit with an otherwise prestigious degree, may face obstacles related to their limited "technical capacity" and "social competence" within the educational field (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 581). Most CMs bring with them scant previous experience in education and related fields, often lacking both the educational theory and hands-on pedagogical tools that are traditionally offered by pre-service teacher education programs (Carter et al., 2011; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2019; Veltri, 2010). Accordingly, if CMs are unable to transpose their existing capital into practicable knowledge, skills, and dispositions

necessary for success – in a sense 'classroom capital' (see also Yin & Mu, 2020) – they may quit. In fact, CMs' extant cultural capital may be perceived as insufficient or even a liability within the educational field (Anderson et al., 2022; Thomas, 2018) or in required licensure coursework taken at traditional teacher education institutions (Thomas & Lefebvre, 2020).

CM success also depends on social capital, which Bourdieu (1986) defines as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network ... which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit" (p. 22). Perhaps paradoxically, while TFA intentionally recruits CMs for their cultural capital, they typically lack social capital within the educational field. This is a seemingly inevitable outcome of TFA's model: if CMs were traditionally-trained teachers, who tend to be hyperlocal in their job preferences (see Reinger, 2012), they may have had more and/or differentiated forms of support. Teachers who complete four-year education degrees and go on to teach in the same or nearby communities typically have wide-ranging connections to education professionals (e.g., former professors, practicum supervisors, and school-based mentors) to contact for mentorship. Instead, many CMs end up in regions far from their places of origin and operate within TFA's semi-autonomous network, primarily supported by novices with only a few additional years of experience. As a result, CMs' social capital (i.e., their connections to other experienced educators and networks of support) is initially contingent upon continued participation in TFA. There is one further point to make here: as Bourdieu (1986) notes, social capital's value is dependent upon the durability and depth of its network. In other words, individuals can only draw 'credit' from the sum of existing capital within a particular network. Consequently, TFA's 'just-in-time' model for both teachers and mentors – as we explore in this paper – may limit the resources its members can access.

Personal characteristics play a further role in whether CMs quit. Theorizing this aspect of the quitter experience, we turn finally to habitus, which has been defined as "long-lasting" and "acquired characteristics which are the product of social conditions" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 29). Drawing on Bourdieu (1977), Reay (2004) writes that habitus "demonstrate[s] the ways in which not only is the body in the social world, but also the ways in which the social world is in the body" (p. 432). These "pre-reflective" ways of being (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 19) and habituated personal characteristics serve a mediating role important to understanding the unique motivations and experiences of quitters, particularly as distinct from TFA CMs who stay. For instance, by design TFA explicitly chooses CMs who readily adopt the organization's core ethics, which include 'relentless pursuit' and setting of 'audacious

goals' (i.e., TFA speak). As we will see, this initial habitus alignment may be insufficient as CMs navigate severely under-resourced schools (i.e., their new field) with a dearth of resources, experience, and networks.

CM decisions to quit TFA ultimately indicate a confluence of factors deserving deeper investigation. This leads us to one final point where, as a set of consistent yet adaptable dispositions, we understand that habitus "may be changed by history, that is by new experiences, education, or training" (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 29). Indeed, some CMs came to believe that their desires to work in under-resourced communities – and to potentially teach longer-term – were incompatible with their TFA commitments. There are limits to one's adaptability that are related to and dependent on both capital and field; corps members' decisions must be understood in conjunction with both internalized experiences and current circumstances, leading to particular practices, including quitting. In sum and as evidenced throughout the subsequent sections, we posit that a Bourdieusian framing is both original and useful in analyzing the TFA quitting phenomenon and perhaps teacher attrition more broadly, allowing us to see important themes across these CM experiences that point toward potential programmatic gaps.

4. Research methodology: a longitudinal qualitative study

This paper stems from a larger, longitudinal qualitative study of CM experiences. These CMs were placed in a TFA region in the Midwestern US and recruited into the study following completion of graduate school coursework taught by us as teacher educators at a university partnering with TFA. The first phase of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 36 CMs from four different cohorts, conducted between 2012 and 2014. Several years later, we sought participation in a second phase of interviews, conducted in 2017–2019. As the participants were former students, in both rounds we were able to build on our previous relational rapport, common understandings, and prior conversations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

Of the 36 CMs who initially participated, 24 volunteered for the second round (66.6% response rate). As the broader project evolved, varied aspects of the TFA experience came to the fore, including CMs' identities (Thomas & Lefebvre 2018; Thomas & Mockler, 2018), engagement with teacher education (Thomas & Lefebvre, 2020), and experiences in TFA and their schools (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017; Thomas, 2018). Elsewhere, we have reflected on using Bourdieu to understand CM experiences (Thomas & Lefebvre, 2024), and most recently we became interested in the CMs who quit, wondering why they chose to leave and how they subsequently made sense of that decision. Specifically, we sought to understand:

1. How did CMs describe their quitting experiences and rationales?
2. Which factors did they believe influenced their decisions?
3. Over time, how did CMs make sense of their decisions to quit?

