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## Becoming the Generalized Other: An Analysis of the Narratives of Teach for America Teacher-Bloggers

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This dissertation, *BECOMING THE GENERALIZED OTHER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES OF TEACH FOR AMERICA TEACHER-BLOGGERS*, by NEIL J. RIGOLE, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chair, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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## ABSTRACT

### BECOMING THE GENERALIZED OTHER: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES OF TEACH FOR AMERICA TEACHER-BLOGGERS

by  
Neil J. Rigole

A teachers' professional identity has been shown to increase job satisfaction, which has been linked to job retention (Hatch, 1999; Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Stobart, Sammons, & Kington, 2006; Cha, 2008). Beginning teachers are at greater risk of leaving the profession than their more experienced counterparts (e.g. Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Huling-Austin, 1990; Ingersoll, 2003) with teacher attrition being especially high in schools serving low income and minority students (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007). The purpose of this narrative research study was to investigate the identity development process of a purposefully selected (Creswell, 2003) group of beginning teachers participating in an alternative certification program known as Teach For America. The participants (n=3) were middle or high school teachers who had taught in high needs, low income urban school settings. They had also blogged on the "Teach For Us" blog hosting site about their experiences in the classroom as beginning teachers. Through the lenses of Sfard and Prusak's (2005) narrative theory of identity and Mead's (1934) social theory of identity and the role of the "Generalized Other", narrative research techniques were used to analyze the stories found in their blog postings. Clarification and additional information was gained via email exchanges with the participants as well as a ten item questionnaire sent to each participant. The study specifically utilized Creswell's (2005) steps for conducting narrative research to analyze the stories of the participants. A key part of the process was in the restorying of the participant's stories which resulted in a

new narrative that has been mutually constructed by both researcher and the participants in the study.

Their stories show that these teachers were ill prepared for the realities they would face and that teaching in a challenging, high poverty, urban school setting was at times overwhelming. The duality and struggle between their Generalized Other concepts of a TFA corps member and who they were becoming as a teacher was found throughout their stories. The stories also show that over time, each became more confident in their abilities and in who they were becoming as a teacher. With this growth came more job satisfaction, yet each decided to leave their TFA placement schools after their second year to pursue other options. Several themes were found within and across the stories, including the struggles the teachers faced their first year, the transformation into a much more experienced and “in control” teacher during their second year, the conflicts between their Teach For America corps member identity and their teacher identity, the impact of high stakes testing and racial issues on their identity development, and the cathartic nature of blogging for each of the participants. Contributions of the study include additional insights into the areas of research on teacher identity development, factors related to retention, and the role that Web 2.0 technologies such as blogging can play in conducting research on beginning teachers.

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OF THE NARRATIVES OF TEACH FOR AMERICA  
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by  
Neil J. Rigole

A Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Instructional Technology  
in  
the Department of Middle-Secondary Education and Instructional Technology  
in  
the College of Education  
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2011

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AIS	Academic Intervention Services
AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
CM	Corps Member
CTT	Collaborative Team Teaching
EOCT	End of Course Test
IEP	Individualized Education Plan
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
PD	Professional Development
SIP	School Improvement Plan
TFA	Teach For America
TOTY	Teacher of the Year

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### My Personal Narrative

I went into teaching with hopes and aspirations of doing something with my life that would make a difference in the lives of others. I had initially failed at going off to college. Being the first and only child in my family to be able to attend a university away from home, I succumbed to the social aspect of attending what was considered a “party school.” I didn’t even make it a year, and was soon back at home, living with my parents, attending a community college. I left my floundering studies a few years later when I was hired at the highest paying factory in my hometown. During my first year working as a Materials Handler Technician in the Supply Department, I made more money than many in my community had ever earned in a year throughout their lives (and I was still in my early twenties). Life was good, but something was missing.

The “something” that was missing was related to the work I was doing. Not only was it menial, the product the factory produced was cigarettes as I was employed by the third largest tobacco corporation in the world at the time. While I was no saint, and had partaken in the product of our production, the thoughts of what the overall impact of the millions of cigarettes we produced daily began to weigh heavily on my conscious. What would my life’s work say about my life when it was all said and done? I ended up having a “quarter-life crisis”, quit my job at the factory, and returned to college.

While at first not knowing what to major in, I ended up selecting education due to the influence of my soon-to-be wife. She was in college as well at the time and was an education major. Knowing my desire to do something more positive than work for the tobacco industry, she had me consider who the positive influences in my life were. The thoughts of my teachers from high school, Mr. Jackson and Ms. Crumbliss came to mind, then thoughts of Jr. High with Señor Perez, and elementary school with Ms. Hawkins. These individuals had a positive impact on the student I was under them, as well as the person I am today. I could be like them...I could make a difference...I could become a teacher!

And I did! I graduated a few years later and accepted a position at an elementary school in the same school system which I had attended from 1<sup>st</sup> grade through the 12<sup>th</sup>. Yet again, something wasn't right. It wasn't quite what I expected. Long days with no break from the students. Never being able to go out to lunch (a small perk in the business world), or even take a restroom break! Nights staying up late grading mountains of papers, apathetic students and parents, lack of an administrator that fostered my growth as an educator. Finally, a lack of resources and a feeling of isolation in a building with over 20 teachers that I rarely interacted with, except at the occasional faculty and staff development meetings, clinched my feelings of dissatisfaction.

I ended up leaving the classroom after two years. I took a position as an Instructional Technologist at the school board office. It was a growing field, and there was more money to be made. But it wasn't just about the money. It was the pressures of teaching that drove me out of the classroom. I really feel as if I did make a difference in the lives of most of the students I taught during those two short years, yet that wasn't

enough. I went in with high hopes, and left as soon as an exit opened. Was the identity I had in mind of a “teacher” totally wrong? Had I romanticized the profession? What I have discovered since is that I wasn’t alone in the decision to leave teaching behind after only a few short years.

### Statement of the Problem

As I discovered, teaching can be a rewarding albeit challenging career filled with dilemmas, paradoxes, and uncertainty (Halliwell, 1993; J. A. Hatch, 1999). As such, every year thousands leave teaching behind to pursue other interests (Shakrani & Michigan State Univ, 2008). Beginning teachers are at greater risk of leaving the profession than their more experienced counterparts. Ingersoll and Smith (2004) note that “nearly 3 out of 10 new teachers move to a different school or leave teaching all together at the end of their first year” (p. 37). Attrition is especially high in schools serving low income and minority students, particularly among new teachers (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Guin, 2004; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Imazeki, 2005).

Studies show that within five years of entry into the occupation, nearly 50% of all beginning teachers have left teaching altogether (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Huling-Austin, 1990; Ingersoll, 2003; Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991). While those such as Ingersoll and Smith (2004) argue for induction and mentoring to stem the tide of new teachers leaving and to slow down the “revolving door” (p. 29), others such as Sawchuk (2008) have found that induction programs do little to boost rates of retention.

The high attrition rate can have a devastating impact on public schools and the students they serve, especially in urban and rural districts. As noted by Imazeki (2005),

these urban and rural districts are more likely to fill vacancies with “less qualified teachers”, substitutes, or by simply increasing class size (p. 432). The financial costs of replacing these teachers can be staggering as well. In a report by the Alliance for Educational Excellence (2005), the cost of replacing public school teachers ranges from \$2.2 billion to \$4.9 billion per year. The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future estimated that teacher turnover cost the nation more than \$7 billion in the 2003 – 2004 school year alone (Honawar, 2007). In times of economic crisis for the states and the nation, these costs are devastating for school systems that have increased demands on their budgets, combined with more accountability for student achievement.

#### Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification

Alternative routes to teacher certification have increased over the years, all the while promising to boost retention rates, increase the quality and diversity of the workforce, and impact teacher shortages (Scribner & Heinen, 2009). Recent research (Mac Iver & Vaughn, 2007) found that during the first two years after their hire date, teachers in certain alternative routes may be more likely to remain with the system than either certified teachers or conditionally certified teachers not involved in an alternative route. Yet this is conflicting with national trend data (Boe, Cook, & Sunderalnd, 2006), which found that the attrition rate for beginning teachers in an alternative route with little or no preparation was twice as high as for teachers prepared in more traditional programs with extensive preparation.

The Obama administration has shown its support for alternative routes to teacher certification. Through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), the federal government funded the “largest pot of discretionary funding for K-12

education reform in the history of the United States” or as Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called it “education reform’s moon shot” (Duncan, 2009). In November of 2009, the U.S. Department of Education released the rules to what is now known as the “Race to the Top” competition (U.S. Department of Education, 2009a). A point system for the competitive grants was devised by the U.S. Department of Education with six selection criteria:

- A. State Success Factors (*125 points*)
- B. Standards and Assessment (*70 points*)
- C. Data Systems to Support Instruction (*47 points*)
- D. Great Teachers and Leaders (*138 points*)
- E. Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools (*50 points*)
- F. General Selection Criteria (*55 points*) (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b, p. 3)

Criterion D “Great Teachers and Leaders”, which has the opportunity for states to be awarded the most points (138) for their application, is of particular interest. It states that in order to be awarded points in this area, states should have:

- ...high-quality pathways for aspiring teachers and principals.
- The extent to which the State has—
  - (i) Legal, statutory, or regulatory provisions that allow *alternative routes to certification* [emphasis added] (as defined in this notice) for teachers and principals, particularly routes that allow for providers *in addition to*[emphasis added] institutions of higher education;
  - (ii) *Alternative routes to certification* [emphasis added] (as defined in this notice) that are in use; and
  - (iii) A process for monitoring, evaluating, and *identifying areas of teacher and principal shortage and for preparing teachers and principals to fill these areas of shortage* [emphasis added] (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b, p. 9).

In his article in the Washington Post, Secretary Duncan pointed out that “states that limit alternative routes to certification for teachers and principals, or cap the number of charter schools, will be at a competitive disadvantage” (Duncan, 2009). While it is clear that this focus for the federal government’s awarding of funds is linked to areas of

teacher shortages, one has to ponder if they have considered the research that show that “extensive teacher preparation contributes to a more stable and qualified teaching force and to a reduction in the demand for a fresh supply of novice teachers to replace those who would otherwise have left teaching employment” (Boe, et al., 2006, p. ii).

### Theoretical Framework – The Role of Identity

As will be further investigated in the literature reviewed for this study (Chapter 2), teacher professional identity has been difficult to define (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), yet there is a body of research (Beijaard, et al., 2002; Flores & Day, 2006; Olsen, 2008) that does conceptualize teacher identity as a process, as opposed to being a fixed entity. The two theories framing this study are Sfard and Prusak’s (2005) narrative theory of identity and Mead’s (1934) social theory of identity and the role of the Generalized Other. Both theories view identity as a process, not a fixed entity. While both of these theories are also explored in greater detail in Chapter 2 of this work, I will give an overview of how these theories are tied intrinsically to the professional identity development of teachers and job satisfaction, which is a key indicator of retention.

Hatch (1999) states that “how a teacher sees himself or herself in relation to teaching can be vitally important in determining job satisfaction” (p. 235), and job satisfaction is a factor leading to retention (Billingsley & Cross, 1992). Day, Stobart, Sammons, & Kington (2006) also found that a teachers’ sense of professional identity leads to more self-efficacy, motivation, commitment to teaching, and job satisfaction. A study by Cha (2008) found that teachers who were satisfied with their jobs were less likely to leave the profession, and that job satisfaction played a greater role in retention

than either salary or professional development. Therefore, identity is of utmost importance to teacher retention and to this research.

People are “storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Sfard and Prusak (2005) have developed a narrative theory of identity in which identity is found within the construction of stories. They in fact “*equate identity with stories about persons*. No, no mistake here: We did not say that identities were *finding their expression* in stories – we state they *were* stories” (p. 14). They assert that

...as stories, identities are human-made and not God-given, they have authors and recipients, they are collectively shaped even if individually told, and they can change according to the authors' and recipients' perceptions and needs. As discursive constructs, they are also reasonably accessible and investigable. (p. 17)

Sfard and Prusak's (2005) definition of identity as a collection of stories about persons also ascribes that these stories should be:

- *Reifying* - through the use of the words *be, have, can, always, never, usually*;
- *Endorsable* - with the person the story is about;
- *Significant* - particularly with regard to membership of a community.

These identifying stories are represented by the triple  ${}_B A_C$  where A is the identified person, B is the author, and C the recipient. They note that there is one special identity which is a first-person, self-told story represented as the triple  $A-{}_A A_A$ . “Being a part of our ongoing conversation with ourselves, the first-person self-told identities are likely to have the most immediate impact on our actions” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 17).

Sfard and Prusak (2005) split the narratives about a person into two subsets: *actual identity* and *designated identity*. Actual identity consists of stories about the actual state of affairs whereas designated identity consists of stories that are *expected* to be the

case, either in the present moment or in the future. “Designated identities are stories believed to have the potential to become a part of one’s’ actual identity” (p. 18). Identity development can then be seen as a narrowing of the gap between the actual and designated identities, and this is an ongoing process.

This research also relies heavily on the theory of the Generalized Other by the American pragmatist George Herbert Mead (1934). Mead’s social theory of the self was one of the first to define the self solely within a societal context (Aboulaflia, 1986; Dodds, Lawrence, & Valsiner, 1997). While Mead divided the self into two “aspects, or phases...the ‘I’ and the ‘me’” (Mead, 1934, p. 192), he situates the I/me self with that of the Generalized Other. The Generalized Other molds the self to the image of the group.

As Mead states:

The attitude of the Generalized Other is the attitude of the whole community...and can direct our own behavior accordingly. It is in the form of the Generalized Other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members. (p. 154-155)

According to Dodd, Lawrence, and Valsiner (1997), the Generalized Other is a special type of role taking, and involves the adoption of a set of social roles, rules and conventions for group conduct (pp. 497- 498). They go on to state that:

A group or society places the individual in situations that require him to take up attitudes belonging to a variety of roles and to discern the common attitude and the rules. The individual actually becomes the Generalized Other internally by self-interrogation while being the object of personal thought in taking up the imagined roles and reflecting upon himself in them. (p. 498)

To summarize, for the purpose of this study, a teachers’ career or professional identity will be found in their stories, or as Juzwik (2006) refers to it as the “identity-as-narrative construct” (p. 13). Identity development will be equated with becoming the

Generalized Other, where traits of the Generalized Other are made explicit in the actual and designated identity stories. Beginning teachers, in taking on the role of the Generalized Other, take on the persona and attitude of a teacher from their unique situational perspectives. From the concepts of self as story and self as Generalized Other, I will now turn to means that may provide researchers an ability to study both through the voice of the teacher via their blogs.

### Teachers Finding Voice and Self on Blogs

Interviews, oral histories, anecdotes, personal and reflective journals, biographies, autobiographies, critical events, and case studies have historically been used by researchers in order to hear and understand the voices and lives of teachers (Butt, Raymond, McCue, & Yamagishi, 1992; Cole & Knowles, 2000; Cortazzi, 1993; Knowles, 1992; Nelson, 1992; Webster & Mertova, 2007). According to Hatch and Pointer Mace (2007), there are now new technologies that “offer unprecedented opportunities for practitioners, researchers and the general public to explore and examine teaching and learning in settings inside and outside the classroom” ( p.1). One such new technology that may offer voice to the teacher, while providing entre into their experience, is the blog.

Blogs, or weblogs, are web pages that are frequently updated and contain archived posts in reverse chronological order. They can include multimedia content and graphics, links (or tags) to other websites, be categorized, and can include comments or posts from readers. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) reported that at the time, eight percent of Internet users, or about 12 million American adults, kept a blog. Teachers (both novice and veteran) are among the millions of bloggers in the

“blogosphere” and they are blogging for a variety of reasons (Ramirez, 2008; Shapira, 2008; "Teachers finding their voice on Blogs," July 10, 2005; Toppo, 2006). Blogs can also be considered mechanisms for teachers to create first-person, self-told stories (the triple A—*AAA*) as noted by Sfard and Prusak (2005).

Herring, Scheidt, Bonus and Wright (2005) categorized blogs according to a modified version of Blood's (2002) three blog types:

- *filter blogs* where the content is external to the blogger (world events and online happenings),
- *personal journal blogs* in which the content is internal (primarily reporting events in the bloggers life, her thoughts, and reflections), and
- *k(knowledge)-logs* (repositories of information and observations focused around an external topic, project, or product. (p. 147)

They also report that at the time of their study, the personal journal blog was by far the most predominant genre of blog found in their sample at 70.4% of those they studied (Herring, et al., 2005).

The survey conducted by Pew (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) found that the most popular topic among bloggers is their life and experiences. While blogs can be viewed as the personal journal of the early 21st century (Herring, et al., 2005), Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004) assert that blogs are much more than online diaries due in part to the social nature of the blog. van Dijck (2004) would counter that this is a myth, and is misleading. She asserts that diaries have always been more than a personal record written for private purposes. She notes that diaries have often been written with a reader in mind, more importantly in how they are addressed (i.e. Dear Diary, or to God, or as Anne Frank to “Kitty”). This form of communication is a “form of self-expression”, signaling the “need to connect, either to someone or something else, or to oneself later in life” (van Dijck, 2004, para. 7). de Laat (2008) seeks to reconcile the diary and blog by noting

...diaries involve a personal project centred (sic) on the self: the blog is a means of self-clarification and self-validation. By sustained writing about the events, thoughts, and emotions of one's life, one is able to discover and develop who one 'is'. On the other hand, there is a need get to know others, to develop a community of sympathizers. Otherwise there would be no point in publishing one's diary in the open.(2008, p. 60)

Yet blogging is not without risk. In the introductory chapter of his book on the history of blogging, Scott Rosenberg (2009) posited the following questions:

- How much of your life should you expose to the Web?
- What line should you draw between your job and home, colleagues and friends?
- At what point does sharing edge into Too Much Information? (p. 13)

Some bloggers are notorious for publishing publically what many would consider to be private information, which could in turn be perilous. There is even a term for losing one's job because of one's blog – that of being “dooced” – so named for the firing of blogger Heather Armstrong who had written about co-workers on her blog dooce.com in 2002 (Rosenberg, 2009, p. 229). The Washington Law Review also gives examples of the “doocing” of a Delta employee fired because of her blog posting of provocative pictures of herself in her uniform, and a Microsoft employee fired for posting pictures of Apple computers purchased by the company (Cote, 2007). Given that teachers are risking the possibility of being “dooced” to provide readers with insight into their beginning years, the data in this study provided stories that offered significant clues related to the participants' identity development process.

#### Statement of Purpose

A teachers' professional identity is a construct that has been shown to increase job satisfaction, which has been linked to increases in retention. Blogging about one's life as a teacher (both inside and outside of the classroom) is a new phenomenon in which many

k-12 public school teachers in the United States are taking part. The purpose of this research will be to investigate the identity development process of a purposively selected group of beginning teachers blogging about their experiences in an alternative certification program (Teach For America).

### Research Questions

How do the stories in blog postings assist in the understanding of the identity development process of beginning teachers?

- a. What are the teacher identity-oriented stories told by the participants?
- b. What do these stories reveal about the identity development process of these Teach For America teachers?

### Limitations

This research was constrained by the fact that the participants were all Teach for America corps members assigned to teach in an urban middle or high school setting. Generalizability to a larger group is not the intended purpose of this study. These teachers blogged for a myriad of reasons, with much of the data being considered nonreactive because the teachers were not aware at the time of their postings that their postings would one day be used for research. The blogs are self-reported data and are also the central data source for inquiry. While the participants may have blogged longer than their first two years, only the first two years of their teaching experience was utilized as a data source. Only teachers blogging on the “Teach For Us” site were selected as participants, even though there may be other Teach For America corps members blogging on other blog sites.

### Delimitations

Delimitations of this research include the purposive sampling of beginning teachers blogging about their beginning years in the classroom as a teacher in the Teach for America program. Their postings were written publicly and voluntarily on the blog site “Teach For Us” (<http://teachforus.org>), which is not officially affiliated with the Teach for America program. The sustained reflections found in their postings were for a two-year time period. The blogs provided a unique window into the experiences of these teachers, and these experiences provided insight into their identity development, which warranted the investigation.