4.1. Research participants

Among the sample, 5 CMs exited TFA before the end of their two-year commitment: one quit in the spring of her first year (Kari), three left after their first year (Charles, Martha, and Katherine), and one left several weeks before the end of their second year (Brooke). All were interviewed twice, once either during or immediately following their TFA experience, and again several years later. Table 1 outlines core demographic details about the research participants (all names are pseudonyms), although more specific information has been intentionally withheld to maintain anonymity. As is common, the CMs discussed in this paper were recent college graduates when they joined TFA.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol

Table 1
Research participants.

Name	Gender Identity	Racial Identity (ies)	Undergraduate Institution	School Placement and Level	Quitting Timeframe
Brooke	F	White/ Asian	Large, Competitive Land-Grant [Public R1]	Alternative High School	Near the End of Year 2
Charles	M	White	Religiously- Affiliated, Small Liberal Arts College [SLAC]	Charter Middle School	After Year 1
Kari	F	Latina	SLAC	Charter High School	Middle of Year 1
Katherine	F	White	SLAC	Charter Elementary School	After Year 1
Martha	F	White	Religiously- Affiliated SLAC	Public Middle School	After Year 1

(Rubin & Rubin, 2011), audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Further, we wrote analytic memos immediately after the interviews, capturing our initial impressions and notable themes as they developed (Miles et al., 2014). During the second interview phase, we also engaged in analytical discussions about the data shortly after each interview. This type of longitudinal qualitative research is necessarily nuanced, as time itself "interacts and interplays with the collection and analysis of qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2003, p. 5), and our iterative approach allowed us to better understand the complexities of the quitter experience, which has been commonly overlooked in teacher attrition/migration literature (e.g., Grant & Brantlinger, 2023). For instance, three CMs were teaching through TFA during the first interview but had quit by the second. Because our research design allowed us to speak with these CMs before or shortly after their exits, and again several years later, we were able to capture their evolving thoughts, an affordance not available in previous studies.

To analyze these 10 interviews across Phase 1 and Phase 2, we began by reading each in its entirety to explore how CMs made sense of quitting. In line with our research questions, particular attention was paid to interview questions focused on CM trajectories, including: "What have you done in the years since your TFA experience?" and "If you're not teaching currently, what led you away?" Our flexible interview protocol also allowed us to follow interesting topics (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) as we asked CMs to talk about how they decided to leave, why they left when they did, and what the implications of early-exit were in the short and longer term. Finally, it is worth noting that we conducted a single interview (Phase 1 only) with one additional quitter, but here prioritize these 5 CM narratives because we have considerably more longitudinal data related to their experiences.²

After this initial, collaborative analysis, we each re-read the first and second interviews from the same participant, then discussed our emerging interpretations of the CMs' reasons for quitting. From these pairs, we developed a series of 'quitting narratives.' Finally, after writing the findings and 'quitter' narratives, we shared an early draft of this paper with three of the five participants, all of whom provided valuable feedback, including informing and encouraging our usage of the term 'quitter.'

It is also important to note our own positionalities as researchers. Both of us have worked as K-12 classroom teachers in public schools, albeit in different subjects, age/grade levels, and U.S. states. Thomas entered the teaching profession after a traditional teacher education

² This interviewee did not respond to multiple invitations for participation in a second interview and the longitudinal component of the study.

program, while Lefebvre was herself a TFA corps member, though in a different region and several years before this study was conducted. Lefebvre identifies as a White, cis-hetero female from a middle-class background; Thomas identifies as a White, cis-hetero male from a middle-class background. As critically reflexive researchers, we engaged in frequent discussions about how our various positionalities intersected with the entire research process, from project design through data collection and analysis to writing and dissemination.

4.3. Limitations

There are a few study limitations worth noting. First, TFA is neither static (Penner, 2019) nor monolithic (Anderson, 2019); therefore, experiences of CMs, and likewise quitters, may vary across TFA region, school type, subject/grade level, etc. Second, because these five CMs took very different paths subsequent to TFA, they may have reflected differently on their experiences, particularly as their time post-TFA shaped their self-perceptions (Saldaña, 2003), something we address in our findings. Third, while this study relates to other larger-scale studies where quitters either disappear entirely or are discussed only briefly, it was intentionally designed to closely analyze the experiences of a few quitters and therefore the sample is not generalizable. That said, a larger set of quitter narratives might yield further insights, and we would encourage future research to build on our analysis.

Finally, in writing this paper we grappled with which terminology best describes CMs who choose to exit TFA early. We ultimately adopted the term ‘quitters’ to distinguish this group from those who complete their two-year commitment and then leave the education profession (i.e., Heineke et al.’s [2014] “leavers”). We believe the term ‘quitters’ reflects both the challenging set of factors that surround the early-leaver phenomenon as well as the finality of this decision, given the considerable consequences of exiting the TFA program (explored in the discussion). Additionally, as suggested by one CM whom we interviewed and reviewed this paper, the term ‘quitter’ can itself be empowering: quitting suggests agency in choosing to leave TFA when they did.

5. Research findings: changing plans

In these findings, we foreground the experiences of the five CMs who were interviewed twice. Our analysis aims to balance broader themes, analyzed through a Bourdieusian lens, with the particularities of their personal narratives of joining, persisting, and eventually leaving TFA.

5.1. Martha – “TFA didn’t really allow room for that ...”

Martha joined TFA due to its espoused social justice mission and the chance it offered to try teaching as a career (see also Nesje et al., 2018), indicating a personal habitus that was seemingly well-aligned with the organization’s mission. Yet despite her degree in social work and desire to work with youth, Martha left at the end of her first year when her placement school cut her position in early spring. TFA tried to convince her to stay, but regional staff also failed to inform her of the somewhat common practice of cutting teachers for budgetary reasons, only to rehire them before the next year. Still, she decided to leave: “I found that out [the position was cut] around spring break time and I was like, well, I think I’ll probably use that as an easy way to just be done teaching then.”

Martha’s response first arose from her increasing frustration with TFA’s support for CMs, and second from their expectation that she focus almost exclusively on students’ academic success, and not on the myriad external factors that might interfere with their learning and engagement. She explained, “I really didn’t like my PD [i.e., MTL], or whatever he was called – my direct supervisor in TFA who’d been through the school, and came out and assessed my work here. We just didn’t click very well.” She described a lack of emotional support from her MTL that she felt mirrored TFA’s inattention to the externalities faced by

students. She said her MTL was:

... all about, “You do it this way.” And “Fix it this way – Does that make sense? Does that make sense?” He was always asking me that question, like, “Does that make sense?” Like, “I just solved your problem, does that make sense how you can do it my way?” But [he] didn’t give any emotional support. It was very logical: “This is what needs to be done to be fixed.” And, like, yeah, that sounds great in theory. But I’ve tried.

The forms (or quality) of professional mentoring provided through TFA’s required interactions with MTLs were clearly not working for Martha, yet she lacked additional social capital within education that may have enabled her to seek out alternative mentorship (see Demir, 2021). This MTL’s technicist approach and Martha’s lack of other professional connections are somewhat common, and broadly reflective of TFA’s programmatic design (see Crawford-Garrett, 2013; Matsui, 2015; Veltri, 2010). Since few CMs complete education programs or teaching preparation, many CMs have limited contacts within the education profession upon their commencement of teaching (something Katherine notes below); moreover, many CMs move away from home to join TFA, leaving other networks and connections behind. It is also worth noting Martha’s lack of cultural capital (in the form of social competence) within the educational field related to teacher hiring and firing during budget crises. Neither she nor her MTL seemed to have known about this relatively common practice, knowledge which could have altered her decision.

Second and relatedly, Martha grew frustrated with a perceived mismatch between TFA’s results-focused habitus and the realities of teaching in an under-served school. She felt unable to address students’ “deep-seated needs,” and instead pushed to fixate on immediate, data-oriented solutions. In the first interview, Martha indicated that she “wanted to help students within the social work role” and to address the everyday challenges they faced. She gave an example of a student who was frequently tardy or absent as he moved between homeless shelters. Though she instinctively seemed to prefer more student-centered pedagogies, Martha felt attending to this situation in some ways conflicted with TFA’s ‘no excuses’ approach (see Golann, 2015):

[There were] so many things that I also wanted to help with, but ... as a teacher I didn’t feel like I could and, like, didn’t want [students] to use [those things] as an excuse. But I just felt like I had to be both. TFA is, like, just classroom focused – just academic focused ... It was really hard for me because I really wanted to be emotionally involved with the students, too, and TFA didn’t really allow room for that.

Together, this mismatch between Martha’s preferred habitus as a classroom teacher and TFA’s technicist approach left her feeling as though quitting was the only option, and one that would ultimately enable her to better serve kids.

5.2. Charles – “I feel like a quitter just for having those ideas ...”

Charles never intended to leave TFA. At the beginning of his first interview, he confidently indicated his intention to complete the program and potentially teach long term. Like Martha, Charles was drawn to TFA’s social justice mission and wanted to fight poverty through education. He was excited to be placed at a charter school serving an immigrant and religious minority population. Later, when asked what he intended to do after TFA, Charles offered a more complicated response:

I thought I would keep teaching, give it chance after chance after chance. Everyone says, you know, “Just fight the good fight and carry on and maybe change schools within the [city].” Maybe it’s just the school. But I’m really thinking it’s just me ... I wonder if we had more support ... if I wouldn’t be thinking, or if I wouldn’t be seriously considering this [other job]. I don’t know ...

He concluded by saying “I feel like a quitter just for having those ideas and I hate that. I didn’t think it would come this quick, those ideas.” Charles’ ambiguity reflected a challenging first year: working in a school with scant curricular and classroom management support, Charles’ classroom was so “crammed in” that he was certain it violated the fire code. Nonetheless, Charles felt he had to fully commit to his students, TFA, and teaching – at least for two years – even as he simultaneously felt a growing inclination to quit. In this way, his habitus of ‘relentless pursuit’ was challenged by the realities of teaching in an under-resourced charter school.