### Definition of Terms

Alternative Routes to Certification - As defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2009b) these are

...pathways to certification that are authorized under the State’s laws or regulations, that... (a) can be provided by various types of qualified providers, including both institutions of higher education and other providers operating independently from institutions of higher education; (b) are selective in accepting candidates; (c) provide supervised, school-based experiences and ongoing support such as effective mentoring and coaching; (d) significantly limit the amount of coursework required of have options to test out of courses; and (e) upon completion, award the same level of certification that traditional preparation programs award upon completion. (pp. 11 – 12)

Blog – Blogs are user generated web pages that are frequently updated and contain archived posts in reverse chronological order. They can include multimedia content and graphics, links (or tags) to other websites, be categorized, and can include comments or posts from readers.

Corps Member –An individual who has been accepted into the Teach For America program. Predominantly recent college graduates who did not major in education, corps members are assigned to teach in high needs rural and urban public schools throughout the United States.

Institute –An intensive five-week summer training program required of all Teach For America corps members before beginning teaching in their school assignment.

Narrative –The telling of a story.

Restorying – Used in narrative research, it is the process of the researcher retelling the story of the participant in the researcher’s own words. This consists of the placing of experiences in a chronological sequence. Elements such as setting, characters, actions, problem, and resolution may be used in the restorying. Other elements that may be used are interaction, continuity, and situation.

Story – Found within a narrative, a story is a sequence of events involving entities.

Teach for America –An alternative teacher certification program founded by Wendy Kopp in 1990 as a part of her senior thesis at Princeton University. Kopp sought to develop a national teacher corps modeled after the Peace Corps and existing alternative teaching programs in which recent college graduates would commit to teach at least two years in high needs rural and urban public schools.

### Summary

I, like thousands of teachers annually, left the classroom and teaching after a few short years. There is an ongoing national crisis with teacher attrition and retention, particularly among rural and urban high poverty schools. Alternative routes to certification are being endorsed by the current federal administration as a means to

address teacher shortages in critical areas. A teacher's professional identity has been shown to increase job satisfaction, which has been shown to increase job retention. For the purpose of this study, identity is equated with stories and with the taking on of the role(s) of the Generalized Other. Beginning teachers in the Teach For America program who blogged about their experiences will serve as the participants and their blogs serve as the data source for the stories from which the identity development process can be analyzed.

The next chapter will review the literature that will help situate the research within the areas of the challenges of beginning teachers, teacher identity development, and the role of society, biography, talk and blogging on the teacher identity development process. These studies provide the foundation from which the findings of this current study will be discussed in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The literature reviewed in this chapter will help situate the study within the body of knowledge on the challenges of beginning teachers, teacher identity development, and the role of society, biography, talk and blogging on the teacher identity development process. The studies cited are useful for both the researcher as well as the reader in providing a foundation and context for this study.

#### Challenges of Beginning Teachers

The first years as a teacher may be difficult to get through for some, thus the high attrition rates as noted in the first chapter (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Huling-Austin, 1990; Ingersoll, 2003; Murnane, et al., 1991). This research shows that the first year is especially critical, and suggests that a major goal of a first year teacher is just to make it to the second year. First year teachers use adjectives such as “exhilarated and exhausted, hopeful and cynical, fulfilled and dejected” in descriptive narratives that pivot between “epiphany and disillusionment” (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2006, p. 351).

#### *The Intent to Stay, Alternative Certification, and the Need for Support*

Even considering the challenges of the first years, it appears that young teachers are going into the profession with the intent to stay. There is recent research (Coggshall, Ott, Behrstock, & Lasagna, 2010) that suggests that beginning Generation Y teachers (those born between 1977 and 1995) are going into teaching with intentions on remaining

in the classroom for more than 10 years. The researchers conducted a random-sample survey with 890 public school teachers in the spring and summer of 2009, in which there was an over-sample of 241 teachers in the age 32 and under Generation Y category. Cogshall, Ott, Behrstock, and Lasagna even found that 56 percent of the Generation Y teachers they surveyed were interested in staying a classroom teacher for life. They note that this finding is “somewhat surprising, though hopeful, in light of the oft-cited statistic that roughly half of all new teachers nationwide leave within their first five years in the classroom” (p. 17). The report does not note if any of these teachers were involved with or have taken part in alternative programs such as Teach For America (TFA), yet the majority of TFA corps members are a part of Generation Y. It would be of interest to better understand the long term plans of these particular beginning teachers.

Another recent study (Carter & Keiler, 2009) did in fact seek to explore the experiences of new teachers in what they refer to as the “intersection of three major policy agendas – alternative certification, new teacher retention, and the small schools movement” (p. 437). Noting that the “newest teachers in urban American schools are increasingly products of alternative certification” (p. 460), Carter and Keiler conducted interviews with nine teachers participating in a university-based alternative certification program in New York City in order to answer the following two questions:

1. How do the realities of school reform, including both small schools and alternative certification, affect the experiences of new teachers in urban schools?
2. What can the experiences of these teachers tell us about the needs of new teachers in today’s urban schools? (p. 438)

The participants in Carter and Keiler’s (2009) study were not all members of Generation Y; their ages ranged from the early twenties to mid-fifties. These individuals

were either in their first or second year in the classroom as a teacher in what had been identified as being a “small high school” (p. 443). Their findings indicate that for these teachers, they were not prepared for the shared leadership responsibilities placed upon them in their schools. They also received very little curricular support from their administration and as such tended to rely heavily on support from their inexperienced peers.

While each of these teachers had to take part in a seven week summer program designed to prepare them for the experience of teaching in an urban school setting, the researchers were concerned about the lack of targeted support to assist these teachers through their beginning years. They conclude that “current structures of mentorship, administration and leadership, and summer retreats do not adequately prepare and support new teachers to thrive in urban small schools” (p. 456). While not noted in Carter and Keiler’s (2009) study, it would have been informative to include whether or not the teachers they studied remained in their urban classrooms, moved to a different school, or left the profession altogether, especially since they assert that the type of environment these teachers were in “can hardly be expected to contribute to effective teacher retention” (p. 453).

#### *Realistic Expectations and the Teacher Persona*

Hebert and Worthy (2001) provide a unique case study of success of a first year teacher (Haley). The selection of Haley was admittedly purposive and convenient for the researchers. She was a former student with whom the researchers were familiar, and she was newly employed at a public high school close to their universities. The purpose of the study was to learn “what is it like to be a first-year teacher,” and they sought to focus

on Haley's "perspectives, feelings, and experiences" (p. 900). Data were collected throughout a school year (September through April). Seven interviews were conducted and to supplement the interviews, three observations were held, each spaced throughout the course of the year. The observations were not of her teaching, but of her interacting with her students, fellow teachers, and administrators in informal settings.

While addressing the challenges of first year teachers noted in other studies (the social and political system of the school; the sense of isolation; the feelings of insecurity and inadequacy), Hebert and Worthy (2001) claim that "beginning teachers often have unrealistic expectations and beliefs about teaching, students, the workplace, and the difficulty of teaching in general" (p. 899). One of the reasons they cite concerning the success of Haley in her first year was in her realistic expectations upon entering the teaching profession. This finding is similar to that of Worthy (2005) whom, in her case study of first year teacher "Mark", also found that prospective teachers should have a "realistic picture of the demands of teaching" (p. 393). This begs a question related to my research with Teach For America teachers: How realistic of a picture of teaching in a high needs urban school setting did the teachers in my study have before entering the classroom?

McCann and Johannessen (2004) conducted interviews with eleven novice high school English teachers. They stated that what began as a "somewhat casual process of conversations led to a more deliberate program of investigation into the concerns that drive new teachers from the profession and the attitudes and support systems that help retain them" (p. 138). Interviews in a variety of settings were conducted and audio taped over a span of two years. The interviews were transcribed and outside readers were

utilized to review the transcriptions while looking for (a) causes of stress, (b) coping methods, and (c) preparation and support received by the novice teachers. Follow-up interviews were then conducted with six of the original eleven teachers, focusing on areas of stress and tracking changes in the experiences of these teachers over their first years as a teacher. Two of the participants had left teaching and the questions asked to them focused on what could possibly bring them back in to the profession.

The researchers noted that their results indicate that the “major difficulty that beginning teachers face is the challenge to define for themselves their *teacher persona*” (McCann & Johannessen, 2004, p. 139). They go on to state that

Before entering teaching, novice teachers have assumed many roles, son/daughter, student, employee, but the role of teacher is a new one. They struggle with various questions: How am I *supposed to* act in this situation? How do *real teachers* do this? Am I aggressive enough in contending with management challenges? Am I overreacting? Am I insisting on unreasonable standards? Am I being too lax? These questions must be answered by means of comparing one’s behavior against a recognizable standard. (p. 139)

While not noted as a theoretical underpinning of their research, the previous quoted paragraph from McCann and Johannessen directly parallels that of George H. Mead’s (1934) Generalized Other, which is the theoretical framework for this research.

### *Urban Teacher Challenges*

Beginning teachers in urban settings face the same challenges, and more, as those of their peers in other settings, with poverty being a critical concern. In describing their struggles with getting teacher candidates in a field-based preparation program to spend two years in residence in an urban school, Leland and Harste (2005) state that

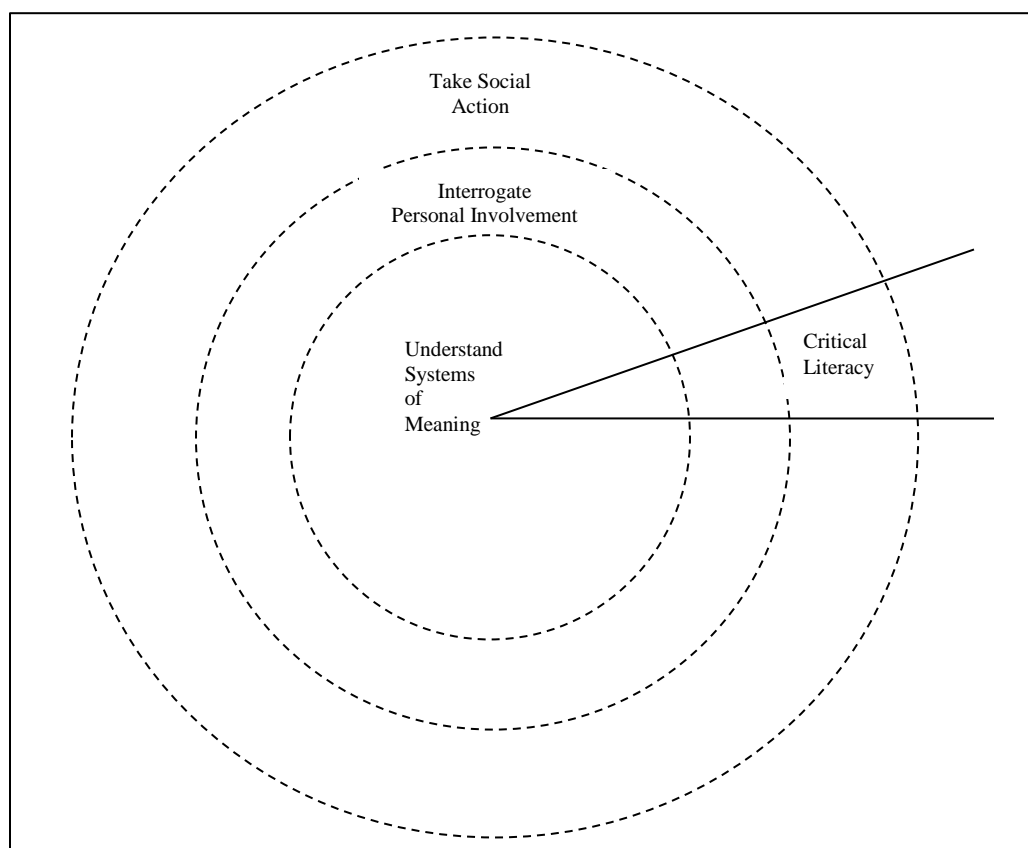
Not only are the schools we work in situated in old buildings without the comforts of air-conditioning and state-of-the-art technology, but they are also populated by a larger than usual proportion of children from impoverished families. (pp. 60-61)

Leland and Harste's (2005) teacher preparation program was located at a university within a major Midwestern city with a large African American population, yet the majority of their students were White and came from suburban or rural areas. They note that these students were "less than enthusiastic about spending time in urban schools" and they had an "expectation that they would do their fieldwork and student teaching in communities that were similar to the ones they came from" (p. 61). Their third cohort was "particularly vocal in their criticism of the program" (p. 66).

Leland and Harste's (2005) research highlights two cases of particularly vocal pre-service teachers whom upon graduation decided to stay and work in the same urban system where they completed their field work. After finding out their decisions, they interviewed the teachers and also analyzed their field journals in order to "look for evidence of movement toward a critical perspective" (p. 67). Figure 1 illustrates their working model of this perspective.

*Figure 1*

## Three Components of a Critical Perspective



*Figure 1.* From “Doing what we want to become: Preparing new urban teachers” by C. H. Leland & J. C. Harste, 2005, *Urban Education*, 40, p. 68.

The model represents three dimensions, yet they note that their data is not clear in determining “whether these dimensions occur in a developmental sequence” (p. 68). These dimensions represent an understanding of the positioning of people by systems of meaning and power (Dimension 1 – the innermost circle), a realization of one’s own complicity with these power systems (Dimension 2 – the middle circle), and a commitment to take social action to address the inequities caused by these systems (Dimension 3 – the outer circle). Critical literacy grows throughout all three dimensions.

The researchers used this model during the analysis of their former students' journals and their interview transcripts.

Leland and Harste's (2005) findings suggest that both of their prior students indeed took social action (Dimension 3) in accepting positions as urban teachers. They report that their findings support the notion that "contrary to much of the rhetoric of the standards movement, teachers of children from poverty need more than a grasp of content knowledge about the different subject areas they will be teaching" (pp. 75 – 76). These teachers need to see themselves as change agents, yet "this attitude is not developed overnight or in the safety of a college classroom. It is the product of inner struggle, self-interrogation, and the realization that anyone can grow into a new kind of person" (p. 76).

The researchers' statement of these teachers' ability to "grow into a new kind of person" is a direct link to the identity development process which this study is focused. While the two teachers in Leland and Harste's (2005) program did modify their initial feelings regarding teaching in an urban environment, there is no indication in this study as to if these teachers (or other prior students from their program) continued to stay teaching in urban setting and if Leland and Harste's program positively impacts retention.

Noting the high attrition rates and teacher shortages in high-needs urban and rural settings, a recent study (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010) sought to investigate the resilience strategies of fifteen beginning teachers. This qualitative, interpretive study consisted of interviews with the participants over a five month period. Five of the teachers were from rural areas, five were from urban, and five were special education teachers, all first-year teachers teaching in what the researchers describe as "high-needs areas" (p. 623). The

questions the researchers hoped to answer were related to resilience and new teacher retention, with those questions being

1. What strategies do new teachers employ in response to adverse situations?
2. What resources do beginning teachers rely on to overcome challenges and obstacles to teaching? (p. 623)

Findings from the research (Castro, et al., 2010) showed that the teachers in the study needed to seek out mentors and allies to solve various problems. One specific problem faced by many of the teachers was in the acquisition of resources. The researchers found that “help-seeking” was a particular resilience strategy employed by the new teachers. They note that the “burden for success falls on the shoulders of the beginning teacher; help-seeking, in the form of seeking ‘adopted’ mentors, advocating for resources, and acquiring allies to resolve problems, begins with the novice teacher taking agency” (p. 625). By taking agency, new teachers can “transform negative aspects in their environment” and “create new resources where none previously existed” (p. 628). The researchers point out that “resilience strategies can place additional burdens on the beginning teachers” (p. 629). They also acknowledge that there needs to be future work on the differences between “successful teachers and unsuccessful teachers (those who leave the profession after the first year)” (p. 629).

Another study sought to determine the impact of a specific urban teacher preparation program on retention (Quartz & The TEP Research Group, 2003). The “Center X” program was founded at UCLA following the unrest resulting from the 1992 Rodney King trial. This alternative certification program “would become a research-based approach to urban teacher preparation that seeks to inform the efforts of other

colleges and universities across the nation in preparing a high-quality and stable teacher workforce for urban schools” (p. 99). The Center X Teacher Education Program (TEP) is described as “an intensive 2-year program leading to state certification and a master’s degree” (p. 102). After completion of the program, teachers take part in an Urban Educator Network (UEN) and “ongoing professional development that supports urban teachers as they continue their learning within schools.” (p.102)

The two-year study conducted by Quartz and the TEP Research Group (2003) utilized both qualitative and survey methodologies. A database was kept by Center X which included retention information for its alumni. For this study, the population was the alumni who graduated between 1997 and 2000 (326 teachers). Interviews were conducted by phone with 233 of the alumni the first year of the study (graduates between 1997 and 1999), and the following year the entire alumni population (n=326) was surveyed using an electronic instrument.

The results show that Center X graduates are more likely to stay in teaching at a far greater extent than national averages. As expected, their attrition rate did increase over time, yet the study found an astonishing 70% of their graduates were still teaching after five years, with an additional 17% still in education. This includes individuals who had become “school administrators, graduate students studying education, a college professor, Peace Corps teachers, curriculum specialists, teacher educators, educational technology experts, counselors, and others” (p. 104). What the researchers want to highlight is that, even in the group that left classroom teaching for other educational endeavors, most were still working in urban environments. While noting that their results

are dependent upon self-reports from their alumni, they do note the following themes as playing a key role in the ability of the program to support retention:

- *Learning to build on the strengths of urban communities* – through the use of non-deficit theories designed to better understand the riches of urban neighborhoods.
- *Becoming a change agent* – For example, by the alumni making their school “a more just and caring place” (p. 107). This was also found in the study by Leland and Harste (2005).
- *Joining a profession* – Supporting professional growth through the use of an Urban Educator Network, an online journal, extensive professional development through the California Subject Matter Projects, and ongoing support to achieve certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This type of support is exactly what was missing, and what was suggested, for the teachers in the study by Carter and Keiler (2009) focusing on the needs of alternatively certified teachers in urban settings.

Of interest in the description of the Center X program (Quartz & The TEP Reseach Group, 2003) is the statement that Center X is striving to be a “community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which educators – including faculty, staff, graduate students, community members, and novice teachers – learn and *develop their identities* [emphasis added] by negotiating what it means to be a member of a social justice community” (p. 102). The concept of negotiating and developing an identity within a community is

further investigated in the next section of this literature review, and is a part of the theoretical framework for this research.

### *Teach For America and Retention*

While limited, there are two recent research studies (Donaldson, 2008; Mac Iver & Vaughn, 2007) that investigate the propensity of Teach For America teachers to stay in the teaching profession. Donaldson (2008) sought to better understand whether the complexity of a teaching assignment might influence retention. She selected TFA teachers because they are “an important sub-population of new teachers today” and “schools need good information about what retains TFA teachers – and others like them – through their 2-year obligation and what might prolong their stay. Conversely, schools need to know what hastens the departure of these teachers from their initial placement school and the profession” (pp. 7-8). Donaldson asserts that her study was the first to examine the retention of TFA teachers longitudinally and on a national scale.

Donaldson’s (2008) study was of a sample of 2,029 TFA teachers who were a part of the 2000, 2001, and 2002 TFA cohorts. The data for the study came from an online survey conducted with the individuals in January and March of 2007. Donaldson did indeed find that the complexity of the teaching assignment for TFA teachers did impact attrition. Teachers teaching multiple grade levels were more likely to leave their school and resign in year 1 than teachers assigned to teach a single grade level. Being assigned to teach multiple subjects at the secondary level was also an indicator of leaving the school in year 1 and resigning from the profession in all years. She also found that math and social studies teachers teaching out-of-field (teaching in an area in which they did not major in college) were more likely to resign from the profession. This was interestingly

different from science teachers teaching out-of-field (non-science majors), whom were found to be less likely to leave than science teachers with a major in science. She notes that there may be unmeasured factors that have led to this finding.

Mac Iver and Vaughn (2007) compared the retention rates of TFA teachers, teachers from other selected alternative certification programs, conditionally certified teachers not in an alternative program, and fully certified teachers from traditional programs. Their primary research question was “whether teachers who came to the district fully certified already were more likely to stay with the district than those who came through alternative certification programs and acquired state certification while working as the teacher of record in a district classroom” (pp. 34-35). The study only focused on one urban school district, the Baltimore City Public School System.