By the second interview, Charles was working for an international development start-up. When asked why he left TFA after his first year, Charles reported that his contract was not renewed; the school’s director felt a prominent family would pull their children if he remained, citing classroom management concerns. According to Charles, the charter school administration complied because it struggled with student turnover and the related precarity of state funding. Although he could have appealed the decision (to whom was unclear to him), he also lacked support from TFA. Charles narrated TFA’s response – “we cannot advocate for you, cannot support you” – and said they declined to provide another placement. It is certainly possible Charles legitimately should have been let go; even those who receive pre-service training through traditional undergraduate programs may find teaching to be a poor professional fit once in the classroom. Nonetheless, it also seems reasonable that in its role recruiting, placing, and supporting first-year teachers, TFA could have provided additional critical and early assistance to ameliorate or prevent this situation. Here Charles’s limited field-specific cultural capital (i.e., his technical capacity and social competence) and lack of social capital (i.e., additional mentors and advocates) factored into his early exit.

Charles eventually decided, “if this is how it is going to be, then I would rather take other opportunities and move on. And stop banging my head against the wall.” Reflecting back on TFA, he commented:

It was like having this watchful body of TFA representatives that were like, “We’re here to help!” and we [the CMs] didn’t feel that way. It was more like, “We’re here to help you – and stab you in the back.” [Laughs.] No. It didn’t feel awful, but we were being constantly evaluated as to whether or not we were really worth their support.

In contrast to Martha, who felt she had made the best choice, Charles seemed rueful; he interpreted quitting as a personal failure that challenged his sense of agency and self. Most importantly, Charles was frustrated by a perceived lack of support from both TFA and his placement school (staffed largely by TFA CMs and other similarly inexperienced teachers) in building successful working relationships between teachers, students, and families.

5.3. Kari – “I knew it wasn’t a good fit from the beginning ...”

Sometime between scheduling our first interview in March and participating in it less than a month later, Kari quit TFA. The first interview therefore captured her most immediate responses to leaving, wherein Kari noted she “wasn’t a good fit from the beginning” and “started really considering [quitting] on day one.” She attributed this to her discomfort as a TFA CM of color (see [Lapayese et al., 2014](#)), and her tendency to be drained by intensive social interactions, indications of a misalignment of habitus between her and TFA. These challenges were compounded by a paucity of even basic resources at her school. Kari described herself as itinerant, moving between classrooms each period. She reported receiving virtually no curriculum and taught upwards of 35 students/class, well over the 25-student limit advertised by her charter school, which was described by other CMs in our study as a ‘shit show’ ([Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017](#)):

I was freaking out because I didn’t have a curriculum, I didn’t have resources, I didn’t have a desk. So, I would say the first couple months was just trying to keep my shit together, honestly. To put it nicely, just keep myself together and pretend that everything was okay.

Immensely frustrated, Kari asked to teach elsewhere but was told by TFA she had to complete her two years at the same school, or quit. So, drawing on social capital from a different, non-educational field, she took an opportunity to work in another profession and left.

While Kari’s assistant principal (a TFA alumna) took her decision in stride, responding to Kari, “It happens all the time”, her MTLD was shocked – though Kari had previously discussed quitting – and strongly encouraged her to stay:

MTLD: So, there’s nothing we can do to make you stay?

Kari: No. I mean, you could fix the problems here. That would be amazing.

Shortly after resigning, Kari received an email from TFA about departure logistics. It noted she was responsible for immediately repaying the relocation loan she had received from TFA and that she would not qualify for an AmeriCorps grant. Kari commented, TFA was “so heavy on communication when you’re on board, and they expect a lot,” but afterward “it’s like a ghost town. It’s weird.” After recruiting Kari to its mission of teaching in under-served schools – work she described as having been “sold” to her – she, like Martha and Charles, was out.

5.4. Brooke – “resigning about two weeks before the end of the school year ...”

In contrast to Martha, Charles, and Kari, Brooke quit only to find a position at another school, despite giving up the benefits of completing TFA. Brooke had completed more than a year-and-a-half of teaching by our first interview, remarking: “60 days left. 60 school days left.” Though “proud to have made it ... I didn’t think I would make it,” Brooke immediately hedged her statement, saying, “I still don’t know if I will make it, not because of the students [but] because of the adults.” Brooke explained in our second interview that her decision to quit just a few weeks later was almost entirely due to conflict with a new school principal. In fact, Brooke left TFA only two weeks before the end of the school year.