Mac Iver and Vaughn (2007) discovered that while most of the TFA teachers tended to leave by the end of year three, their retention rates were as high as three-year retention rates for traditionally certified teachers in three of the four cohorts they studied. They also found that teachers in another alternative certification program, known as Project Site Support, “remained with the system at higher rates than regularly certified teachers through years four and five” (p. 40). Project Site Support was a partnership with Johns Hopkins University, Morgan State University, and the University of Maryland. It provided the teachers with professional development, mentoring, and graduate coursework leading to state certification and a master’s degree in teaching. What is of interest in this study is that the researchers note that the Project Site Support teachers would have their tuition for the master’s degree reimbursed by the school system “in return for a five-year commitment to remain with the system” (p. 35). Mac Iver and

Vaughn also note that traditionally certified new teachers, as well as the TFA teachers, also were participating in master's programs in which their tuition could also be reimbursed for a five-year commitment. What the research fails to do is provide the reader with information as to if the subset of TFA and traditionally certified teachers (who made the five-year commitment) had retention rates on par with the Project Site Support teachers.

### *Summary*

While there is research that Generation Y teachers are going into the profession with intentions on remaining in the classroom for more than 10 years (Cogshall, et al., 2010), there are other findings (Carter & Keiler, 2009) that indicate that young beginning teachers, who are increasingly products of alternative certification programs, are given very little curricular support from their administration and as such tend to rely heavily on support from their inexperienced peers. Seeking support has been shown to be a resilience strategy, but can place additional burdens on beginning teachers (Castro, et al., 2010). Having a realistic expectation about teaching has been shown to be an indicator of how successful a beginning teacher feels about their first years in the profession (Hebert & Worthy, 2001; Worthy, 2005). The creation of a teacher persona was found to be a challenge for beginning teachers (McCann & Johannessen, 2004), as well as urban teachers having a grasp of more than content knowledge when faced with teaching children from poverty, which requires growing into a new type of person (Leland and Harste, 2005). In terms of issues causing Teach For America teachers to leave the profession, one study (Donaldson, 2008) found that the complexity of the teaching assignment, as well as teaching out-of-field, caused TFA teachers to resign early. Other

research (Mac Iver and Vaughn, 2007) indicates that TFA teachers tend to stay in the profession on par with more traditionally prepared teachers, yet teachers involved in alternative programs that offer professional development and mentoring may stay in the profession longer than traditionally prepared teachers.

As much of the findings of the research cited in this section delved into aspects of the importance of the creation of teacher identity, the next section will focus on the teacher identity development process.

### Teachers' Identity Development Process

What is identity? What is professional identity? How does one come to garner such an identity? What is the role of society in identity development? Where does the concept of identity intersect with that of story and narrative? This next section seeks to identify research that addresses these questions.

#### *Identity as Process*

In their analysis of 22 studies about teachers' professional identity, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2002) state that "while it is clear that teachers' professional identity has emerged as a separate research area, it is, in our view, an area in which researchers conceptualize professional identity differently, investigate varying topics within the framework of teachers' professional identity, and pursue a diversity of goals" (p. 108). They found that there is not a consistent meaning in the literature on the concept of identity, and what this suggests is that "identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon" (p. 108).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) also find it difficult to ascribe a definition to the concept of identity for teachers stating

Identity is a term that tends to carry a burden of hard reality, something like a rock, a forest, an entity. Being true to this identity, being true to oneself, is often thought to be virtue. Yet, from the narrative point of view, identities have histories. They are narrative constructions that take shape as life unfolds and that may, as narrative constructions want to do, solidify into a fixed entity, and unchanging narrative construction, or they may continue to grow and change. They may even be, indeed, almost certainly are, multiple depending on the life situations in which we find ourselves. This is not less true for teachers in their professional knowledge landscape. (p. 95)

Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2002) did find that in the majority of the studies they examined the researchers “saw professional identity as an ongoing process of integration of the ‘personal’ and the ‘professional’ sides of becoming and being a teacher” (p. 113). In as such, they developed an identity development process as illustrated in Figure 2.

As can be seen in the illustration, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2002) have found the process of professional identity development to be ongoing.

Figure 2

Representation of Professional Identity Formation from a Teacher's Knowledge Perspective.

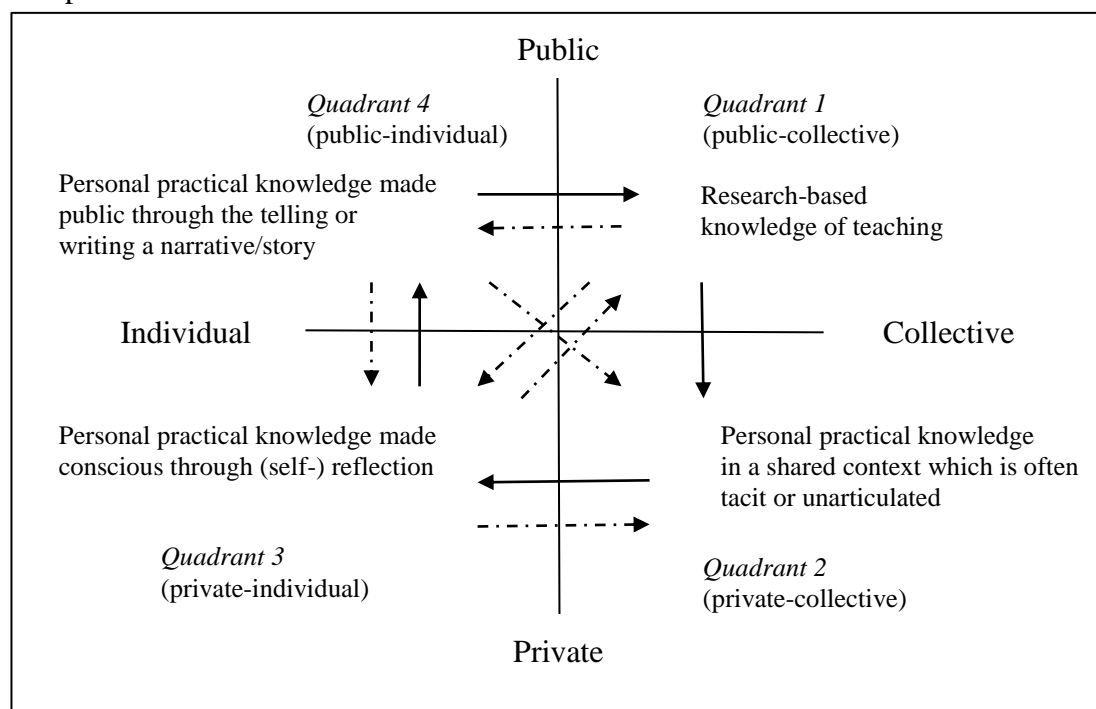


Figure 2. From “Reconsidering Research on Teachers’ Professional Identity” by D. Beijaard, P.C. Meijer, & N. Verloop, 2002, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, p. 124.

Quadrant 4 is of particular interest for this research, in that it involves the telling or writing of a story. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2002) analyzed two studies that “explicitly relate storytelling to teachers’ (and researchers’ as well as administrators’) professional identity” (p. 120). In one of the studies, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) refer to professional identity in terms of “stories to live by” (Beijaard, et al., 2002, p. 121).

They go on to state that

A ‘story to live by’ ... provides a narrative thread or story-line that educators draw on to make sense of themselves and their practice. ‘Stories to live by’ is a way to conceptually bring together a teacher’s personal practical knowledge, his or her professional knowledge landscape, and identity. Through storytelling, teachers

engage in narrative ‘theorizing’ and, based on that, teachers may further discover and shape their professional identity resulting in new or different stories. (p. 121)

This concept of “a story to live by” is very similar to the theory of narrative identity as described in the theoretical framework of this study which equates identity with stories (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). “A story to live by” is also similar to results found by other researchers over the past two decades, where a teachers’ identity is constructed via the telling of stories - be they biographies, interviews, journals, or career stories (Kelchtermans, 1993; Syrjälä & Estola, 1999; Urzúa & Vásquez, 2008; Watson, 2006).

In her commentary, Juzwik (2006) points out how Sfard and Prusak see danger in treating identity as a “product or an essential core that remains the same over a lifetime” (p. 13). For Sfard and Prusak, identity is a “relational and dynamic process” that “changes across time, space, and is always in motion” (p. 13). Sfard and Prusak (2005) argue that

The difference between identity as a ‘thing in the world’ and as a discursive construct is subtle. The kind of data that the narrative-minded researcher analyzes in her studies is the same as everybody else’s: These are stories that people tell about themselves or about others to their friends, teachers, parents, children, and bosses, as well as to researchers. The only distinctive feature of the present narrative approach is that, rather than treat the stories as windows to another entity that stays unchanged when ‘the stories themselves’ evolve, the adherent of the narrative perspective is interested in the stories as such, accepting them for what they appear to be: words that are taken seriously and that shape one’s actions. (p. 21)

Olsen (2008) conducted a study with six first-year teachers in order to examine “how multiple components of a teacher’s professional identity mediate one another as each becomes intertwined within (and organized around) the teacher’s understandings of teaching, teacher practices, and career plans” (p. 24). Olsen believes teacher identity is a dynamic, holistic interaction among multiple parts, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Teacher Identity as Dynamic, Holistic Interaction among Multiple Parts

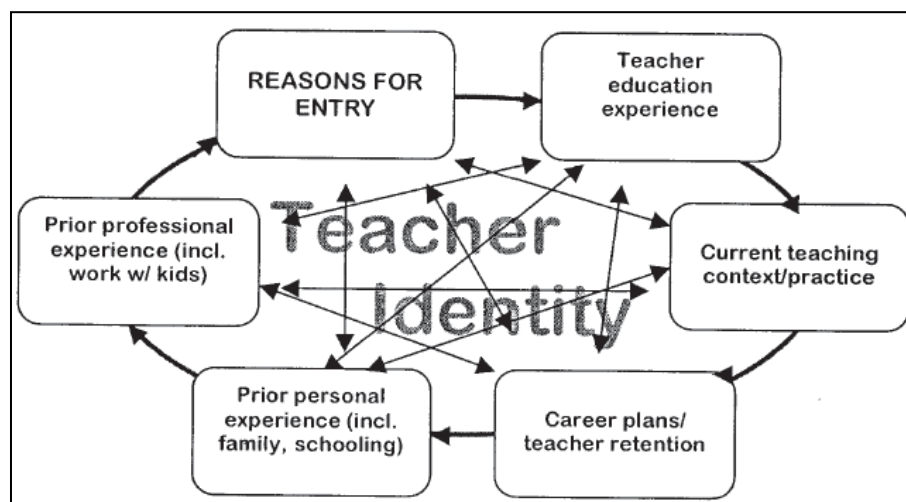


Figure 3. From “How reasons for entry into the profession illuminate teacher identity development” by B.Olsen, 2008, *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 35, p. 25.

Olsen (2008) contends that each of the boxes in the model “acts as an opening into the holistic, circular mix of how any teacher’s past, present, and future are linked; how the personal and the professional are in many ways inextricable; how context and self interact; and how each teacher component mediates (and is mediated by) the others” (pp 24-25). His study used “reasons for entry” into the profession as a doorway to be able to study teacher identity, yet he concedes that researchers could enter through any of the other boxes. One could in fact begin the study with questions about retention, and enter through the box in the lower right corner of the figure.

Olsen’s study “revealed that many first-year teachers experience fundamental identity conflicts as they work to reconcile long-held expectations with current teaching realities, and merge their personal self-understandings with their developing identities” (p. 37). Of interest to this research is that Olsen concludes with some possibilities for ways

beginning teachers and teacher educators can address identity conflicts, both during and after the teacher education experience. One of the suggestions is for teachers to develop what he calls “learning-and-teaching autobiographies” which are “revisited and revised” as their identity development progresses (p. 37).

Flores and Day (2006) conducted a longitudinal study over a two-year period to examine “the ways in which the identities of a cohort of new teachers were shaped and reshaped” (p. 219). The sample for the study was fourteen new teachers, nine female and five male. Ten of the fourteen teachers worked in rural and isolated settings where dropout rates for the students were high.

Three main influences upon the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the teacher professional identities are reported in their findings with those being

- i. *Prior influences* – examining teachers’ past experiences as students
- ii. *Initial teacher training and teaching practice* – examining the motivations for entering a teaching degree and teachers’ overall assessment of their formal professional learning experiences as well as their implications for the formation of their identities; and
- iii. *Contexts of teaching* – analyzing the process of learning, socialization, and professional development both in terms of *classroom practice* and *school culture and leadership* and their effects on the reconstruction of teachers’ identities in changing contexts of teaching. (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 223)

The study found that personal biography plays a key role “in mediating the making sense of teachers’ practices and their beliefs about themselves as teachers – and in reshaping teacher identity” (p. 230). This process occurs over time (constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing an identity), and are shaped by contexts of “biography, pre-service programs, and school culture” (p. 230) with pre-service programs being noted as noticeably weak in their influence. Figure 4 illustrates the Flores and Day (2006) concept of identity as a process, opposed to being a fixed entity.

Figure 4

## Key Mediating Influences on the Formation of Teacher Identity

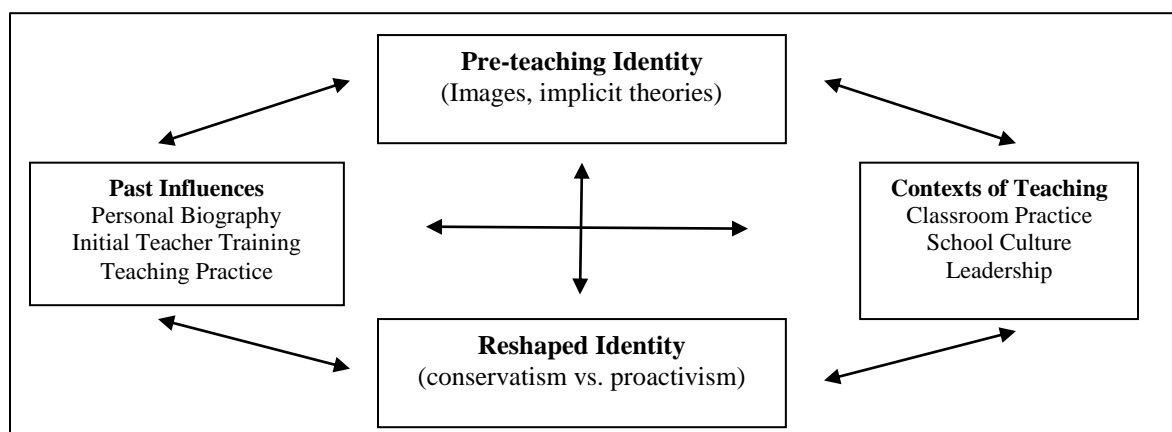


Figure 4. From “Contexts Which Shape and Reshape New Teachers’ Identities: A Multi-Perspective Study” by M. A. Flores & C. Day, 2006, *Teaching and Teacher Education*. 22. p. 230.

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*Future Talk and Expertise*

While Flores and Day (2006) highlighted the role of the personal biography (which could take the form of a blog), another study by Urzúa and Vásquez (2008) sought to situate identity within teachers’ future-oriented talk (which may also be found in blog postings). While noting the importance of reflection on past experience, they state that “teachers’ professional identities emerge through their social actions, including interactions with others, in which they not only reflect on past events, but also – and perhaps even more importantly with respect to their professional development – consider how those past events may inform future events and activities” (p. 1936). This concept of future talk of the self is in line with that of the concept of *designated identity* (Sfard & Prusak, 2005) which is a theoretical foundation of my own research.

Urzúa and Vásquez (2008) were particularly interested in the “relationship between identity, reflection, and futurity in teachers’ *spoken* discourse” (p. 1937). The

spoken data of novice English as-a-second-language (ESL) teachers were captured in meetings by means of audio recordings, which were then transcribed by one of the researchers. There were two different types of meetings in which data were collected; mentoring and post-observation.

The findings of the research show that, for the teachers studied, planning and prediction were main themes in teachers' future-oriented talk. Urzúa and Vásquez (2008) note that this type of discourse serves as a "reflection *for* action" (p. 1944). They further state that this type of "prospective reflection...allows novice teachers to interpret their early experiences with a view towards the future: to imagine the kind of teacher they want to become, and to use their formative years as a means to project a designated sense of self as teachers" (p. 1944).

While their findings support the concept of designated identifying stories of Sfard and Prusak (2005), it should be noted that data used for this research were conversations that were held between the teachers and their supervisors. This begs the question as to the level of honesty one may have when discussing their future behaviors and projected identity with someone in a position of authority. If the conversations had been with an outside researcher, where conditions of anonymity have been secured, would the findings be different?

While not dealing specifically with first-year teachers, Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) conducted an exploratory study of experienced secondary school teachers. The purpose of their study was to answer the following questions:

1. How do experienced teachers perceive their professional identity, now and at the beginning of their careers?
2. What have been, in view of this identity, their most important learning experiences throughout their careers? and

3. Can factors be identified that influence these perceptions of their profession identity? (p. 750)

Noting that teachers should have a full understanding of their subject matter, be knowledgeable of ethical and moral issues, and a facilitator of learning, Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) describe identity in terms of “the teacher as subject matter expert, the teacher as a pedagogical expert, and the teacher as a didactical expert” (p. 750). They define each of these as follows:

- A subject matter expert - a teacher who bases his/her profession on subject matter knowledge and skills;
- A didactical expert - a teacher who bases his/her profession on knowledge and skills regarding the planning, execution, and evaluation of teaching and learning processes; and
- A pedagogical expert - a teacher who bases his/her profession on knowledge and skills to support students’ social, emotional, and moral development. (p. 754)

Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) created a four-part questionnaire that was administered to 80 experienced secondary school teachers. The results are illustrated in Figure 4 and show that the teachers’ professional identities are a combination of the three areas of expertise (subject matter, pedagogical, and didactical). They note that because of the “tendency toward the left-hand side of the triangle, most of the teachers see themselves more as subject matter and didactical experts and less as pedagogical experts” (p. 756).

Figure 5

Representation of the Teachers' Perception of their Professional Identity.

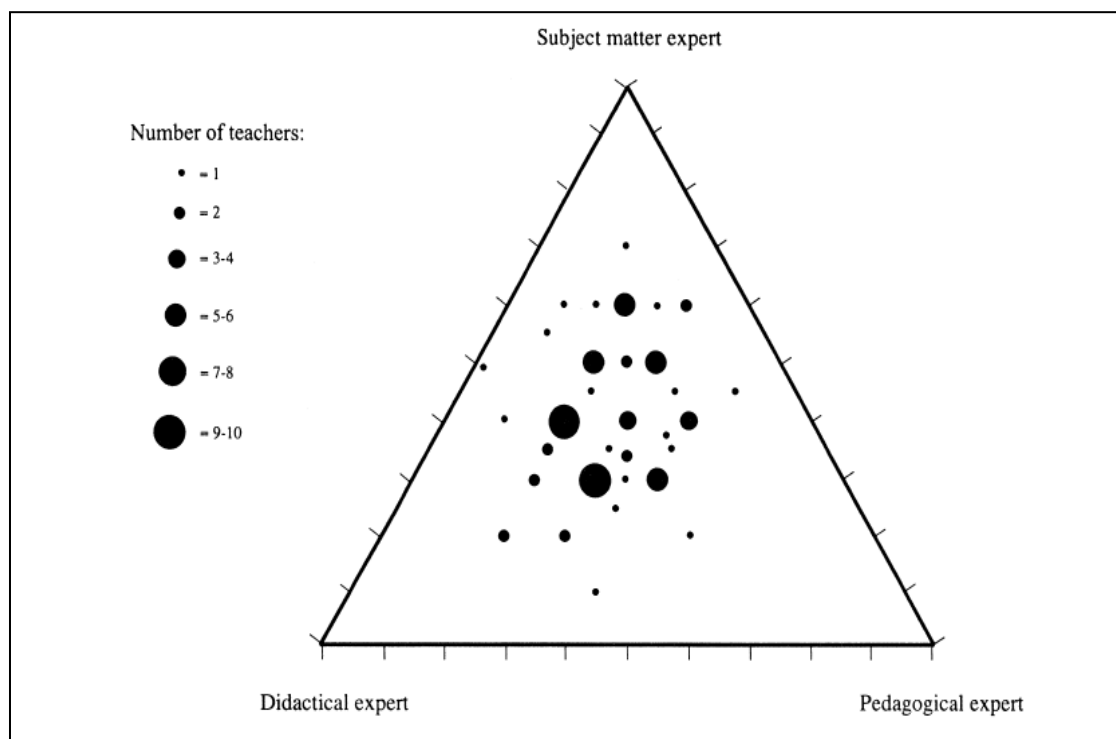


Figure 5. From "Teachers' perceptions of professional identity: An exploratory study from a personal knowledge perspective by D. Beijaard, N. Verloop, & J.D. Vermunt, 2000, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, p. 756.

Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) conclude that the teachers are able to express how they currently see themselves professionally, but it is not possible for them to draw the same conclusion from the retrospective data concerning their beginning years. What is of value in my own research on the identity development of Teach For America teachers is to identify how my participants view the expertise (subject matter, didactical, pedagogical) of themselves, their peers, or of their image of the "Generalized Other" (Mead, 1934).

### *Summary*

While identity has been difficult to ascribe a definition (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990; Juzwik, 2006), studies have determined that it is an ongoing process as opposed to a fixed entity (Beijaard, et al., 2002). This same research related storytelling to teachers' professional identity and cited research by Connelly and Clandinin (1999) that refer to professional identity as a "story to live by." One study (Olsen, 2008) has shown that a teacher's identity takes into account their past, present, and future, while personal biography can play a key role in mediating a teacher's belief about themselves as a teacher (Flores and Day, 2006). Along with biography, future-oriented talk (Urzúa & Vásquez, 2008) has also been shown to be important in allowing teachers to imagine the kind of teacher they want to become. The final study cited (Beijaard, et al., 2000) identified three areas of expertise (subject matter, pedagogical, and didactical) to describe a teacher's identity, yet it was difficult to draw this conclusion for beginning teachers. The next section of this review of the literature will focus on the role of society in the development of identity.

### The Role of Society in Identity Development

What is the role of society in the identity development process? Czarniawska (2004) observes that "social life is narrative" (p. 3) and thusly, "we are never the sole authors of our narratives" (p. 5). Somers and Gibson (1994) posit that "it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities" (pp. 58-59). In referencing the research of Coldron and Smith (1999), Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2002) found that "being a teacher is a matter of the teacher being seen as a teacher by

himself or herself and by others; it is a matter of arguing and then redefining an identity that is socially legitimated” (p. 113).

Nowhere is this “socially legitimated” identity more explicitly defined than in the writings of George Herbert Mead in his work “Mind, Self, and Society” (1934). As also noted in the theoretical framework of Chapter 1, Mead was instrumental in developing the view that the “self” was a product of society. For Mead, according to Natanson (1956), “apart from society, there can be no self, no self-consciousness, no language, no communication, and no communality of understanding. In society and the generic framework of ‘social experience’ the individual finds his true possibilities” (p. 7).

Mead divided the self into two “phases” or “aspects: the “I” and the “me” that develop within the social process (Mead, 1934, p. 192; Natanson, 1956, p. 17). Mead succinctly describes these two aspects by stating “the ‘I’ is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others; the ‘me’ is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes” (Mead, 1934, p. 175). It is important to note that this separation is not a dualism of identity (Dodds, et al., 1997, p. 491) because for Mead the “self” is a process; a process of a conversation between the “I” and the “me” (Mead, 1934, pp.178-179).

### *The Generalized Other*

Taking on the role of the “Generalized Other” – which for Mead is the attitude of the whole community – is crucial in terms of developing a complete self. It is, according to Mead, what makes thinking possible, because the “internal conversation of the individual with himself...is carried on by the individual from the standpoint of the “Generalized Other” (Mead, 1934, p. 155). He goes on to assert that by taking the attitude

of the general other toward himself...can he think at all; for only thus can thinking – or the internalized conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking – occur (p. 156).

Mead uses the concept of the “game” to illustrate how one takes on the role of the Generalized Other. As opposed to just “play”, taking on a role in a “game” requires the player to “be ready to take the attitude of everyone else involved in that game” (Mead, 1934, p. 151). As noted by Natanson (1956), “to play baseball is necessarily to play according to the rules of the game” (p. 13). Rules separate mere role-playing from actually playing the game. Natanson goes on to assert that “game rules are the mark of the transition from simple role-taking to participation in roles of a special, standardized order” (p. 13). For Mead, children playing games and following the rules represents “the passage in the life of the child from taking the role of others in play to the organized part that is essential to self-consciousness in the full sense of the term” (Mead, 1934, p. 152).

It is important to note that in groups and society individuals are placed in situations that may require the individual to assume the attitudes, and adhere to the rules, that belong to a variety of roles. Aboulafia (1986) gives the following example:

I am speaking with my boss about business, when he or she suddenly invites me to dinner with his or her family; a dinner for friends, so that I find myself between the business relationship (role) and a relationship (role) of friendship. It is only because I can take different roles – employee, boss, friend – and internalize various Generalized Others, that I have a self; a self is a system of behaviors that one is aware of through the internalized other. (p. 21)

Very few research studies have utilized the concept of the Generalized Other as a foundation for inquiry. Holdsworth and Morgan (2007) attempted to do just that in their investigation of the process of leaving the parental home. The researchers conducted 92 interviews with young people who had left their parental home, young people still living with their parents, and with the parents themselves. The interviews were analyzed

“paying particular attention to some of the more everyday words that are used...to show how notions of self and personal identity are linked to the generalizing process” (p. 409). Through these interviews they found several levels of generalization references. They particularly focused on the idea of the Generalized Other “as a process” that is subtle and “occurs in everyday conversational practices” (p. 408). From shifting the emphasis from the Generalized Other as a “thing”, to it being seen as a process, they were able to suggest that “there is a close, dialectical, relationship between the construction of the Generalized Other and taking the role of others” (p. 415).

### *Summary*

Czarniawska (2004) observed that “social life is narrative” (p. 3) and Somers and Gibson (1994) assert that “it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities” (pp. 58-59). Mead (1934) has been instrumental in viewing the “self” as a product of society. For Mead, the taking on of the role of “Generalized Other” (which is the attitude of the whole community) is crucial to developing a complete self. It is important to note that in groups and society individuals are placed in situations that may require the individual to assume the attitudes, and adhere to the rules, that belong to a variety of roles. One research study (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2007) used Mead’s concept of the Generalized Other as the basis of inquiry to determine how the notions of self and personal identity are linked in the generalizing process. As with the identity research cited in the previous section, they found that the emphasis should not be on the Generalized Other as a “thing” but as a process that helps mold the relationships that are involved in taking on the role of others.

I now turn in the next section to the study of identity development through biography, talk, and a relatively new phenomenon being embraced by not only teachers, but by individuals throughout the world. This phenomenon has been termed blogging, and it not only gives voice to those whom historically have been made silent, but may also provide a mechanism for storytelling and sharing of experiences from which the identity process may be investigated.

#### On Biography, Talk, and Blogging in Teacher Identity Development

As noted in Chapter One, interviews, oral histories, anecdotes, personal and reflective journals, biographies, autobiographies, critical events, and case studies have historically been used by researchers in order to hear and understand the voices and lives of teachers (Butt, et al., 1992; Cole & Knowles, 2000; Cortazzi, 1993; Knowles, 1992; Nelson, 1992; Webster & Mertova, 2007). This next section will focus on recent research related to the use of biography, discourse, and blogging to study the identity development of teachers.

#### *Biography*

Jephcote and Salisbury (2009) investigated the role of biography in “determining and explaining how teachers undertook their role in classrooms and in the formation of their teacher identities” (p. 969). The researchers utilized auto-biographical accounts produced by a subset of teachers in the study in order to focus “around the notion of ‘becoming and being’ a teacher” (p. 967). Jephcote and Salisbury contend that biography can exemplify not only the importance of training and institutional factors related to teacher education, but also on the importance of prior beliefs and experiences. They found that biography can be used to understand “the formation of teacher identities”

which “can be seen as an outcome of understanding all those experiences that have impacted on teachers’ thinking about their work” (p. 969).

Finding agreement with other literature reviewed in this chapter (Beijaard, et al., 2002; Flores & Day, 2006; Olsen, 2008), Jephcote and Salisbury (2009) found that “being a teacher is not static” (p. 971), but an ongoing process. They in fact pay homage to the symbolic interactionism of Mead (1934) by stating in their findings that teachers “develop a view of ‘self’ as they make sense of the responses and actions that others take to their own actions” (p. 971), which is also a direct correlation to Mead’s Generalized Other. They conclude that these interactions “can play an important part in identity formation and re-formation” (p. 971).

### *Talk*

Cohen (2010) as well asserts that “professional identity is an ongoing, dynamic process” and that “teacher narratives and storytelling” are an important “avenue for understanding the characteristics of teacher professional identity and the processes through which that identity is developed” (pp. 473-474). Yet, Cohen notes that there needs to be a better understanding of how teachers use language in the negotiation of a professional identity. By studying teachers’ conversations with other teachers (as opposed to mentor teachers, students, or administrators), Cohen sought to highlight “ways in which colleagues constitute key actors in teachers’ formation of professional identity” (p. 474).

Cohen (2008, 2010) presented findings from the result of a focus group with three Humanities teachers at an urban middle- and high school in the Midwestern United States (which was a part of a larger ethnographic study that was conducted over a period of a

year and a half). While not focusing on beginning teachers (the teachers in the focus group had been at the school for at least five years), Cohen focused on “how the teachers accomplish particular meanings for professional identity in the context of talk about classroom practices and challenges” (2010, p. 474). The research questions Cohen sought to answer questions related to the role of reflective talk, discourse strategies, and how teachers contextualize their professional identities through talk.

Cohen (2010) applied a notion of “identity recognition by thinking of talk as a series of *identity bids* that depend on recognition from others to be successful” (p. 475). In much the same way as Mead (1934) likens taking on the role of the Generalized Other to playing a game, Cohen asserts that “like players in a card game, we put out identity bids through particular forms of social interaction. The ways in which these bids are recognized by other relevant players influence both the determination of the game being played and the stakes of the game” (p. 475). While Cohen’s study sought to better understand the specific identity bid of “*teacher as learner*” (p. 475), her findings suggest that for the teachers in her study reflective talk (personal storytelling and analytical talk) were a “central strategy” in the “identity work” of the participants (p. 479).

Of interest to my research, Cohen (2010) found strategies employed by the teachers in the study in which they were “co-constructing stories, warranting identity claims with observable evidence, building on, reiterating, and extending shared themes across contexts” (p. 479). These strategies are remarkably similar to those employed in narrative research, the methodology utilized for this study, and which will be highlighted in greater detail in Chapter 3.

### *Blogging*

While still a relatively new phenomena, there is a body of research emerging in the literature related to blogging and identity development. In 1995, with the World Wide Web still in its infancy, Sherry Turkle was delving into concepts related to identity and self for computer users. While her focus in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Turkle, 1995) dealt primarily with individuals involved in online role-playing games referred to as MUDs (multi-user domains), she asserted that these Internet users were constructing multiple selves within a cloak of anonymity. Turkle writes that

The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality we self-fashion and self-create. What kinds of personae do we make? What relation do these have with what we have traditionally thought of as the "whole" person"? (p.180)

Turkle also addressed the (at the time) new idiom for creating another self, a "home" identity, by the creation on the Web of a "home page" (p. 258). She referred to home pages as "dramatic illustration(s) of new notions of identity" (p. 259). For Turkle, "we come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine" (p. 9).

Fast forward to the present and both MUDs and home pages of Turkle's research are at best passé. The text-based MUDs have given way to three-dimensional virtual worlds such as Second Life ([www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com)), and home pages have given way to what O'Reilly (2005) referred to as Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites like Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)) and MySpace ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)). Blogs in particular are purported to reflect the personae of their author. As Efimova and Fielder posit,

...what makes weblogs different is not the publication of content per-se, but the personalities behind them. Weblogs are increasingly becoming *on-line identities* of their authors. Compared to topic-centred(sic) or community centred(sic) on-line discussions, a weblog often provides a narration of someone's feeling, thinking, reading, and experiencing. (p. 3)

Davies and Merchant (2007) took an auto-ethnographic approach to study their own activity of blog posting and “associated digital practices such as reading, linking to and commenting on other blogs as a focus for reflection and analysis” (p. 175). During their reflection, they were made aware of the “broader issues of identity” in their online writing, noting that “threading through our posts were stories of our lives” (p. 177).

While recognizing the concept of identity in narrative, Davies and Merchant (2007) believe that what is being developed is a “plural narrative” (p. 178). It is the role of the (real or imagined) audience that “prompts us to think about what we wish to show” (p.178). They liken identity not only to narrative, but to performance, stating that “identity performance, involves a sense of audience – an audience to whom one is presenting a particular narrative (or narratives) of the self” (p. 178). They in fact state the identity performance “mirrors multiple and shifting perceptions of audience” (p. 192).

Davies and Merchant (2007) posit that there is an emergence of “a particular kind of blogger identity; an identity that has a symbiotic relationship with other aspects of the self” (p. 179). Noting that there is a “tension between self-disclosure and public performance” they contend that “even the most intimate revelation of one’s private life can be constructed or perceived as a carefully managed process of self-presentation” (p. 179). In my own research with Teach For America bloggers, it was also important to understand what role the perception of audience played in the writing of the participants in my study.

There are others whom feel that cyber-theorists such as Turkle and her postmodern account of identity (one which is fragmented, multiple, and de-centered), and Davies' and Merchants' "plural narrative" (2007, p. 178) misses the mark. These researchers have found that personal homepage and blog authors work hard to ensure that their online personae reflects and supports the development of their offline self (Chandler, 1998; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Luehmann, 2008; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008; Miller & Mather, 1998; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004; Robinson, 2007; Wynn & Katz, 1997).

While not specifically related to teacher identity development, there was a study on how identities are presented and formed in an online setting. Huffaker & Calvert (2005) used content analysis to examine how teenagers present their identities online in their blogs. Only blogs created by 13 to 17 year olds were selected for study, with a process of stratified random sampling employed to create an even sample. The online identity of the final sample (n=70; 35 male and 35 female) was explored as follows:

1. The disclosure of real-world personal information
2. Emotive features used to express thoughts and feelings
3. The language that adolescents use to express their sexual identity; and
4. The tone and semantics of the blogs, focusing on resolute, active, and communal language styles and the subcomponents of passive, aggressive, and cooperative language features. (Discussion section, para. 1)

The results found the blogs of male and female teenagers to be strikingly similar. These teenagers were using the blogs not to create multiple "public faces", but an "anchor and a consistent public face as they engage in the very serious business of constructing a stable cohesive set of representations of who they are" (Conclusion section, para. 3). They note that the results support the "social interactionist perspective, in as much as language is being used to construct and reflect adolescent identity"

(Conclusion section, para. 3). This is consistent with the theory of narrative identity and the equating of identity with stories (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). While not specifically related to teacher identity, this research does provide insight into how a specific group is using the blogs not to create a separate identity, but to reflect their offline persona. Also, the sample group in this study were all members of Generation Y, as are the majority of members of Teach For America, and provides insight into how this subset of the population may be using the new technology of blogging.

A study that did seek to ascertain how k-12 public school teachers were using and how they perceived the usefulness of blogs was conducted by Ray and Hocutt (2006). The researcher specifically sought to determine the usefulness of blogs to support reflective practice. A census was conducted that located 142 teacher-created, teacher-centered blogs that were active in the spring of 2005. The study was not interested in pre-service teachers using blogs or in blogs created by teachers for instructional uses with their students.

A sample of 30 bloggers were selected from the 142 blogs located by the census taken by the researchers. Of the 30, 16 responded for inclusion in the study. The bloggers consisted of one elementary teacher, eight middle school, and seven high school teachers. Six were male, nine female, and one blogger did not disclose their gender. The majority of the bloggers published their blogs anonymously with only one using her real name.

The blogs and comments to the researchers were analyzed to determine emergent themes. The findings suggest that the participants found their blogging to be useful in promoting reflective practice and social and collaborative interaction. In terms of reflection, Ray & Hocutt (2006) noted that “many of the teachers’ entries demonstrated a

process of continuous reflection about their students and about their knowledge and understanding of other issues impacting practice” (p. 15). Blogging also allowed the participants to overcome a feeling of isolation as they were able to make connections with peers and others in the blogosphere to help in the creation of a community of support.

An interesting aspect to the Ray & Hocutt (2006) research is that it highlighted the concern for the bloggers’ privacy and the ethical issues bloggers should consider. While the majority of bloggers posted anonymously, they were ever cognizant of the public nature of their blogs and “avoided sharing specifics about their students, colleagues, or the work place” (p. 15). The researchers did note that they did view some unethical practices in the blogging of their participants, and as such developed the following list of nine guidelines for educational bloggers:

1. Avoid using the real name of students, colleagues or other school personnel. Respect their right to privacy.
2. Think before you type. Ask yourself whether what you are posting is hurtful to others. Are you presenting a fair and balanced perspective on the issues you post about? Or are you simply venting frustrations? Would you sign your name to what you are posting? If not, what purpose do you have in make a particular post?
3. Avoid blogging from school. Even the most innocent of posts may put you in violation of your school or district Acceptable Use Policy (AUP).
4. Avoid violation of U.S. copyright laws. While the ease of use for many blog sites make it a snap to add these files to your blog, all images, sound, or other files should be of your own created or public domain files. Rather than copy/pasting entries from other blogs, link to the entry within your posts.
5. Avoid use of school or district identifiers. Information specific to school or district locale should remain confidential.
6. Consider making your blog “favorites only.” Many free blog sites offer this option.
7. Avoid using your school e-mail as your contact e-mail on your blog. Free e-mails are available from a variety of sources. Most school e-mail addresses use geographic identifiers that can be used to back track to you and to your school.

8. Avoid posting students' work without obtaining prior consent. Students' intellectual property rights should be respected.
9. Read your local AUP or Internet Use Policy. Know your rights; know your obligations. (Ray & Hocutt, 2006, p. 18)

While not specifically related to blogging, a study with teachers using an online asynchronous learning environment was conducted by Grion and Varisco (2007) to determine if online collaborative practices enhanced professional identity development. The participants were both in-service and pre-service teachers taking an online course. Some of the in-service teachers were novices (with one to three years of experience) while the other were considered experts.

The teachers in the study (n=47) participated in activities individually and in groups based upon their service level (expert, novice, pre-service). The study had two aims:

1. To correlate the different constructions of professional profiles in pre-service and in-service teacher students, pre-post case-work activities.
2. To analyse (sic) the nature of interactions among future teachers and in-service teachers, specifically social cognitive processes within shared case-work online discussion. (Grion & Varisco, 2007, p. 275)

Grion and Varisco (2007) found that the expert teachers seemed to exhibit more "inflexibility" and "functional fixedness" and that the novices did not (p. 281). In terms of their professional identity development, the researchers found that expert teachers need to establish a "novice state of mind" (p. 281). Expert teachers need to "approach each situation with the fresh eyes of the novice: he has to feel individual confidence in the group and trust in others to open himself, his views, values, understandings, (and) knowledge to examination and re-evaluation" (p. 282). Because of the novice nature of the individuals involved in my own research, this research suggests that they will be more open and flexible to others in helping them develop their own professional identities.

There have also been two studies that investigated both blogging and the identity development process of teachers (Luehmann, 2008; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). Both studies used Gee's (2001) definition of identity as being recognized by self or others as a "certain type of person" (Gee, 2001, p. 99).

In the first, Luehmann (2008) conducted a case study to explore the affordances a blog offered to "Ms. Frizzle", an urban middle school science teacher and blogger, to support her professional identity development. The 316 posts she wrote over one school year were analyzed and triangulated with data from e-mail exchanges and interviews with Ms. Frizzle and her colleagues. Luehmann asserts that becoming a teacher "is a very challenging and complex understanding, especially when a teacher faces the additional challenges presented by an urban setting and is trying to implement practices that are not yet the norm" (p. 292). In analyzing the blog postings of Ms. Frizzle, Luehmann states that she was interested in "identifying which *practices*...she engaged in while blogging, as this would provide evidence at least of the opportunities for professional identity development offered by blogging" (p. 294).