At the beginning of her second year, Brooke’s placement school had been merged and several people let go, including her original principal with whom she had good rapport. By her account, the new principal did not like her and eventually forced her out (reminiscent of [Boyd et al.’s \[2011\]](#) findings related to school administrators’ impact on teacher attrition). Brooke indicated she had planned to return for a third year, but the principal said, “Well, we won’t have you.” This was “a little surprising” to Brooke, who asked why and was told she had taken too many sick days, though she carefully pointed out that she had not exceeded the maximum. Brooke’s new principal argued these days were not in the school’s budget. Brooke was perplexed because otherwise her performance reviews were good:

And she [the principal] lied about, like – she had, like, write-ups that weren’t – like things that she hadn’t ever talked to me about ... these types of things that were effectively collected to make a case for firing me, if I didn’t quit.

After this conversation, Brooke remained committed to completing her second year, but the principal continued to write her up: “And I became worried that if I stayed, if she added stuff to my record, that it might hurt my chances to get to med school ... So I decided to resign.”

Afterward, Brooke said “TFA ... kicked me out of everything.” In contrast to Kari’s or Charles’ experiences, she felt her MTLD had supported her and argued it was unfair for Brooke to forgo her AmeriCorps grant so close to the end of her two-year commitment. Still, Brooke lost

that funding (approximately \$5500) and other resources offered to the TFA alumni network. Brooke initially felt directionless, but soon realized she could get hired elsewhere since she had a three-year provisional license. She reached out to her first principal who offered to write a reference (exercising her non-TFA social capital) and moved to a traditional public school where she joined the teachers' union and felt much better treated and supported. She taught middle school there for two more years.

Looking back, Brooke appreciated her MTLT's support but felt TFA failed to mediate well between her and her school, a common sentiment among some CMs in our study as well as the research literature on TFA (see Anderson et al., 2022). Her experience points to the contingent nature of the social capital offered by TFA. So long as Brooke was willing or able to work within a proscribed set of circumstances, she would benefit from the support they provided to corps members and alumni. Yet when her new principal created a hostile work environment and she felt she had to quit, this support was withdrawn. It is interesting that TFA either neglected or refused to use its capital on her behalf, in contrast to the support she experienced from her former principal – social capital she had gained through her time in the educational field. Like Kari and Charles, Brooke's narrative raises questions about the lengths to which TFA may go to maintain relationships with dysfunctional schools at the expense of its own CMs' potential longevity in the field (see also Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017). Ultimately, Brooke felt "it's disappointing, having left that way", but was proud she learned "just to show up anyway" – something she saw as essential to her habitus.

5.5. Katherine – "I'm lucky, I have a license. I can do whatever I want."

Katherine presented a rare case for our study (and TFA) because she earned an ESL teaching license and a Spanish BA before TFA, both important forms of cultural capital in education. As a college student from a lower-income background, concerned about the job market, she viewed TFA as a "guaranteed job" – a clear opportunity to benefit from its ability to ensure CMs find teaching jobs as well as the prestige of entering teaching through TFA (e.g., Labaree, 2010). She was also eager to join a cohort of first-year teachers and address educational inequity through her work:

I was like, "Wow, this program looks to close the achievement gap and I'm already going into education. I'll already probably be working in these types of schools, it would be so nice to have a group of people supporting me, other young people."

Indeed, she initially believed TFA's organizational habitus was well-aligned with her own, and thought joining would add to her existing social and cultural capital within the education field.

To her surprise, TFA found Katherine a placement as an ESL teacher at a charter school serving non-Spanish-speaking students.

I called the [TFA] placement coordinator and the most upsetting thing for me was I am highly proficient in Spanish, so I thought the best use of my skills would've been working with a population that actually spoke Spanish ... here I was working at a school that had literally zero Spanish speakers. I was upset and I begged them to change my placement.

According to Katherine, TFA responded by assuring her that it was an excellent school and denied her request for reassignment.³ Left without an option, she tried to reframe: "Well, I'll learn a lot about [this community] and that's something I don't know much about. I'll be doing ESL, which I'm way more confident in than bilingual [education]." Her initial impression of the school was also "glittery" and she was relieved to have a teaching job. Unfortunately, these positive impressions quickly

³ This is akin to Brewer's (2014) account of seeking reassignment to a subject in which he was already licensed.

wore off, and Katherine left TFA between her first and second year.

Two pivotal experiences seemed to drive Katherine's decision. First, over time Katherine became increasingly disenchanted with the support she received as a first-year teacher. For instance, Katherine was supposed to be mentored by a second-year TFA teacher who did not have his ESL license.⁴ While she liked her mentor, she explained "we collaborate but it's not a mentoring relationship." Although other CMs (like Kari) were similarly frustrated by ineffective or nonexistent support, Katherine's ability to clearly articulate this phenomenon was likely due to her prior experience with and knowledge of the teaching profession, gained before TFA – something most CMs lack.

Second, Katherine was concerned by significant service gaps – perhaps even bordering on illegal – at her charter school placement. In particular, Katherine was to be supervised by an assistant principal "who's former TFA and in her third year – that's what really made me hate TFA." In addition to lacking a principal's license, this administrator "didn't understand ESL" and "blatantly violate[d] ESL laws." Katherine reported concerns to her MTLT, who responded "Well that's your school. Your school can do what they want," suggesting either a lack of knowledge on their part or an unwillingness to intervene. Katherine concluded that TFA's habitus:

... sucks a creativity and passion out of [CMs] that would be beneficial ... I didn't like the educator I was becoming at this school. I hated it. The way I started talking to kids. The way I started to treat kids. I was like, "This is not me. I cannot do this," and that's when I knew I had to leave.

Katherine eventually quit TFA to take an ESL position at a local, traditional public school with a Spanish-speaking population where she felt significantly better supported by both the staff and teachers' union. In fact, a significant impetus for leaving was Kari's knowledge that not all teaching positions were equally dysfunctional

I had known not every school is like this, this isn't how it always is. Where I felt like some of the other people, even people in TFA or not in TFA, but who hadn't spent as much time in schools, hadn't done those hours, hadn't done student teaching – all they knew was TFA, so they didn't know that there is something else. There is a different way.

This dispositional desire to teach differently caused an abrupt end to her relationship with TFA. However, Katherine's teaching license and professional savvy (i.e., her field-specific cultural and social capital) offered her the opportunity to keep teaching, an option unavailable to many CMs: "I can't imagine what that decision would have been like if I had to give up teaching or stay at that school ... I'm lucky, I have a license. I can do whatever I want." She told friends: "If I continue to teach here, I know I will not be in teaching in five years. So, I would rather leave TFA." Katherine felt her TFA experiences were valuable because of the opportunities they provided to be "more informed as an educator and as a citizen" but was glad she left. Likewise, her decision to quit reflects many of the themes above, as the CMs' habitus and forms of social/cultural capital led them to exit TFA early.

6. Discussion: making sense of a not quite relentless pursuit

Few studies have attended to the surprisingly large numbers of CMs who quit TFA early, though "it happens all the time" (Kari). Brooke speculated that approximately 20% of the CMs in her region had quit, a percentage consistent with other national data (see above and Baker, 2016). This phenomenon is especially significant because initially CMs should be less likely to quit (Redding & Henry, 2019). They are purportedly recruited through TFA's competitive process because

⁴ See Veltri (2010) for more on the mentoring of first-year CMs by second-year CMs.

they are America's 'best and brightest' (Kopp, 1989, 2001), and the TFA model has been exported globally based largely on its 'proven success' (see Blumenreich & Gupta, 2015; Thomas et al., 2021). However, we see the limits of TFA's attempts to profit from the (misplaced) cultural capital of its recruits by 'habituating' them into an organizational culture rooted in individual achievement, leadership, and the relentless pursuit of results (Brewer, 2014; Thomas & Lefebvre 2018). As a guidebook for prospective TFA applicants suggests, "You cannot let frustration or burnout get to you, and you certainly cannot give up" (Whitman, 2012, pp. 46–47).

6.1. Why corps members leave: the interplay of habitus, cultural, and social capital

Yet of course CMs do give up. Indeed, when CMs' cultural capital proves unhelpful in their new field, their habitus of achievement and resilience is insufficient, and their limited social capital falls short, they leave. Though TFA teachers themselves often use psycho-social language to describe quitting, in stepping back to look at their experiences we argue that their habitus, and cultural and social capital within the educational field all played significant roles in their early exits. We see Bourdieu's tools as a novel and valuable theorization of these teachers' experiences, adding further richness to the research literature on teacher attrition, which commonly employs psychological frames (e.g., intrinsic/extrinsic motivation) or examines policy mechanisms (e.g., Kelly & Northrop, 2015; Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Katherine's narrative is particularly illustrative for considering the role of cultural capital in CM decisions to quit: placement outside of her certification/licensure area was frustrating at best, and contradicts much of what is known about teacher retention and success (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Ingersoll, 1999). Beyond mere preferences, Katherine's technical capacity and social competence within the educational field (demonstrated in part by her Spanish fluency and ESL certification) would have been immensely helpful, but were underutilized by TFA's placement process. Unfortunately, her experiences are not uncommon within TFA (see Anderson et al., 2022; Brewer, 2013). Most TFA CMs are 'out-of-field' teachers and very few have previous exposure to more pedagogical aspects of the teaching profession (e.g., Blumenreich & Rogers, 2021; Thomas & Mockler, 2018; Veltri, 2010), vital forms of cultural capital within the educational field. In fact, all of the quitters included in this study, except Katherine, lacked previous relevant experience. This made their transitions to teaching quite challenging and was exacerbated by their commensurate lack of awareness of what to expect (for instance, a classroom with curricular resources, or that firing and rehiring teachers due to budgetary constraints can be common). As Katherine suggested, "some of the other people ... all they knew was TFA, so they didn't know that there is something else."

As a result, social capital became an important lifeline as these TFA teachers learned to teach while teaching, following the program's synchronous-service (Thomas & Lefebvre, 2020), "just-in-time" model (Carter et al., 2011). In some ways, the program's explicit and organized forms of social capital – professional Saturdays, MTLT mentorship, etc. (see Lefebvre & Thomas, 2019) – served as a 'durable' asset, at least for two years. Kari, though an exception among the quitters we interviewed, felt her MTLT had done everything she could. Yet in other ways, TFA's design resulted in two interrelated challenges that ultimately limited corps members' social capital.