According to Luehmann (2008), Ms. Frizzle's blog was selected "because of the consistency and frequency of her blogging, the many interesting topics covered in her blog, the lively community that has developed around this blog, and – last but not least – Ms. Frizzle's willingness to engage in an ongoing dialogue with me about her blogging practice and to provide access to colleagues for data collection purposes (p. 297). In terms of the role of blogging in her identity development process, Luehmann concedes that "Ms. Frizzle is aware of the importance of blogging in her development as a teacher, even if she has difficulty pinpointing it down" (p. 329). While this study supports the

potential blogs have for promoting teachers' professional identity development, it also indicates that the way in which teachers use blogging will determine the extent of the benefits they can derive from this practice. This was an important consideration for my own research (the way in which teachers use blogging) and was considered throughout the data analysis of the blogs from the participants in my study.

In the second study, Luehmann and Tinelli (2008) report on 15 secondary science-teachers and examined "the ways in which blog-based social interactions nurtured the development of professional identities of teachers trying to bring reform-based practices to their science classroom" (p. 325). While not beginning teachers, the participants in the study were enrolled in a year-long graduate-level seminar and as a component of course requirements, they were asked to maintain a personal, professional blog and to read and respond to each other's blogs. For the researchers, the construct of identity is a "valuable lens for teacher learning and development as it foregrounds the personal and multifaceted nature of learning in this profession (p. 324).

The two primary data sources for the investigation were the content of each participant's blog and survey responses that indicated their perceptions of the value of blogging. The role of community stands out in this research, noting that "connecting like-minded colleagues through social-networking technologies was shown in this study to offer participants opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions that contributed to learning and professional identity development" (p. 331). A limitation of this study was in the requiring of the teachers to create and post to the blogs, as well as to read the blogs of their classmates. Having not started blogging voluntarily, this begs the questions as to

whether these teachers would have found this of value if not a class requirement or if they will continue these practices once the seminar ended.

### *Summary*

Research (Jephcote & Salisbury, 2009) has shown how auto-biographical accounts can be used to study the experience of being and becoming a teacher. This study found agreement with other research (Beijaard, et al., 2002; Flores & Day, 2006; Olsen, 2008) that developing a teacher identity is not static, but an ongoing process. Another study (Cohen, 2010) found that how teachers talk about classroom practices and challenges, impacts their identity development. Cohen refers to talk as being a series of identity bids that may or may not be recognized by others. Her findings suggest that for the teachers in her study reflective talk was a central strategy in the identity development process of the participants. Blogging is a new phenomena and blogs have been shown to reflect the personae of their authors (Effimova & Fiedler, 2004). One study (Davies and Merchant, 2007) found that the real or imagined audience that a blogger may have prompts bloggers to consider what they post in public, and this creates a narrative that is plural, which is in line with the earlier studies by Turkle (1995). Other studies, (Chandler, 1998; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Luehmann, 2008; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008; Miller & Mather, 1998; Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, et al., 2004; Robinson, 2007; Wynn & Katz, 1997) however, assert that an online personae reflects the authors offline self. One study of teachers using blogs (Ray & Hocutt, 2006) noted that the participants' blog entries demonstrated a process of continuous reflection about their students and of other issues impacting their practice. Blogging also allowed the teachers in the study to overcome a feeling of isolation. Two studies (Luehmann, 2008; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008)

investigated blogging and the identity development of teachers. The first study supports the potential blogs have for promoting teachers' professional identity development. It also indicates that the way in which teachers use blogging will determine the extent of the benefits they can derive from this practice. The second study found that the role of community was important in providing the participants with opportunities to engage through their blogs in meaningful discussions that contributed to learning and their professional identity development.

### Conclusion

The literature reviewed for this chapter provided insight into the issues related to the challenges of beginning teachers, teacher identity development, and the role of society, biography, talk and blogging on the teacher identity development process. The research on beginning teachers showed that novices need to enter the profession with a realistic idea of what they are getting into. It can be a struggle, especially when pre-existing ideas about teaching are challenged. But this is exactly what urban teacher preparation programs are seeking to do, challenge ones pre-existing beliefs, not only of teaching but of the students and communities they serve. There is also concern about the level of support offered to students in such programs. The development of the teacher persona was found to be critical, and urban educators need to see themselves as change agents with a mission for social justice. This type of identity should be supported via a community of practice, and this in turn helps in teacher retention. The research on identity showed it to be an ongoing process and can be situated in narratives and developed by assuming the role of the Generalized Other. It also highlighted to necessity of future-oriented talk in these narratives, which can be just as powerful as reflection. Finally, biography, talk, and the act of blogging were shown to be mechanisms for the

creation of narratives that in turn can reflect the identity development process. Because of its relative newness, there seems to be a gap in the research for studies that involve the utilization of blogs to study the identity development process of beginning teachers. With that being the case, my research should prove useful in adding to the literature additional data about this relatively new phenomena. The next chapter will detail the methodology selected and utilized for conducting the research in this study. It will also include the context of the study, participant selection process, data collection, and analysis process. The ethical considerations of the research and how I handled my biases as a researcher are also discussed.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the identity development process of a purposively selected group of beginning teachers who chronicled on their blogs about their experiences in an alternative certification program (Teach For America). The study sought to answer the following research questions:

How do the stories in blog postings assist in the understanding of the identity development process of beginning teachers?

- a. What are the teacher identity-oriented stories told by the participants?
- b. What do these stories reveal about the identity development process of these Teach For America teachers?

I began the first chapter with my own narrative account of why I entered, and left, teaching after two years in the classroom. I also framed the study by presenting the problem of teacher attrition, exploring a national policy promoting alternative certification, establishing the theoretical framework for the study, and introducing the phenomena of blogging by teachers. Chapter 1 also presented the purpose of the study, research questions, limitations and delimitations, and definition of key terms. Chapter 2 presented a review of the literature to situate the study within the areas of the challenges of beginning teachers, teacher identity development, and the role of society, biography, talk and blogging on the teacher identity development process.

In this chapter I focus on the methodology. This includes the context of the study and participant selection, followed by a detailed examination of the methods implemented, data collection and analysis process, including the ethical considerations of the research and how I handled my biases as a researcher.

### Rationale for the Selection of the Methodology

For this study, I used narrative research to analyze and report the stories of the participants who blogged during their first two years of teaching in the Teach For America program. In doing so, a better understanding of their identity development process has been brought forth in their restoried accounts. Creswell (2005) states that narrative research is used “when you have individuals willing to tell their stories and you want to report their stories” (p. 474). Returning to the literature reviewed for this study, it was shown that teachers who blog about their teaching are creating narratives which contain the stories from which their identity development process can be identified and studied (Luehmann, 2008; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008; Payne, 2008).

According to “The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative” (Abbott, 2002), narrative is “something we all engage in, artists and non-artists alike” and that we “engage in narrative so often and with such unconscious ease that the gift for it would seem to be everyone’s birthright” (p. 1). Abbott (2002) defines narrative commonly as “the telling of a story” (p. 193), with story being defined as “a sequence of events involving entities” (p. 195). Gubrium and Holstein (1997) assert that the stories within narratives may be “short accounts that emerge within or across turns at ordinary conversation, in interviews or interrogations, in public documents, or in organizational records” (p. 146). Savin-Baden and van Niekerk (2007) are in agreement with this

concept, likening narratives to “interruptions of reflection in a storied life” (p. 464). These interruptions are often unplanned, such as the example of an unexpected illness, which may “disrupt identities, thus changing the story and the storied-ness of lives” (p. 464).

Specific to the study of teachers, Cortazzi (1993) asserts that the analysis of teachers’ narratives allows researchers to study “questions of teachers’ cultures, experience, and beliefs” (p. 5). He also describes narratives as being the stories told by teachers of their own experiences, and that these narratives could be thought of as “impression-management, as the presentation of their professional selves” (p. 42). In support of this concept, Lyons and LaBoskey (2002) assert that narratives can be useful to study the “situated complexities of teachers’ work and classroom practice, which are often messy, uncertain, and unpredictable” (p. 15).

As noted in the theoretical framework, Sfard and Prusak (2005) have developed a narrative theory of identity in which identity is equated with the construction of stories. This investigation focused particularly on the identity stories related to the other theory framing this study, that of Mead’s Social Theory of Identity (1934). In this theory identity is shaped by the taking on of the role(s) of what Mead refers to as the Generalized Other, which is defined as the “organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self” (p. 154). Through these lenses, I was able to investigate the identity development process of the beginning teachers via the stories they have told in their blogs.

### Narrative Research as a Methodology

Not to be confused with content analysis, which according to Smith (2000) is “derived from mainstream social science and is used primarily in quantitative research”, narrative research methods are “derived as much from literary and philosophical analysis as from social science and are used predominantly in qualitative research” (p. 327). Smith goes on to note that the methods in narrative research are varied and with few sources to draw from. Creswell (2005) is of agreement stating that “despite substantial interest in narrative research, its methods are still developing and it is infrequently discussed in the literature” (p. 474).

Even as such, Creswell (2005) identified seven major characteristics of narrative research that distinguish it from other forms of qualitative inquiry:

1. A Focus on the Experiences of an Individual - these include both personal and social interactions. While noting that narrative researchers typically study only a single individual, multiple individuals may also be studied.
2. A Chronology of the Experiences – this characteristic “sets narrative apart from other genres of research” (Creswell, 2005, p. 479). It includes past, present, and future experiences.
3. The Collection of Individual Stories- these stories are generally first-person telling or retelling by an individual that often contain a beginning, middle, and an end.
4. Restorying of the Field Texts by the Researcher – This is the process of the researcher retelling the story of the participant in the researcher’s own words. This consists of the placing of experiences in a chronological sequence.

Elements such as setting, characters, actions, problem, and resolution may be used in the restorying. Other elements that may be used are interaction, continuity, and situation.

5. Identification of Themes – a small number of themes (five to seven) are identified. These may be presented in a separate section of the study following the restorying by the researcher.
6. Describing the Context or Setting of the Experiences of the Individual – the researcher includes in the restorying detailed descriptions of the place(s) and/or the context of where the story takes place.
7. Collaborating with the Participants – involves creating a working relationship with the participants and allowing them to become actively involved as the inquiry unfolds.

The specific steps I took in conducting this narrative research will be described in greater detail at the end of this chapter. Next, I turn to the context for the study to give a clearer understanding of the rationale for the selection of the participants.

#### Context for the Study

The teachers that were contacted for selection were former Teach For America corps members who blogged on the site “Teach For Us” (<http://teachforus.org>). In order to more fully understand why teachers in this particular alternative certification program were targeted for selection, I will first provide a brief historical overview of the Teach For America program. I will then provide an overview of the independent blog site “Teach For Us” that allowed these teachers to publically blog about their experiences becoming teachers in the program.

### *Teach For America*

Teach For America (TFA) was founded in 1990 by Wendy Kopp as part of her undergraduate senior thesis at Princeton University. Kopp was concerned about what she saw as an inequity in the educational opportunities for students in low income urban and rural school districts. Her vision was to begin a national teacher corps modeled after the Peace Corps and alternative teacher certification programs that would recruit “top recent college graduates” (Kopp, 2003, p. 6). She stated that if these graduates

...devoted two years to teaching in public schools, they could have a real impact on the lives of disadvantaged kids. Because of their energy and commitment, they would be relentless in their efforts to ensure their students achieved. They would throw themselves into their jobs, working investment banking hours in classrooms instead of skyscrapers on Wall Street. They would question the way things are and fight to do what was right for children.(Kopp, 2003, p. 6)

While not solely founded to address teacher attrition, Kopp does note that “even in times of general teacher surplus, there is always a shortage of qualified teachers in very low-income areas, and it is possible for individuals who haven’t majored in education to be hired to meet the need” (2003, p. 9). In her book, Kopp also included documents that she used for raising capital sent to funding prospects that included the following paragraph:

Our vision is that teaching becomes the “thing to do” on college campuses, that thousands of top graduating non-education majors decide to commit themselves to teaching; *that they mitigate the persistent teacher shortages which exist in our inner cities and rural areas*[emphasis added]; and that thousands of incredibly sharp individuals, whether they remain in teaching or enter business or government or law, will have the knowledge and commitment to be spokespersons for teacher professionalization and educational reform.(Kopp, 2003, p. 45)

While the mission of TFA is geared towards what Kopp refers to as “educational inequity” (2003, p. 5), the above affirms that an initial goal of the program was to address

shortages in some of the most challenging school districts in the country caused by attrition. It has certainly grown since its founding 20 years ago. According to the TFA website

Teach For America's network has grown to over 24,000 individuals. We have become one of the nation's largest providers of teachers for low-income communities, and we have been recognized for building a pipeline of leaders committed to educational equity and excellence.(Teach For America, 2010b)

According to its 2009 Corps Profile (Teach For America, 2009a), in the fall of 2009 more than 4,000 TFA corps members began teaching, with these being selected from more than 35,000 applicants. The average TFA corps member in 2009 had an average SAT score of 1344 and an average GPA of 3.6, with 89% of them holding a leadership position while in their undergraduate program. 70% of its 2009 corps was Caucasian, and 25% had been Pell Grant recipients in college. Unlike traditionally prepared teachers, which “require a substantial investment of student time and money just to become certified, TFA corps members only need to attend an all-expenses-paid summer boot camp before vaulting into the classroom” (Labaree, 2010, p. 49).

Teach For America is not without controversy. Many (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Donaldson, 2008; Hopkins, 2008; Labaree, 2010; Veltri, 2008) point to alarming issues with TFA, particularly in the lack of preparation of their recruits, overt corporate influence, lack of effectiveness of the teachers, inability to impact the revolving door, and the setting up of contrasts between traditional teachers and TFA teachers. In times of great economic difficulties nationwide, there are reports (Sawchuk, 2009; Toppo, 2009) of school districts replacing higher salaried veteran teachers who have lost their jobs due to budget cuts, by the lower salaried, less experienced TFA corps members.

In terms of addressing attrition, according to its 2009 Press Kit (Teach For America, 2009b), a 2008 TFA alumni survey found two-thirds of its 17,000 alumni are still working full-time in education, with over half of those still as classroom teachers. While not noted if these teachers are still teaching in high need areas, the data show that there has been a 67% attrition rate from their corps members being a classroom teacher. This is greater than that of traditionally prepared teachers as shown in other studies (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Huling-Austin, 1990; Ingersoll, 2003; Murnane, et al., 1991), yet can be seen as being on par with teachers serving in low income and minority schools (Barnes, et al., 2007; Guin, 2004; Hanushek, et al., 2004; Imazeki, 2005).

*“Teach For Us”*

The blog site “Teach For Us” (<http://teachforus.org>) describes itself as follows:

Teach For Us is the organization that connects Teach For America teachers with each other for support and provides a place for them to share their stories with the world. Each day we’re providing a window into classrooms across the country as seen through the eyes of real teachers...written in their own words.  
(TeachForUs.Org, 2011)

In order to ensure that the blogger is or was affiliated with the program, a valid Teach For America email address is required to sign up and be granted access to a portion of the blog site.

While not officially affiliated with Teach For America, the “Teach For Us” blog site was started by a TFA corps member while attending a TFA institute in July of 2006 (originally known as TeachFor.Us). In 2008, the official Teach For America website began promoting “Teach For Us” as an “independent website featuring blogs from hundreds of corps members, who share their day-to-day experiences in and out of the classroom” (Teach For America, 2010a). In an edition of the Scholastic “Instructor”

online magazine, “Teach For Us” was voted the website with the “best news from the trenches”, noting that “whether you want TFA dirt (like how tough the boot-camp training really is) or warm fuzzies (like one blogger’s quest to get her student to love books by reading with her nightly over the phone), you’ll find the goods in this collection of blogs from TFA corps members working all over the country” (Scholastic Instructor, 2009).

### Participant Selection

A unique aspect to the teachers in the Teach For America program is that for the majority, becoming a teacher was a decision made late in their undergraduate college career. Therefore, their identity as a teacher had not begun to be formed while in college as is the case with more traditionally prepared teachers. Teachers from more traditional programs have several years of college coursework related to the aspects of teaching (e.g. pedagogy, learning psychology, behavioral management, etc.) and have also had opportunities for field experiences such as classroom observations and student teaching. Teach For America corps members are generally not education majors and are initiated into teaching via a five week summer program known as “Institute” before starting to teach fulltime in their assigned school. Due to this lack of a solidified pre-formed teacher identity which could have been forming years prior to stepping into the shoes of a teacher, these individuals provide a unique opportunity to investigate teacher identity development. Because several of these teachers are also bloggers, their stories provide a window into the experiences that shape their identities as they are becoming teachers.

An analysis of the “Teach For Us” site in February of 2010 found that, at that time, 633 future, current, or former Teach For America participants had started a blog on

the site. As with many in the blogosphere, not all of these TFA bloggers maintained their blog consistently or for a significant amount of time. Of the 633 bloggers on “Teach For Us”, only 26 of these blogs were maintained at any consistency for two or more years. Consistency for the purpose of this study is defined as the individual posting to her/his blog for the majority of months of the two-year period (as most summer months when school is not in session are noticeably light months for the bloggers in terms of their postings). The two-year period is critical for this research in that it is not only the time-frame for which these TFA corps members commit to serve (although some do drop out), but as noted in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 (Hebert & Worthy, 2001; McCann & Johannessen, 2004; Rust, 1994; Worthy, 2005), it is part of the critical time period in which their teacher identity is being formed. Due to the fact that the “Teach For Us” site was founded in the summer of 2006, selected participants either began teaching and subsequently began blogging about their teaching in that year (2006), in 2007, or in 2008.

As noted in Chapter 1, attrition is especially high in schools serving low income and minority students, particularly among new teachers (Barnes, et al., 2007; Guin, 2004; Hanushek, et al., 2004; Imazeki, 2005). These are the settings that Teach For America targets. Also, as an attendee of a large, urban university, I am extremely interested in the TFA corps members who have been placed to teach in urban settings. While TFA places teachers in high need urban and rural districts, for the purpose of this research, I selected only the urban middle and high school teachers as a possibility for participation (n=10). Of this population, eight had evidence on their site as referencing themselves as female, with the other two as male. These middle and high school teachers are generally assigned to teach subject areas which are related to their major in college, and recent research

indicates that this impacts retention of TFA teachers (Donaldson, 2008). The subject areas these teachers were assigned to teach are High School Science (n=4), High School English (n=3), High School Math (n=1), Middle School Science (n=1) and Spanish (n=1).

### *Ethical Considerations for Participant Selection*

As previously noted, the blogs were available online to the general public via the “Teach For Us” website. As put forth by Bassett and O’Riordan (2002) “if an individual or group has chosen to use Internet media to publish their opinions, then the researcher needs to consider their decision to the same degree that they would with a similar publication in traditional print media” (p. 244). Yet are these blogs public enough to be utilized for research without gaining Informed Consent from the bloggers?

Elm (2009) puts forth four degrees of openness for Internet researchers to consider; public, semi-public, semi-private, and private. For Elm, “a public environment is one that is open and available for everyone, that anyone with an Internet connection can access, and that does not require any form of membership or registration” (p. 75). According to Elm, this environment is “clearly public enough to study without informed consent” (p. 76). Yet further on, Elm concedes that there are two crucial questions that should be considered when doing research on the Internet in these public spaces; “for whom is the content created, and to which audience is the content intended or directed?” (p. 77). In light of these two questions, I must acknowledge that I do not believe the teachers writing the blogs were blogging with a researcher in mind who may one day publish their innermost accounts of their experiences as a beginning teacher. Also, in light of my theoretical foundation that equates stories with identity, it would be unethical

for me to treat their postings strictly as textual (as if I am not involved in the study of human subjects). Furthermore, the selection of narrative research as a methodology requires collaboration by the researcher with the participants of a study.

With this being the case, I sought and obtained University IRB approval and Informed Consent from the bloggers in this study, even though the blogs were publicly available. After IRB approval was secured in the summer of 2010, I posted the following comment on each of the ten blogs targeted for consideration:

My name is Neil Rigole and I am a doctoral candidate at Georgia State University conducting research on the identity development of beginning teachers via the narrative analysis of their blogs. I am particularly interested in Teach for America corps members' blogging on the TeachFor.Us website. In my research, I am only including teachers who have blogged for the majority of their first two years in the classroom, and your blog is one of the few that falls into this category. I would only use your first two years even if you blog past that point. Would you consider allowing me to use your blog postings for this research? Your participation is voluntary, and your anonymity will be secured. This research has been granted approval through the Institutional Review Board of Georgia State University and if you agree to be a part of the study I will send you the official Informed Consent Form which details the research and your rights as a participant. The analysis will be conducted this summer (July-September) as I hope to defend my dissertation late fall 2010 or early spring 2011. I can be reached via email at [nrigole1@student.gsu.edu](mailto:nrigole1@student.gsu.edu) should you agree to participate. Thanks so much for your consideration!