First, as novice teachers recruited by TFA, most CMs viewed TFA as providing their primary and sometimes only source of social capital and found it lacking. Some, like Martha, wanted better support from her MTLT. Others, like Brooke, felt overlooked and abandoned by TFA. This finding is consistent with the literature. Previous analyses of CM experiences suggest the quality and quantity of support from MTLTs and other TFA staff vary widely (see Brewer & de Marrais, 2015; Veltri, 2010), presumably because many MTLTs are themselves former TFA CMs with only a few more years of experience. As Katherine noted, she

was to be supervised and mentored by individuals with little specific or relevant experience in ESL. This lack of depth to an otherwise durable form of social capital through TFA raises critical questions about its practice of hiring slightly less new teachers as mentors, forgoing opportunities to work more closely with school- and community-based mentors unaffiliated with the organization (see Anderson et al., 2022).

Second, as TFA has increasingly shifted to working with charter schools, its CMs have been placed in schools that often lack experienced teachers, responsive administrators, and supportive infrastructure, all of which are essential to novice teacher success (Boyd et al., 2011; Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Madigan & Kim, 2021). As these quitter narratives show, Kari's burnout and the non-renewal of Charles' contract could both be attributable to what they perceived to be disorganized and dysfunctional school administrative structures, as well as a lack of adequate classroom space, curriculum, and training. Both Brooke and Katherine drew sharp contrasts between their initial TFA placements and the traditional public schools where they eventually worked. In their second interviews, they praised their new schools, principals, and teachers' unions for the social capital these communities offered, vital to the success of novice teachers (see Demir, 2021). While the experiences of these quitters could simply be indicative of challenges common among under-served schools, scholars have raised critical questions as to whether or not TFA's approach might implicitly prop up schools that serve their students poorly (Golann, 2015; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017). Setting aside broader organizational debates, these quitter experiences certainly suggest that the lack of school-based social capital available to CMs was a significant barrier to their persistence.

Perhaps ironically, the cultural and social capital accrued by CMs through their degrees and pedigrees (acquired both before and during TFA), while not particularly useful in the education field, did enable them to find footholds elsewhere (Labaree, 2010). Kari, for instance, made use of a contact outside TFA to find a job in a different professional field. Still, all five CMs *expected* to finish their two-year commitment and were recruited by TFA, in part, for their perceived habitus and willingness to persist despite all obstacles (Brewer, 2014; Thomas & Lefebvre, 2018). Several CMs in the larger study from which these data were drawn – both those who stayed and those who quit – indicated that they were potentially interested in teaching long term and that they may have set aside previous aspirations if they saw a way forward within the education field. Yet, for many, their experiences in the TFA program made them sceptical about the viability of teaching as a career. Thus quitting – as well as 'leaving' and 'lingering' (Heineke et al., 2014) – is a potential indication of career dissatisfaction (see Kelly & Northrop, 2015), particularly among a group of graduates who were recruited because they wanted to pursue something challenging and meaningful. The early exit of CMs is therefore a considerable loss to the profession. When the 'best and the brightest' feel that teaching is not a viable option, we all lose.

6.2. What quitting 'costs'

There are also broader 'costs' to quitting for individuals, TFA, and school placement sites. First, while CMs are recruited because of their cultural capital and habitus – their willingness or ability to be enculturated into TFA's approach emphasizing individual achievement and relentless pursuit – much of the additional cultural capital and social capital they gain through TFA are contingent on completion. As alumni, CMs are able to tap into any number of resources, including: AmeriCorps grants to pay for educational expenses or loan forgiveness; post-TFA employment counselling; prioritized corporate jobs and internships; graduate school scholarships; access to private alumni networks; political experience, such as the Capitol Hill Fellows program, or campaign training and fundraising through Leadership for Educational Equity; and lifetime subscriptions to TFA's alumni magazine. This capital can be mobilized internationally, too, through the Teach For All 'movement' to end educational equity. However, if someone fails to complete TFA, they

lose access. As Brooke put it, if you quit, you are “kicked ... out of everything.” With all these ‘carrots’ of economic, cultural, and social capital for completers, it is remarkable so many quit.

Arguably, these programmatic structures are in place because TFA stands to lose when CMs quit. TFA’s ability to raise economic capital is based partly on its brand-value (i.e., cultural capital), bolstered by an aura of selectivity and success predicated on alumni/leaders (i.e., completers) who do amazing things. Kopp’s (2001) memoir, for example, is replete with stories of CMs and alumni who succeed at a wide range of educational and social entrepreneurial activities. Ness’s (2004) journalistic account, supported by TFA, likewise references the graduate degrees TFA alumni pursue, prestigious internships or positions they assume, and social initiatives they launch. These texts never discuss quitters, who are also commonly excluded from available statistics, as it is to TFA’s strategic advantage to ignore anything that damages their brand value. As one 1990 CM reflected, “[They didn’t want TFAers leaving ... they needed us to stick it out so they [could] continue as a program” (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2021, p. 111).

Quitters also cost TFA and their partner schools economic and social capital. TFA spends a significant amount of its annual budget recruiting, training, and placing incoming CMs (Anderson, 2019; Brewer et al., 2016; Kopp, 2001). Some of these costs are defrayed by ‘finder’s fees’ paid by schools and ranging from \$3,000-\$6,000, straining already under-funded school budgets. Thus, when CMs quit, both TFA and partner schools necessarily lose their initial investments, potentially creating a “revolving door” (Kari) of teachers and recurring recruitment costs. TFA (2023) itself forewarns against quitting:

When you accept your offer to join the corps, Teach For America takes that as a good faith commitment that you will teach for two years within your placement school and region. Teach For America then invests money, time, and staffing resources into preparing you as a corps member ... Should you not fulfill that commitment, those resources will be lost, which could negatively impact our work with students, and you will have taken extraordinary time away from already taxed school districts, credentialing programs, and other community partners.

Later in the same paragraph, the seriousness of quitting is underscored with: “While Teach For America will not pursue legal action against corps members who later decline their offer, it’s important to consider the consequences felt by students, schools, and Teach For America staff.”

Beyond economic costs, schools and TFA also bear social capital costs when quitters leave. When new teachers are hired cyclically, it can be challenging for schools to create stable communities of experienced educators, provide important forms of mentorship, develop curricular resources, invest in meaningful professional development, and so on (see Anderson et al., 2022). This phenomenon was noted by Kari and Charles, both of whom worked at schools heavily staffed by TFA and TFA alum (see Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017). Boyd et al. (2012) found that TFA CMs teaching mathematics were statistically more effective than teachers who entered through other pathways; however, they noted that “the clear advantage that TFA teachers had ... dissipates as the very high attrition of TFA teachers following their second and third years of experience causes many more TFA teachers to be replaced by novices” (p. 1041). In essence, any short-term benefit “is largely eliminated once the much higher attrition of TFA teachers is taken into account” (p. 1043). TFA’s reliance on novice teachers and slightly less novice mentors prevents the organization from creating deep and durable social networks that might support CMs amid other shortfalls, as described above by Katherine and others. For teachers with limited connections within the educational field, this creates a shallow and contingent form of capital. Moreover, it does little to address broader structural challenges related to teacher turnover in under-resourced schools, a notable irony given TFA’s mission to address educational inequities.

7. Conclusion

This paper examines a vital blind spot in research on TFA and teacher attrition: the experiences of quitters. These CMs passed through TFA’s rigorous application process, survived summer trainings, and commenced their teaching careers. They were meant to make a difference in students’ lives while contributing to educational equity on a grand scale. Yet somewhere along the way they decided to quit. Three left the profession altogether while two opted to teach outside TFA. All of these CMs forwent significant incentives aimed at encouraging them to finish the program.

By using a Bourdieusian lens to explore these experiences, we are able to understand not only the individual accounts of these five quitters, but also how these individual experiences seemed to interact and overlap with various systems. We are able to see, for instance, how TFA’s approach to recruitment and placement left Brooke and Charles in precarious positions at their schools, with little support either from their administrators or TFA. We also gain insight as to why CMs like Kari, Katherine, and Martha who, shaped by their habitus, wanted and intended to persist in teaching but ultimately felt it would be better to leave TFA, either for another teaching job or a different profession entirely. While not generalizable in the strictest sense, reading these five narratives against Bourdieu’s work enables us to see patterns and structures that help theorize the broader quitter phenomenon, and exemplify the potential utility of sociological frames. These quitters struggled largely because of a program architecture that drew on their individual habitus and cultural capital by offering a contingent and limited form of social capital. This resulted in important structural gaps, including: inadequate mentorship, out-of-field placements, and lack of cultural and social capital within the educational field that may have facilitated a longer tenure.

Beyond adding to our knowledge of a heretofore neglected group within TFA, this study also raises important questions about the organization’s expansion. As of today, the TFA model has been replicated across a now 60+ country network of affiliate organizations through Teach For All, based on its ‘proven’ success. Yet, as our study shows, there are critical questions to be asked about TFA’s model. We contend it is paramount for potential funders and other supporters to more fully understand the lived realities of all CMs – including those who quit TFA – to increase transparency and avoid an overly-curated and unrealistic view of the program. We wonder: What are TFA’s actual attrition rates? How do they vary across regions, and why? In pecuniary terms, how much does each ‘quitter’ actually cost TFA, schools, etc.? What are the attrition rates of affiliate Teach For All organizations and how do their costs vary across different country contexts? In sum, addressing these and related questions is essential to understanding the overall impact of an organization that purports to end educational inequity.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Elisabeth E. Lefebvre: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Matthew A.M. Thomas:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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