I also had found an email address for several of the bloggers and sent them an email with the same request as above. Three bloggers responded to my request by sending me an email stating that they would be willing to participate in the study, the other seven never responded. These three bloggers had a combined total of over 500 posts over their two years of teaching. Due to their similarities and the amount of data provided, no additional participants were sought. After communicating back to them via email, they provided me with a mailing address to send them the IRB consent form along with a self-addressed stamped envelope to return the signed form to me by mail.

### The Participants

Two females and one male were the participants for this study. The two females are both Caucasian and the male is of Asian American decent. All were in their early twenties when they began teaching. Each had also blogged before beginning to teach. One female (Ms. A.) taught high school math, the other (Ms. E.) taught middle school science. The male teacher (Mr. Z.) taught high school science.

*Ms. A.*

Ms. A. had been a math major who was hired to teach high school mathematics in the southwestern part of the United States. She attended what considers itself to be a highly selective private college in the northwestern United States. She admits to having joined Teach For America “on a whim” yet was the only participant in the study who remained a classroom teacher after her two year commitment to Teach For America ended. She is currently a doctoral student studying math education and also works for Teach For America. She continues to blog about her experiences in graduate school and states that she thinks about education and math “all day every day.”

*Ms. E.*

Ms. E. was a neuroscience major at a highly acclaimed private research institute of technology in the New England region of the United States. She graduated with two bachelor’s degrees and was hired to teach middle school science in a large urban school district in the northeast. Ms. E. was a prolific blogger, having posted almost every day of her two years as a Teach For America corps member. She also went to work for Teach For America after leaving the classroom as a teacher and continues to blog about her personal and professional experiences.

*Mr. Z.*

Mr. Z. had been a pre-med major at a private research university in the southeastern United States. He deferred going to medical school to teach high school biology in the same part of the country. He calls his signing up for Teach For America as a “why not?” decision. He left teaching after his two year commitment to TFA ended, yet he still questions if that was the right decision. He is currently attending medical school at a private research university in the mid-western part of the United States. He currently does not blog consistently, although he has sporadically posted on his “Teach For Us” site about his thoughts concerning public educational issues since he left the classroom.

#### Steps for Conducting Narrative Research

In addition to the seven characteristics listed earlier, Creswell (2005) developed seven steps for conducting narrative research in the field of education. What follows is the step-by-step plan for how I utilized these to guide my research.

##### *Step 1 - Identifying a Phenomenon to Explore that Addresses an Educational Problem*

As noted in Chapter 1, teacher attrition is a national problem and it is especially high in schools serving low income and minority students, particularly among new teachers (Barnes, et al., 2007; Guin, 2004; Hanushek, et al., 2004; Imazeki, 2005). This high attrition rate can have a devastating impact on public schools and the students they serve.

##### *Step 2 - Purposefully Selecting an Individual(s) to Learn About the Phenomenon*

As illustrated in the Participant Selection section of this chapter, Teach For America corps members who blogged on the “Teach For Us” blog site were selected as participants for the study. These bloggers taught in an urban, high needs school at the

middle and high school level. Recent research indicates that middle and high school teachers are generally assigned to teach subject areas which are related to their major in college, and this impacts retention of TFA teachers (Donaldson, 2008).

*Step 3 - Collecting the Stories from the Individuals in the Study*

The stories that were collected were found in the blog postings of the participants. The unit of analysis was the teachers' first two years of teaching, as described by the teachers in the narratives found in their blog postings. This type of data collection is termed as being nonreactive. According to Janetzko (2008), in nonreactive data collection the "persons under investigation are usually not aware that they are being studied, so that their behavior is not affected by the data collection procedure" (p. 161). While the participants were contacted to obtain Informed Consent as well as to be included in the research process (Step 5 below), their blog postings occurred prior to their knowledge of this research. Janetzko brought forth the following considerations regarding nonreactive data collection stating the following:

Are the persons studied on the Internet in a nonreactive way really unaware of possible data-recording procedures? Speaking either of awareness or of nonawareness is of course an oversimplification, since persons may suspect that they are or will be studied without being fully aware of it...Online behavior changes provoked by awareness of data recording can be expected on two levels. Firstly, there is increased motivation to use anonymizing services....Secondly, there may be some form of self-censored communication caused by privacy concerns. (pp. 162-163)

In terms of the bloggers selected for this study from the "Teach For Us" site, the individuals actually took advantage of both of the levels described above. First, all of the bloggers used an alias and did not give their real names in any posts. Even though these bloggers used an alias, in an effort to further anonymize the participants, additional pseudonyms were used in their restored accounts. Second, the bloggers had the

advantage of password protecting posts if they felt it was warranted. One of the bloggers took advantage of this ability multiple times during her two years of blogging but allowed me to access these protected postings for the good of the study.

While the stories from the blogs were the central source of data, they were not the sole source. Nonreactive data has been considered to be “thin description”, and what researchers should hope to do is “go beyond what is given by thin descriptions and to obtain thick descriptions instead” (Janetzko, 2008, p. 163). This occurred via the inclusion of information from email exchanges with the participants as well as having the participants answer a short series of questions related to their teaching and blogging experiences (to gain further insight into their stories). The following are the ten questions which were emailed to the participants in the fall of 2010:

1. Why did you blog throughout your first two-years of teaching?
2. When you blogged, who do you think is reading it?
3. Did you blog before becoming a teacher? If so, about what?
4. Did your district have a policy about teachers blogging?
5. Did you talk about your blog with other teachers at your school?
6. Did you read other blogs about teaching? Which ones? Why? Why not?
7. Did you respond to comments left on your blog?
8. How did blogging impact your being a teacher?
9. Did you plan on blogging after you left teaching?
10. Would you recommend blogging to other new teachers? Why? Why not?

The use of these multiple sources for triangulation allowed for cross-checking of information to determine corroboration among the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

As noted in the characteristics of narrative research, and as will be shown below, collaboration with the participants was critical in the validation of their stories and ensured their voice was not lost during the restorying process.

A disadvantage to having the stories available online is that they could have theoretically disappeared should the “Teach For Us” site be taken down for any reason (such as the inability or unwillingness of the founder to continue to maintain the site, the websites’ data being destroyed by a computer virus or act of nature, or the potential of a blogger unintentionally deleting a post). Due to this, the postings were archived in digital form using Microsoft OneNote. These files, as well as the email exchanges and answers to the questions by the participants were stored on my computer and backed up to an external storage device. These electronic items, totaling over 500 pages of raw data, were also printed out and kept in a lockable file storage cabinet.

#### *Step 4 - Restorying or Retelling the Individual’s Stories*

An advantage to this type of nonreactive online data is that initial transcription was not required, as the text was already in electronic format on the blog. These postings were considered my field texts and raw data. In narrative research, the researcher then retranscribes these raw data by “identifying the key elements of the story” (Creswell, 2005, p. 480). While elements such as setting, characters, actions, problem, and resolution may be used in this retranscription process, I drew from the “three-dimensional space approach” of Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 49) where personal experiences were examined as well as social interactions. The elements of interaction, continuity, and situation form the three dimensions. Given as such, I followed a guide as recommended by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) which focused on the three elements as follows:

1. Interaction – Because this involves both the personal and the social, I analyzed the data for the personal experiences of the blogger as well as for stories of interactions with other people. These other people have a unique role in light of Mead's (1934) social theory of identity and in the taking on of the role(s) of the Generalized Other.
2. Continuity - I analyzed the data for information about experiences illustrated in descriptions of the past as well as events or actions that may occur in the future. This enabled me to consider the past, present, and future in the narratives of the bloggers and was helpful in identifying *actual* and *designated* identifying stories (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).
3. Situation - I looked for specific situations in the setting of the blogger. Some of these were related to the blogger's pre-institute experience, the Teach For America institute training, the classroom setting (which was the dominant setting for a majority of the posts of each blogger), and a variety of other professional and social situations.

After the retranscription and identification of the elements occurred, I began the restorying process. In this phase, I placed the retranscribed data into a logical and chronological sequence. This was necessary because at times elements of a story were included in multiple blog postings over a period of time, some of which included memories, verification of events, and excluded information from the initial story. Restorying entailed telling the participants' stories in my own words in a manner that hopefully allows the reader to more fully understand the story of the participant without

superfluous information, all the while attempting to maintain the voice of the original storyteller.

#### *Step 5 - Collaborating with the Participant-Storyteller*

In narrative research, this step should occur throughout the research process, beginning with the participants granting informed consent to be included in the research and ending with the “mutually illuminating story” that developed between me and the participants (Creswell, 2005, p. 483). This is similar to the concept of member checks which greatly enhance the external validity of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants read over their restoried accounts and sent me feedback as to if the accounts could be considered accurate portrayals of their experiences. In doing so, the participants offered clarification and additional information that related to their stories which provided a richer understanding of their unique experiences. This information proved to be critical for the following step.

#### *Step 6 – Writing a Story about the Participant’s Experiences*

In this step I produced a new narrative in which the restoried experiences of the participants played a central role. It was also in this step in which I located the specific themes found throughout the stories that will be highlighted in the final chapter. Creswell (2005) states that “the identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences” (p. 482).

#### *Step 7 - Validating the Accuracy of the Report*

Because of the collaborative nature of narrative research between researcher and participant, this step also occurred throughout the study via participant feedback. As noted earlier, the use of multiple sources allowed for cross-checking of information to

determine corroboration among the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Both of these methods increase the validity of my research. Verisimilitude was also considered. As noted by Creswell (2008), distortions, inability for participants to tell the *real* story, and fear of reprisal may impact the storyteller's version of the truth, yet Creswell asserts that "any story told has an element of truth in it" (p. 484). Therefore, the intent of this study was not to provide generalizability in a positivist empirical sense (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001), but to report the truth as it was constructed in the stories forged between myself and the participants.

#### Attending to Researcher Bias

My researcher bias could have been a threat to the validity of this study and one which I was careful to watch for. A key strategy that I used to understand my researcher bias was reflexivity. Through reflexivity I engaged in critical self-reflection to become more self-aware while attempting to monitor and control my biases (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). According to Merriam (1998), the primary instrument in a qualitative research is human, and as such I brought my own view of the world, my objective and subjective thoughts, as well as an agenda into this study. As noted, I too have been a teacher that left the profession after two years. I have also worked for a large university system where it was my job to recruit individuals into the alternative and traditional teacher preparation programs the system offered. I currently work with teachers and administrators in a k-12 school district where it is my responsibility to guide how technology is implemented to provide opportunities for the professional growth of the staff in the system.

Peshkin (1988) suggests that it is important to be aware of our subjective selves, and by my being aware of this ‘self’ my research was enhanced. Peshkin asserts that subjectivity “can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers’ making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (p. 18). By being constantly on the lookout for “warm and cool spots” in the “emergence of positive or negative feelings” (p. 18), I was able to better “manage” my own subjectivity (p. 20).

#### Establishing Trustworthiness

For Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is a means of judging the quality or goodness of a study. Trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry ensures the study and its findings are noteworthy to audiences. Following Creswell’s (2005) seven steps contributed to the trustworthiness of my own study. I also increased the dependability of my findings by not only collaborating with the participants but by having a peer-debriefer audit my work in the identification of identity related elements found in the raw data of the initial blog postings. The debriefer was given ten random blog postings from each of the participants (30 total) and asked to code for identity statements. The debriefer’s coding was compared to my own and found that there was a 90% agreement in our identification of identity statements. This is referred to as interrater reliability and is the “consistency of judgment among multiple observers” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 147). This auditing process not only helped to ensure the confirmability of the research, but also to ensure that my personal biases have not impacted the research to a great extent.

### Evaluating Narrative Research as a Methodology

Creswell (2005) includes a list of questions that I as a narrative researcher should ask myself when evaluating my use of narrative research methods.

- Did I focus on individual experiences?
- Was there a focus on a single individual or a few individuals?
- Did I collect the story of an individual's experience?
- Did I restory the participant's story?
- In the restorying, was the participant's voice as well as my voice as the researcher heard?
- Did I identify the themes that emerged from the story?
- Did the story include information about place or setting of the individual?
- Did the story have a temporal, chronological sequence including the past, present, and future?
- Is there evidence that I collaborated with the participants?
- Did the story adequately address the purpose and questions of the research?

I believe that by following the steps as listed in this chapter, I am able to positively answer the above questions and have conducted a narrative research study in a manner which can be critically evaluated by others interested in this topic and methodology.

### Summary

The purpose of the study was to better understand the identity development process of a purposefully selected group of beginning teachers. The participants in the study (n=3) were teachers who had previously been corps members in

the Teach For America program. The participants had also blogged on the “Teach For Us” blog hosting site about their experiences in the classroom as beginning teachers. The study utilized Creswell’s (2005) steps for conducting narrative research to analyze the stories of these middle and high school math and science teachers who had taught in urban, high needs schools. The data analysis process included following a three-dimensional approach that took into account the elements of interaction, continuity, and situation. A key part of the process was in the restorying of the participant’s stories. The end result was the creation of three new narratives which were analyzed for themes within and across the stories.

What follows are the restoried accounts of the three participants of the study (Ms. A, Mr. Z, and Ms. E.). Their accounts contain the identity-oriented stories which were initially a part of their blog posts that revealed key aspects of their identity development process. Participants also answered a short series of questions as well as dialogued with the researcher via email. Selected information from their answers and the email exchanges have been interwoven into these restoried accounts. Each story chronicles the individual participant from the point of their beginning to teach to the end of their second year in the classroom. These restoried narratives have been analyzed through the lenses of Mead’s (1934) social theory of identity and the role of the Generalized Other, as well as Sfard and Prusak’ (2005) narrative theory of identity.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE STORY OF MS. A.

#### Introduction

In her senior year as a math major at a self-described highly selective college in the northwestern United States, Ms. A. applied to Teach For America “on a whim” and was subsequently hired to teach high school math in the southwestern United States. She admitted to have written in a journal for her entire life and believed blogging to be an extension of that practice. She had blogged before beginning to chronicle her first years teaching on the “Teach For Us” site. Her first blog detailed her adventures on a trip to South America. She claims this blog showed evidence that she was “happy, adventurous, outgoing and athletic, and overall well-adjusted” before she started teaching. Her second blog chronicled her experiences in the Teach For America (TFA) Institute. She is the only blogger in this study who remained a classroom teacher after finishing her two-year commitment to TFA (though not at the same school). She is currently a math education doctoral student and has recently accepted a position as an Upper School Math Community Leader at TFANET, which provides online instructional and professional resources for TFA corps members. She continues to blog about her experiences in graduate school and her new job with TFA. Ms. A. is also an avid cyclist and many of her posts reflected this aspect of her life. When asked why she blogged on the “Teach For Us” site during her first two-years as a teacher, she stated that she didn’t do it to become famous, or as an assignment, but simply because she liked it.

## Year One

### *The Struggle to Survive and Overcome Failure*

She may have liked blogging, but her blog posts about her beginning days in the classroom painted an entirely different picture about her experiences becoming and being a teacher. The title of one of her first posts was a question that related to her own survival. She provided a poignant designated identity (Sfard & Prusack, 2005) statement in the closing of this post. She asserted that she was “supposed to be ending educational inequality but all I’m doing is surviving.” Ending educational inequality is a mantra of Teach For America and using this statement tied her then current identity to the identity she envisioned she should have as a part of the larger TFA movement. While her first days of classroom experience were not documented, after her first several weeks she wrote that she had never “felt so unhealthy, so mentally unstable” in her life.

In terms of the “Generalized Other” (Mead, 1934, p. 154) aspects of her concept of being and becoming a teacher, she hearkened back to her own high school days and how she “never really appreciated how difficult it was to keep grades, attendance, and be so responsible for so many human beings at once.” She wrote that she knew what she, as the teacher now, needed to be: consistent with her students, ensuring consequences, and not allowing the students to manipulate her. In spite of this knowledge of what she needed to be doing, her voice was worn out and she cried over the fact that her students were not learning.

In terms of her self-identification, Ms. A. closed out an early post identifying herself as a “first year teach for America corps member” who was teaching specific math subject areas (pre-calculus, algebra, math fundamentals). In this description, she did not

yet call herself a teacher. She was a TFA corps member who taught math subjects areas, or at the moment was at least attempting to teach. It would actually be several postings before Ms. A. would refer to herself as a teacher. She first had to endure and deal with what she called her own failure.

Ms. A. felt that she had “never failed this badly at anything” in her life. She provided identity statements of whom she thought were TFA members – the “best and the brightest from colleges around the country.” She asserted TFA recruitment practices were “overbearing” to the point of only selecting “ambitious, motivated, hard-working leaders”...basically those “who don’t fail.” She called these recruits “perfectionists”, people who only have to “work harder” in order to succeed. To her, these characteristics and attitudes reified her Generalized Other (Mead, 1934) identity of TFA teacher/corps members. The problem was that at this point in her experience, just “working harder” was not enough for her to consider herself successful, and therefore not truly a member of this community. In a statement of frustration, she wrote of her own former identity from her days as a student. She stated that “being great at math and a very hard worker, very smart, and academically accomplished doesn’t really mean anything” when related to her becoming a teacher.

She reflected back to other past experiences she considered failures: not doing as well in college as she had initially hoped, having an accident on her bicycle that kept her from racing competitively. She offered a Generalized Other statement on how teachers make it seem that “those who succeed in academics succeed in the real world”, but now she was not so sure that was true. She again gave some actual identity statements about herself, stating that “I excel at school. I can read, research, write, solve, organize. When it

comes to discipline, doing too many things at once, or organization, I fail.” She did concede that it was good to know these things about her. Reflecting on her past, she wrote that it was “amazing what a different view it was from the failing side of life.” She already looked forward to her next year teaching and hoped it will “involve less failure and more success all around.”

What she was already calling her “year of failure” was teaching her “more than any successful year in her life.” She added that “if I hadn’t had those more minor difficulties along the way in life I don’t know if I would still be here” (referencing to still being in the classroom as a teacher). She closed out a post wondering “every other day how I am going to make it. There is no way I can leave this year behind without knowledge, even if I buried myself in a hole for the rest of it. I guess it is a good thing.”

### *Teaching as a Battle*

A week later, at the suggestion of her mentor teachers she rearranged her classroom to where she could walk around the perimeter. In this post, she likened herself to a prowling tiger with her students being mice. She noted that while she was poised and ready to pounce, the students as well were

...on their toes...seeing just what they can do. One mouse and one tiger is easy. Tiger wins. Always. When there are 40 of them they can, as [one student] so annoyingly proposed in 4th period today, “Stick together! We can win if we stick together.”

With specific classes it had become a battle of teacher versus student. She wrote “I wish we were on the same side. I tell them today I really care about your education. They say I’m lying. I hope they can tell that in that at least I’m being serious.” Even though she thought this specific day she was winning the battle initially (lulled into a “false sense of security”), she knew better not to think the solace would last for long. She

claimed that already she had “made too many enemies with my tirades on classroom management and misbehaving and how they will fail in life if they fail this class.”

The first “shot” of the battle this day came from one of the “mice” who saw an opening in the guard of the “tiger.”

I don’t even know where it came from. That is my problem. The tennis ball hits the board next to me. I have let down my guard. I am not on the prowl around the room anymore. I am vulnerable, putting up some prime factors on the board in response to an innocent enough question. They lure me off track with questions that seem appropriate, they know I want to answer, there is a reason I became a teacher.

This was interestingly the first time she called herself “a teacher” while also giving some insight into what she thought teachers should do (answer the questions of her students).

This was also one of the first reasons for why she became a teacher, yet meanwhile events have been set into motion that could not be stopped. After the tennis ball hit the board, she recalled that

I turn around, give my best incredulous, disappointed stare. I am beyond real emotion with this class of 40 boys. I spent enough time crying and worrying and having nightmares. This is not TFA, but to kind of give up, to put myself first, and to shrug internally when they go crazy has been necessary to maintain sanity this week.

Her reference to her having to change her attitude as not being “TFA” was another Generalized Other statement. Mead (1934) called the “attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community” (p. 154), and in this case she was accepting to not maintain the attitude of the community of Teach For America corps members in order to “maintain sanity.” In the case of the tennis ball being thrown at her she wrote

I stop. I tell them that I will not teach if they throw things at me. They ask if I’m scared. I tell them that I climb, I ride bikes, I have scars all over me. I’m not afraid of the tennis ball I just refuse to be treated like that.

In terms of standing up for herself, her treatment, and her teacher identity, she brought one of her other identities to the attention of the class (that of being an athlete). This did not seem to impact the behavior of the class the rest of the period. She stated that from there it

...turns to disarray. Kids are talking. I do not have the drive to behavior log everyone. I mean really. They threw a ball at me. Then someone throws a book at someone's head. I see where it came from, narrow it down to a student or two. I feel like a blind tiger. I can't figure out what is going on. I let my guard down and the class turns into a stupid game. Who did it? You have to tell me who did it. No we don't. After class I ask kids and they swear they don't know. It is a battle.

### *Losing One Identity and Gaining Two Others*

A few weeks later significant cognitive dissonance seemed to have set in regarding the changes she was observing in her identity. She wrote that she was having trouble remembering what she used to be like. On one of her bike rides she had a memory of who she was and what she used to love about herself. She denoted former identity statements on how she used to be positive and that she was the one who remained "happy, composed, (and) collected." Her posts show that her becoming a teacher had changed the way she felt about herself, so much that her "mind is so half-baked by the events of the last few months that I wonder if that was all some sort of dream" (her positive self). She went on to state that "I think that I really used to be like that, I should check my journals to be sure, but I think I was a generally happy person." Yet this malaise was not dissuading her commitment. She wrote

...in any case, I'm teaching for two years. I'm working as a math teacher... You can have a bad day, or a bad class, whoever you are, whatever the state of your mental well being. However, you can't just have a bad year by chance. [An] entire bad year of misery where you never really get your head above the waterline is a choice, or maybe a lack of choices. In any case, this is my life and I can't afford to be miserable. Life isn't starting after I'm done with Teach for America; life is

now. I can't self-sacrifice for two years, destroying myself and my body in the hopes that it will all be over soon. I can't sprint for two years.

During the tennis ball incident, she referred to a reason she became a teacher.

Now she was only "working as a math teacher." She also reluctantly contended that at that moment she was only going to hold to her two-year commitment to Teach For America. What teaching had been up to this point was "self-sacrifice", one that she was afraid she could not continue. Mead (1934) would counter that in this case, Ms. A. was determining by her commitment what her teacher- (and TFA-) self was going to do.

Mead wrote that we

...accept certain responsibilities in advance. One makes contracts and promises, and one is bound by them. The situation may change, the act may be different from that which the individual himself expected to carry out, but he is held to the contract which he has made. He must do certain things in order to remain a member of the community. (p. 203)

While she reaffirmed this commitment to her promise and responsibilities, she also began to display a significant change in terms of her beginning to seek a personal peace in her life regarding where her decisions had landed her. She wrote that she became sick and in her cyclist terminology "crashed." While she had a fever, sore throat, aches, and serious exhaustion, she did not think the sickness was "normal."

I'm stressed, burnt out, my energy burnt up, and me a shriveled wasted smoldering mass. I was so happy to be sick because it meant that Friday I got to sleep, to watch movies, to read books, to rest, to sit still all day long. I've never been so happy to be sick in my life (have I ever been happy to be sick before is the real question). Finally my body and mind were on the same wavelength. Somehow taking a "mental health" day does not seem legitimate, especially if you are in Teach for America. But if your body is looking out for your mind, sees that you are on the verge of collapse, and stands up for you by giving you a sore throat and a fever, then you can certainly stay home and rest. Thank you body!

She was even finding dissonance in terms of what TFA tells its corps members.

Teach for America tells us that everything is in our sphere of influence, if we want exemplary on the rubric we better expand the sphere. We can attack the problem at school, at home, after school, during lunch, every breathing moment. I see the kids being crazy, skipping school, not doing their homework, talking in class, treating me like shit, and I blame myself; this is all supposed to be in my sphere of influence. And perhaps some of it is; there are direct correlations between my planning and the behavior in my classroom. But at this point, I do not have the skill or time to influence some things that I have been told that I should. Thinking that I should be controlling all of these factors and failing makes me miserable and crazy.

The specific references to her planning and to her not having “the skill” are direct actual identity statements, an identity that again was in conflict with what Teach For America had told her she should be and should have. She in fact wrote that not being able to control the factors that TFA claimed she should meant she was “failing” and also made her “miserable and crazy.”

She sought solace from her roommate who advised her to stop thinking about work all of the time. She also sought advice from her mother, who reminded her of the “serenity prayer”, which Ms. A. admitted that she repeated “over and over as a desperate wish to God, or whatever is out there.” She wrote that she needed “wisdom, wisdom, wisdom, and it’s in short supply fresh out of college in a brand new job.”

Her mother also recommended that she list the positives in her life at the moment. This listing allowed her to realize that there were some “great things about my job.” She wrote of her “great coworkers...who care about me, who are smart, good at their jobs and helpful.” She stated that she did like her administrator (in spite of some frustrations) and that she had “two great mentor teachers who help me so much and provide much needed support.” She also mentioned several groups of her students whose attitudes about their education and about Ms. A. as a teacher helped make her job enjoyable. This reflection on the positive made her realize that she needed to

... be the person I am, the person who is positive and happy and does not complain about life so much. Today I think is the first day that I've made it to this place for real. I have been happy before this year, out climbing rocks on Saturdays or riding my bike for hours, but after four days and a lot of thought, I can actually say that I would rather go back to school tomorrow than be sick at home. Maybe that is not much, but it's something. I hope it lasts.

In her writing of this post, she began to remember who she was, is, and who she wanted to be - a blending of former, actual, and designated identities. While she was ready to go back to school and face her students and teaching again, in an ironic twist it was the effects of her sickness that would enable her to learn more about herself as a teacher than any other opportunity she had since the beginning of her teaching experience.

What she had not considered earlier to be a "normal disease" did indeed turn in to a severe case of laryngitis. After an afternoon of her feeling that she may be losing her voice, she awoke the next morning without the ability to speak at all. She did not have any lesson plans for a substitute, so she decided to "go to school and see what would happen." She soon realized that in order to manage one of her most challenging classes she would need the help of her mentor teachers.

When another teacher arrived to assist, Ms. A. wrote that she was not able to "communicate and tell him how to run my classroom." She decided to "just say nothing" and observe this other teacher and the reaction of her students to his methods. She stated that in her silence "it was much more obvious when students were confused, because I couldn't say something aloud and imagine that they had understood it." She thought about her own learning style and that having someone talk "at" her would not help her understand the concept had she not understood it from the beginning. She wrote that "listening to (the) other teacher talk made me realize how confusing it can be when

teachers follow random tangents of others or suddenly jump to a new topic” (which reflected how she has felt manipulated by her students in the past). She was able, in silence, to be an observer of her own class as it broke down from the frustration of the students related to the content being taught. She admitted that “I learned more today, observing my own classroom in silence, than I have any other day of the year.”

She also admitted that her classroom behavior management was better without her having a physical voice. She realized that because she could not talk the students could not trap her into an argument. She also learned that she did not have to answer every question asked of her. She could admit to just not knowing, or that she did not have to answer right then and just move on. As far as her identity as a teacher, she gave the following statement about her current actual identity:

It’s almost as if I had to physically stop speaking to learn how to teach without talking so much. My body has been controlling my mind lately. First I get sick so I have to take a break, to rest, to mentally recharge and reassess. Then my voice stops working, so I have to learn to teach without so much effort, to give instructions very clearly, to plan, and to work for students who do not understand verbal instructions well. I got so many ideas about planning and clarity today just because I could not rely on my voice, which doesn’t seem to work well anyway because who really listens to directions?

### *Trading Perfection for Balance*

She still struggled to find that balance and peace within her life which she wrote of earlier. She described a conversation with a friend who was also stressed out due to several events in her life. Ms. A. admitted to not knowing how to advise her. Does she tell her to “chill out, or to keep working to achieve her dreams?” Ms. A. acknowledged that she had lowered her own standards for herself and while it was “going fine so far” she was not sure if she would be proud of herself later for doing so. She wrote “I was making myself sick with stress, so chilling out seemed like a necessity.”

A few days later found Ms. A. continuing to ponder the topics of “success, perfection, mediocrity and sanity.” It also found her first mention of readers who were commenting on her blog. She wrote that “the comments to my blog (which I love by the way) seem to suggest that finding a balance between measurable success and inner peace is what a successful life is about.” She noted that “if you have conquered the world, achieved things never thought possible, but end up miserable, stressed-out and unhealthy, you have not succeeded in life.” While she admitted that achievement made her happy, she also wrote that “this year is the first year that I have not sought very high standards of perfection, though my life has been following some general trend of trading perfection for balance.”

An admitted life-long high achiever, at this point she was willing to “accept some mediocrity as long as I fill my time with something that I deem valuable.” It is interesting that the experiences at this point in her search for balance, ones that she deemed valuable, were not in her working as a teacher, but were from the athletic side of her life (climbing and cycling). Perhaps increasing these other activities would allow her to answer the following questions she posed about the quality of life: “Is life about achieving measurable goals? Impressive athletic achievements and significant gains in the classroom? Or is the quality of life measured by some sort of inner peace?”

She had yet to find peace and balance in her life as a teacher, particularly with her most challenging students. She became extremely angry after a student hit her with a rubber band during class, and when the students left she punched a cabinet, screamed, and threw her keys. Teachers in the lounge next to her classroom came running and asked if there had been a fight in her room. She told the other teachers “I have to admit, it’s

only me, fighting with myself.” She continued by stating she’s “not sure what the value of this experience is yet, or why this post is particularly enlightening. I think it’s just an example of me, losing control, being pushed farther than I ever have been pushed before.”

This fighting with herself and the struggles with her students were not rendering her teacher-self possible. Mead (1934) stated that “there is a definite end to be obtained” (the rendering of the self) and “the actions of the different individuals are all related to each other with reference to that end so that they do not conflict” (p. 159). Ms. A. could not assume the Generalized Other role of teacher until her students take on the Generalized Other role of students, roles that are set and interpreted by the community and institution. Mead noted that the attitude and response of individuals should be “interrelated in a unitary, organic fashion” (p. 159). Clearly, at this point this was not happening for Ms. A. or her students.

Her next post found her showing appreciation for the comments she received on her blog. She opened the post with a question to herself about whether to be “happy or sad in my blog post today” and went on to “wonder what is more interesting for people to read about?” Never before in her postings had she recognized her audience so blatantly before. She acknowledged that she was happy to see the people who were commenting and that she “really appreciates the advice, wisdom, and other observations on life from those older, wiser, or just a few steps removed from the eye of the storm.”

“The storm” was an interesting and appropriate metaphor of her experiences and transition into the world of public school teaching. She admitted that if it were not for the support of her mentor teacher she may not still be teaching, in fact she stated that

“without her support, guidance and encouragement I don’t know where I’d be.” Yet Ms. A. still found working as a teacher difficult and stormy to say the least, particularly with one specific class. She had reached the point of not talking with her (fellow TFA) housemates about the behavior of herself and a specific class (to maintain sanity and friendships with these housemates) but instead choose to blog about it. She wrote

I told the class to shut up today. They said that I can’t tell students that. I’m not sure if that’s true, but I’m probably getting to the point, screaming at students, telling them they are failures, telling them that they won’t graduate, making them pick up garbage, making fun of them, that is bordering on the absurd. I try to be respectful, but they treat me like shit day in and day out and I’m human. I’m cracking. I need to make it a game, to not let them under my skin. As I told them today “I have a degree in advanced mathematics; I don’t need to know these things. You are the ones who need this information.”

A few days later she received some additional advice from her mentor teacher. This time it was about creating an action plan for dealing swiftly and judiciously with misbehavior. She wrote actual identity statements that she had come to realize about her students in the specific class she struggled with most, statements that contradicted her prior Generalized Other attitude of who these students were.

I’ve reached the point where I realize that I can’t care that these boys are going to be missing “instructional time.” “Instructional time” does not exist in the classroom, it does not matter if they are suspended or not. I finally have accepted that they are not inherently good, that they do lie (often) and that their promises to improve and their excuses about their behavior are just that, excuses. It’s hard for me to accept the extent to which I’m lied to.

She was not alone in this belief about her students. She admitted that in a lunch conversation with the science teachers one of them told her “I don’t ever trust anything those motherfuckers say.” Another teacher suggested that she should just have her students do worksheets. “Don’t talk” the other teacher said, “just hand them a worksheet

and write on the board: Sit Your Ass Down. Work on the fucker.” And while she was not to that point just yet, she did admit that she was finally

...understanding just what I have to do. I have my stack of referrals ready to go and the second a kid misbehaves he’s out. And after he is disciplined, if he comes back and says anything he is out again. I finally feel that I have the energy to do this. It’s a good feeling to have hope that I can wake up, go to work, and battle those little bastards with some sort of plan. The thing is that they lose either way. If they misbehave and fail they lose; if they misbehave and are kicked out they lose. My life will go on no matter how this turns out.

She again referred to teaching (at least with certain students) as both “work” and as a “battle.” While not yet to the point of a full-blown war, her mentor teacher was trying to help her see that she needed to “get them (the students) in trouble now so that the behavior does not escalate to the point where they are suspended and drop out of school.” Ms. A. stated that she believed what she was doing was for the good of these students. By having this plan for her most disruptive students, it allowed her to “have more energy” to focus on her other classes and students.

While not only focusing on the negative behavior plan, she also posted of wanting to implement a positive reward system. She wanted to see her students take ownership of their own learning. She wrote that “I want students to collaborate, to help each other, to really get into the idea of studying.” This was the Generalized Other attitude she felt her students should possess. She stated that her students still think math was “something that comes from a textbook.” She was discouraged when she asked a student “why”, and the student responded “because the book says so.”

It was in the twelfth post of the year that she again self-identified herself as “a teacher.” In discussing how one of her classes’ quiz scores were good (a 68% average) she noted “while it’s not meeting our big goal...it means almost everyone passed first

time around and that made me happy.” Then she realized and exclaimed “Oh dear! I’m supposed to be grading the other quizzes! Hopefully they will bring me just as much joy! I’m already such a teacher.” Not only was she now calling herself a teacher, but she was also finding joy, not only in her outside of work activities (cycling and climbing), but in her work helping her students be successful on their quizzes. Less than a week later, her opinion towards a certain group of her students would be quite different.

It started with an incident report she filed with her administration that was related to how some of her students were performing crude, disrespectful, and sexually degrading actions behind her back. At the time, Ms. A. was a young, recent college graduate who described herself as athletic and attractive. She had been placed in a situation to teach in a high school that separated their math classes by gender, so she had classes that were made up of entirely adolescent males. She wrote that one of her students informed her other students were “air humping” her when she had her back turned helping others. She also wrote that

One of them has a cell phone with sexual noises that they play in reference to me when I can’t hear. I knew something was going on in the classroom. When students made post it notes about what we needed to do to reach our goals one wrote “stop staring at the teacher’s butt” and stuck it up on the wall. Another time a student yelled “Hey miss, keep your ass tight” resulting in a three minute eruption of laughter directed towards me. And it’s just dangerous to turn around to get papers in that class. You can hear the talking and just feel that someone is staring at you.

After she learned about these crude behaviors, she called her mother “in an absolute rage” and told her

...I hate these students. I do not want to grade their papers, help them with anything, write them dean’s referrals or call their parents. I don’t care if they drop out of school and wind up in prison. They have treated me like a piece of meat and I hate them. I hate them.

She calmed down, reported the incident, talked with her mother and mentor teacher, and she thought things would get better in this class. She stated that the deans at the school were “very supportive of me and are taking my issues seriously”, serious enough to install a video camera in her classroom. The feelings she had relating to her “self” as a teacher and as a woman seemed to have caused her confusion and were conflicting. She wrote that

...it’s hard to know exactly how to react to this. On one level I feel that as a woman I should be very angry at these boys because they have tried to degrade me. On another level I feel that I should ignore it, not let them get to me and view it as another part of the job to be dealt with without emotion by filling out the behavior logs, incident reports and dean’s referrals.

Her comments that related to handling such a serious incident as a “part of the job” and “dealt with without emotion” were definite designated identity statements about how her Generalized Other teacher-self should possibly have reacted. While she may have wanted to control her emotional tendencies, a few days after reporting the sexual harassment incidents found her in the midst of another breakdown.

Not only did Ms. A. take on the responsibility of becoming a beginning teacher in the Teach For America program directly after completing her undergraduate degree, but because of her being admitted into TFA she had to commit to complete a master’s degree program at a local university. The workload of her job and of being a student was overwhelming. She admitted that she had “curled up on the dirty carpeted floor of my classroom and cried too many times this week.” She wrote of being “so tired” that she simply entitled her blog post “exhaustion.” She described having to leave her university class the night before because she started “crying in defeat and could not continue to

work.” She wrote that even though her professor may read her blog post she was at the point that it did not matter. She conceded that

I feel like such a worthless student. I do the work, but I don’t have the drive to be the perfectionist I used to be in college. I feel bad about it. The classes about technology are interesting and useful but Thursday evening, after a week of being destroyed at school, I can hardly will myself to put forth the necessary energy they take.

Further on she wrote some very informative actual identity and Generalized Other statements about how she saw herself and how others viewed her as a teacher. She wrote that she was like a performer on display, being constantly analyzed, on the non-stop Ms. A. show. She asserted that “they” (not only a reference to her students, but her fellow teachers, administrators, college professors, parents of students, etc.)

...look at my eyes (Miss, why were you crying?), my clothes (didn’t you wear that last time?), how I walk (laughing at me if I trip over a wire), my grades, my everything. I know that so many of their criticisms are legitimate; it’s as if I should be perfect because I’m the teacher. I cannot be flawed or make mistakes. It’s so much pressure. I need to realize that just because I make a mistake, it does not mean that kids should be able to misbehave or that my plan in general is bad.

Throughout months of trials, struggles, and what she referred to as failures, Ms. A. was in definite need of a good day. It finally arrived a week after she filed the incident report regarding the gross misconduct of her most challenging class. She opened the post stating that “today I was almost in shock.” She wrote that she was not only in shock, but she was “flabbergasted!” While not perfect, she stated that her “fifth period boys, the worst of the worst” actually were on task and were behaving. To her, this behavior was what Mead (1934) called the “generalized attitude” that students should possess within the “institutional form” (p. 167). She wrote that “life was amazing...they were taking notes, listening and asking questions.”

Ms. A provided a revelation of how she learned to be a better teacher in the most surprising of circumstances. Just as laryngitis unexpectedly allowed her to assume a silent observer role within her own classroom, she highlighted how she was able to learn more about teaching and reaching her students by having allowed a student to become the teacher.

It started when Ms. A. called upon a student for an answer to a question. She wrote that

...she (the student) answered correctly but I was not sufficiently enthusiastic about her correct response. She corrected my teaching “Miss, you need to teach like this: She models a highly excited voice “[student’s name], that was amazing, you are so bright” I think that she might be on to something and mimic her back much to the amusement of the class of girls. We are working on a PowerPoint which reveals steps to algebraic equations one by one and I try to call on someone else in the back. [Student’s name]. corrects me again. “Miss you can’t just call on someone like that, it’s too scary. You’ve got to warm them up. Tell them you are thinking of someone in the back of the class and give them time to think. Then tell them that they can do it, encourage them and clap when they get it right.” At this point I offer to let her teach the class. I honestly don’t think that it will go incredibly well because teaching is so difficult and most students flounder in front of students. She immediately took charge of the class with a confidence I envied. She was magnificent. When she saw a student unengaged she pulled them in immediately with a question. She encouraged students to speak who never did for me. When they got the answer she got the entire class to clap for them. After getting an answer from someone instead of saying yes or no she polled the class to see if they agreed or not. Everyone had their heads up, off their desks and were participating. I tried to say a few things and [the student] shushed me. I literally just sat and observed and voted with the class when she asked for a poll. It was great. I didn’t have to talk and everyone loved it. After I took over again [she] continued coaching me. Say that with enthusiasm Ms. A.. Congratulate them. Warm them up, warm them up.

This other opportunity of learning in silence and observing allowed Ms. A. to be able to recognize positive teaching and student behavior in her own classroom from a different perspective: Using encouragement, promoting engagement, utilizing differentiation in assessment (polling). Ms. A. recognized all of these exemplary teacher

behaviors in a student even though she initially thought she could not do it because in Ms. A.'s words "teaching is so difficult." Ms. A. was so proud that she called the student's mother to let her know that her daughter should consider becoming a teacher. Earlier in the day, the student had told Ms. A. "I'm a teacher not a learner."

This story could stand as a testimony to the dichotomy of Ms. A.'s own self-observation regarding the contrast she recognized in herself regarding being a student and a teacher. In her third blog post she referred to herself as "being great at math and a very hard worker, very smart, and academically accomplished", but when it comes to teaching all of that "doesn't really mean anything." Her student was proof to Ms. A. that sometimes it takes more than content knowledge to be able to effectively hold the attention of a class, encourage participation in the learning process, and promote student engagement.

Ms. A. closed the post about another student; one whom she thought had been misplaced in her Pre-Calculus class. She stated that this particular student was struggling "so much with basic concepts that I really felt that she should drop the class." To Ms. A.'s surprise (and through the students' hard work and asking for help) her grades improved to where at the time of the post she had an 89% average in the class. Ms. A. closed the post stating that the students' "attitude of working harder when faced with failure is going to take her far in life."

It could be said that both of the accounts of her students were recognition by Ms. A. regarding her own identity development process. In the story of her student "teacher" Ms. A. acknowledged that some skills like teaching may be ingrained within certain individuals, but the story of the other student detailed how hard work and effort can

triumph over a lack of innate ability. In the personal narratives in the blog postings of Ms. A., one could say it was interesting how she selected these two students who highlighted areas and questions related to her own life and journey thus far in becoming a teacher.

### *Testing, Time, and Two Identities*

In Ms. A.'s eighteenth post of her first year teaching the topic was primarily concerning district mandated testing. This was an aspect of her job and identity that she had yet to address to a great extent – that of preparing students to do well on standardized assessments. She addressed the question of what she should do if her students were failing to her mentor teacher, and her mentor responded that she was proud of her for asking. The mentor stated that most first year teachers do not worry about this until the end of the year and that she could not believe how fast Ms. A. had grown as a teacher. It appeared that a crucial aspect of her teacher identity, that of being a classroom manager, was under control and she could focus on more that management issues. Even her attitude towards her freshman boys had lightened up. She admitted that she at least “actually care(d) enough about my boys again to want them to pass instead of thinking that failure in life is what they deserve.”

While Ms. A. had blogged several times about her classroom management issues, with the district assessment looming (which counted for twenty percent of a student's final grade), she knew she needed to spend more time planning. In her next post she mentioned staying after school with her co-teacher to brainstorm ways to get her students more invested in their classes. She recognized that it was “much harder to try to be interesting or engaging with lessons” than it was to be “boring all the time and expect students to learn.” She also recognized that as a teacher, it was her job to engage and

motivate the students. The time to plan for engaging and motivating lessons was not provided in her daily schedule, and she blamed her administration for this. In fact, she wrote that

...the administration basically ensures that we won't be able to do a great job by giving us unrealistic schedules. Everyone complains that they give the worst and hardest schedules to the first year teachers. I guess that as a Teach for America teacher I should expect this but it's still frustrating.

Here she not only identified herself as a TFA teacher but also as a first year teacher. The contrast may seem trivial, but it was an apparent recognition of her identity as a TFA teacher – one which was in contrast with the “regular” first year teachers – and as such she should not expect the public school administration to look after the best intentions of their beginning teachers. While this may not have been the only intention of this statement, it does provide her readers with insight into how Teach For America seemingly, intentionally or not, sets its corps members apart from teachers who are hired through other circumstances.

She was able to celebrate the high scores one of her classes made on a test she gave on logarithms. She noted that students she tutored in college (something she had yet to mention before – a former identity statement that did allow for some teaching experience) all disliked learning about logarithms so having her Pre-Calculus students do so well (an 82% average) was “no small feat.” She wanted to give the students some sort of celebration and she admitted that she was “jumping around the apartment last night when I finished grading” because of how proud she was of these scores. She also admitted that it was the “first time that I've actually reached a big TFA goal of 80 percent mastery of power standards.” Being able make that identity statement was an indicator of her growth, if not only as a teacher, but as a TFA corps member who was being held to

different accountability standards than the other first-year, and even more seasoned, teachers at her school.

### *Writing as Therapy*

While still basking in the glow of her students' success on the logarithm test, she transitioned back to a recurring story of the specific class that she had to write an incident report on for their sexual harassment towards her. To her, blogging about this was "therapy" (she entitled the post "writing as therapy"). In the email questions I sent to Ms. A. I asked her about how blogging impacted her being a teacher. She responded that "reaching out to the world made the difficulties easier to deal with."

The difficulties may have been easier to deal with, but they were there all the same. After the night of grading the tests that made her so proud, she claimed that somehow she knew the next day "wasn't going to be a good." Recall her earlier reference to teaching some of her students as a "battle", on that specific day she "lacked the energy to attack" and the students took advantage of this. After detailing several events with students in that class who were clearly being insubordinate and disruptive, a student later in the period showed Ms. A. a book he had discovered with a sexually derogatory statement directed towards Ms. A. When the student told Ms. A. that "I think someone doesn't like you", Ms. A. just replied with "I understand" and she continued to teach. Of this she wrote that she was "pretty upset about it because clearly the investigation into the sexual harassment has not stopped the problem."

She reported the textbook defacement to the principal and he was as "appalled just like everyone else is but it's hard to figure out who did it." She was pretty certain she

knew who did it and reported that student to her Dean. Her frustration level was high and she was confused on how this made her feel. She wrote

Should I get angry and cry because someone is making horrible derogatory comments about me or should I just forget it because it ruins my day to think about it? It sure kept my prep period from being at all productive today. And now I'm just typing about it instead of doing the work that needs to be done. Those boys are holding me back from everything that I should be doing. I think that I would consider quitting if they gave me boy classes again next year after seeing how they sexually harassed me this year. It is cruel and unusual punishment to put me into the lion's den every day for 85 minutes. I really do think that it is awful that the school does this to me and the teachers in the last two years. At least they are being supportive by disciplining the students.

This post pointed out that the sexual harassment of young female teachers had been going on for longer than the period of time that Ms. A. had dealt with it at this high school. It had been almost a month since her initial incident report was filed, yet she still felt that she was being "thrown into the lion's den every day for 85 minutes" each school day. She seemed to want to give the administration the benefit of the doubt by acknowledging their "being supportive by disciplining the students", but it was obvious that they were not taking the situation as seriously as they could. Ms. A. admitted to considering quitting (before her two year commitment to TFA) and called what they (the boy students and administration by proxy) were doing "cruel and unusual punishment." As for her writing as therapy, one of her frequent commenters to her blog postings wrote for Ms. A. to "PLEASE keep writing on your blog. You cannot keep it inside – it is not good and remember you are winning it just takes more effort with some than others." She desperately needed a break and soon the winter holiday break would be upon herself and her students.

*Questioning the Value in the Struggle*

Her first blog post back from the break found Ms. A. feeling like she had energy again, not as fragile, able to withstand more. She wrote a particularly poignant identity statement that “after spending two weeks at home with the family, I no longer felt like the adult I’ve been struggling to become.” Its poignancy lies particularly in her almost reverting back to a child-like state when she was with her family, and that being thrust from the comforts of her college life into true adulthood and teaching had been a “struggle.” She even entitled this first post of this new calendar year as “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart” (a quote from Albert Camus).

She did in fact report that returning from the time with her family “actually felt like coming home.” In reconnecting with one of her housemates, she made a statement of realization that “it is when we struggle and reach our limits that we understand ourselves.” She was still searching for that balance, and she believed that she may have found it in the struggle stating that “the last semester has proven this to me. I found my limit, my breaking point and decided to back away from it. Now I’m balancing teaching with racing my bike and climbing up rocks.” She followed this up with some significant actual and designated identity statements: statements that showed both an understanding of who she was and a fear of who she may or may not be able to become. She also questioned the balance she had found.

She acknowledged that the balance she had found only allowed her to be “a good teacher” (her current actual identity) and not great at her other activities (cycling and rock climbing). She questioned if putting all of herself into teaching (something she had never done with anything before) could possibly allow her to become a great teacher. She

admitted that her self-worth was tied to her failure or success based on her commitment. Even if she admitted to never really putting all of herself into anything, recall from her first postings when she was “stressed”, “burnt out”, and a “shriveled wasted smoldering mass” from the amount of energy and commitment she did put into her teaching.

For Ms. A. teaching was a struggle and she found this struggle analogous with the story of Sisyphus. She retold the story of Sisyphus being forced to push a huge boulder to the top of a hill, only to watch it roll back down, then repeat the process for eternity. She realized that “this is not so different from teaching.” She begins her analogy by stating that

...my boys’ classes are on the verge of being under control but it takes a constant effort. Herding them into the classroom, getting them calm and channeling their minds towards math is not unlike pushing a large boulder up a hill. If I waver in my energy for a moment, all is lost. It might be possible to rest for a second but when I do momentum is lost and it is only more difficult to continue. Controlling the boys will be like pushing a rock for the rest of the year. All of the Dean’s referrals, parent phone calls, student conferences and suspensions could be for naught if the class was given just a few minutes to roll back into mayhem.

She extended the analogy to the work she was doing as a teacher and as a member of Teach For America, yet it brought with it questions. She stated that she was

...not sure I can accept that my life is as absurd as pushing a rock up a hill to watch it roll back down and that I must find all satisfaction in the struggle. In the struggle of last semester, I found myself in many ways I never would have in college, yet was that all the world gained? The thought is rather depressing and not particularly great advertising for TFA. Join TFA because you’ll find yourself even if you don’t manage to help anyone!

Ms. A. had begun to question if her struggles might not be for naught despite what she, or TFA, would have earlier in the year referred to as failures. This brought to her mind questions of what the role of a teacher may actually be; something more than just closing the achievement gap and high scores on high stakes tests, stating that

...I think that it is possible that my struggles this year could result in something lasting, that my boys may become better people even after I can't force math into their brains. If I do my job well enough, all the day to day successes will stick, they won't roll all the way back down the hill to the valley of mathematical illiteracy from which they came. If the premise that mathematical knowledge is valuable is correct, I think that I will have improved them somehow even if they forget most of what I've taught them. Even if math only prepares them to attend college or to get a good job, my efforts might result in something more than just finding myself in the midst of the struggle.

A couple of weeks later, with finals approaching and the semester wrapping up, she recounted a story of a day that went extremely well after she modified her instructional strategy to allow the students to play a math game as a review for the upcoming tests. Even her boy classes, the ones she had struggled with the most for the entire year, were engaged and invested in the team aspect of the game. After school she admitted to feeling "invigorated as opposed to drained, pleased that (the) kids had learned, had fun and that there had been no (discipline) referrals." While her previous posting may have hinted that she saw more to teaching than "forcing math into their brains" and actually making them become "better people", she closed this post with a mention that it was not only her efforts that were causing a specific group of her students' grades to improve (while she did take some credit), but a "work ethic" instilled by others. She stated that she was

...excited to give out around 25 legitimately-earned A's between those classes and as many B's. I'm a sucker for giving good grades. When it's based on test scores it definitely reflects that I did something right. I know a lot of it is the work ethic of the students which was developed by their parents, their other teachers and themselves but they legitimately learned something.

She closed this post with an excitement about entering finals week and that soon there would be an opportunity to "start fresh in the classes, get solid systems down, and get the kids reinvested." She noted that some of her "hopeless failures" will be leaving

her classes, and that what she would be left with are a group of kids whom she refers to as “self-selected” students, students who were much more likely to be able to meet her and TFA’s goal of 80% mastery of power standards. Back to her Sisyphian analogy, she admitted that it will still be “a struggle” but that she thinks “things are looking up”, even though there may have been a boulder right in front of her that could roll back down the hill at any moment.

That is just what happened...the boulder did indeed roll back down the hill. Ms. A. had been under the impression that several of her students were misplaced in her classes because of scheduling errors. These were students who did not have the prerequisite skills to be successful with the concepts she was mandated to teach. She wrote that she talked to several people about this situation, “the counselors, my department chair, but never directly to the administration.” She suggested these students be transferred out of her class, because she “really believed they were not in the right spot and, despite the TFA mantra about achieving significant gains, it was not my responsibility to catch them up to the rest of the class.”

Apparently this was not how the administration felt about it. After one of Ms. A.’s students requested an administrative grade change, they called her in and she wrote that “all of a sudden I’m in a conference, feeling like I’m under the gun and in trouble.” Her administrators were under the impression that instruction in Ms. A.’s classes was being differentiated to meet the various academic needs of each individual student. As Ms. A. had noted from the beginning, her life to this point has been more about survival than being able to master complex instructional strategies such as differentiation. One administrator thought she should be able to teach regular and honors pre-calculus at the

same time. She claimed that it “makes me feel like a failure because that does sound difficult and I didn’t think I could.” She even admitted that her TFA program director did not think this was possible either. Ms. A. does believe that a “great teacher could have done it, and it just reminds me that I’m not great (yet).” Her inclusion of the word ‘yet’ is a positive indicator that she wanted to continue to grow as a teacher and to become better at this job she has taken on.

She believed the administration was upset because despite changes in the students’ schedules requiring them to take more math classes that year, the students were still failing at high rates. The administration questioned the math department about why this was happening, and while Ms. A. was glad they were asking, she believed she could tell them some of the answers.

I wanted to tell them that the scores are not high because we have 4 long-term subs and even more new teachers, some of whom don’t have degrees in math; we are all teaching too many different classes; some of us have huge issues with one gender or another; veteran teachers are not used to block schedule, and we are dealing with massive lack of prerequisite knowledge. Of course this is what I signed up for as a Teach for America teacher and I can’t claim “I can’t do my job because the kids are coming unprepared.” I’m supposed to take these kids and make them great, and that is possible, but it’s hard. Massive disorganization at the school just doesn’t make it easier. The lost minutes because of broken printers, inefficient attendance, bad scheduling, and lack of training correlate to minutes lost from being good teachers. There is a trickle down effect.

In this post she recognized the communal effect of the organization on her teacher identity development process and not being able to perform at a higher level. She referred to the breaking-down at the organizational level as having had a “trickle down effect” that did not allow any of the schools’ teachers to be “good.”

Second semester began and the boulder rolled down the hill again! This time the boulder turned out to be the fact that despite what she had hoped, the students she had the

most trouble with had not been moved out of her class. Almost two weeks after the start of the semester she admitted to being on the verge of another breakdown because of their (the students') constant misbehavior in her classes. She went to see the Dean, this time supported by the security guard (who had talked to the counselor about these students' behaviors), and her mentor teacher as well. Ms. A. claimed the administration "had some sort of excuse related to the computer system", but her mentor teacher insisted that these disruptive students be moved out of her class.

*From Survival to Achievement*

Two days later and her life would change. She wrote that on that day

...a stack of green and yellow student schedule change forms arrived in my second period. I'm sure my Pre-Calculus kids had no idea why I was so smiley all of a sudden. Getting those forms in my hands made a huge mental difference for me. All of a sudden things weren't looking so glum or impossible.

The day got even better for Ms. A. later that evening as she secured, through the help of her housemate, the assistance of Air Force pilots and engineers to come to her class and "mentor students and give lectures about the importance of math and education." Ms. A. recognized that in order for her to become a teacher, she could not do it flying solo. It took the assistance of her mentor teachers, the security guard, and the Dean to finally get her schedules changed. Not only that, but in her posts she illustrated how it was continually through the assistance of others - fellow teachers, administrators, her housemates, mother, supportive students, blog commenters, etc.- that she had been able to make it this far. In securing the help of the Air Force volunteers, she was only extending that which she had come to recognize in herself to her students.

She was at the point where her attention shifted from "survival to achievement" (a recollection back to her first posting which questioned what it was that she needed to do

to survive). In fact, she stated that “teaching is no longer about keeping the class under control for 80 minutes, but about helping the class learn and reach their goals.” She had finally reached a place in her teacher identity where she could state that “things are changing and it feels pretty good.”

Over half way through her first year and she not only felt “pretty good”, she also felt that her classroom was “coming together.” She reflected back to earlier in the year when she ran around “like a crazed, frantic, stressed-out, basket case.” She now admitted to having more “time and presence of mind.” She wrote that she was so excited to be able to multi-task well enough to differentiate instruction (a strategy she was admonished for not being able to do from an administrator just a few weeks before).

While she felt better about certain aspects of her teaching (she wrote that she was “not trying to say I’m doing fantastically”), she recognized that despite her efforts her students were still not performing well on assessments. As a part of Teach For America, Ms. A. met with her program director on a regular basis. In a post during the latter part of her first year of teaching, she recalled a conversation with the program director regarding how poorly her students had done on the district interim assessment (the students had averaged a 31%). Although not all of the content standards on the test had been covered at the time of the assessment, she acknowledged that the low scores still meant she was behind, and that the type of assessment questions she gave her students were not as difficult as the ones on the district assessment. She wrote that her program director...challenged me on that teaching practice. I’m not actually giving them what they need to achieve outside of this high school if I’m lowering my standards. It makes me feel bad because I’m not achieving the Teach for America mission of putting my

students on a different track in life. They are achieving, they are learning, but still not like their white peers.

*Racism and the “Achievement Gap”*

After this conversation with her program director she decided to bring it up “the achievement gap” with her girls’ class. Ms. A. wrote that she told the students they needed to “work harder”, to “do extra work and get extra help” because she was not going to change the final exam or slow down because of their lack of understanding of the concepts and because they were behind. She wrote that because of the recent conversation with her program director she told her students that

... it was because students at predominantly white schools would be ahead of them and gave them statistics on the achievement gap. They were upset and talkative when I told them that white students were much more likely to attend college. At first they accused me of being racist when I told them that statistically blacks and Hispanics had lower test scores and graduation rates. I had to convince them that I thought they were just as smart but that the school system was not equitable. I always wonder what I should tell students about where they are in comparison to students at other schools. I also wonder as a teacher if I can get in trouble for telling students that their school is not achieving at the same level as white upper-class schools. It seems subversive. It’s like living with a bad government where you are not supposed to talk about how it’s bad because they don’t want you to think that. Of course my school has never told me not to discuss it with my students but I still wonder if it’s a good idea. Some students said they were going to go talk to their parents about the achievement gap.

She closed the post by stating she hoped her “choice to tell them about reality is a good one and won’t discourage them further.” Her post not only showed her obvious belief in the statistics she shared with her students, but also about her concern that she could “get into trouble” for having this conversation with her students. She felt it seemed “subversive.” A few posts later, and it seemed her administrator would agree with the subversiveness of this type of conversation.

But first she described the account of her administrator asking her to consider applying to become the department chair. She wrote that the administrator told her that “he thought I had the skills and knowledge necessary to do a good job”, and while “flattered” she was “concerned that the school is so desperate that they would choose a first year teacher.” She told her administrator that she thought she needed more experience and she was not sure if she should take him up on the offer. She wrote that

...I like challenges, and it is nice to be valued enough to be offered this kind of responsibility but I’m not sure it’s a good move. Department chair is a lot of work and a lot of headaches. I do get an extra prep period and the chance to really change the entire math department at the school. I would also be more involved in the overall administration and structure of the school. As a third year teacher I would definitely think that it was the right move to really fulfill Teach for America’s mission of reaching as many kids as possible. Next year I’m just not sure. And I want to ride my bike too. I feel almost guilty putting cycling before a department chair job but it is my sanity. What would you do?

This post was interesting on many levels regarding her identity, who she was, and who she wanted to become. She recognized her own inexperience and the extra work becoming department chair would require. She gave a designated identity statement where she believed that as a third year teacher it would be more appropriate for her to take the position. She also denoted the Generalized Other attitude of TFA and how by assuming this sort of leadership position would help fulfill its mission. She closed the post with a question to her readers asking what they would do. She received mixed responses to the question, yet it was telling in her seeking of others’ opinion that she valued her readers and could benefit from their advice.

Her subsequent posts probably had her readers wondering if her administrator had more than likely changed his mind and regretted recommending that she apply for department chair. As she mentioned in the post about discussing the “achievement gap”

with her students, she worried if it was subversive. She also had mentioned that her students said they were going to go home and talk with their parents about this conversation. She wrote that

...it would have been silly of me to think that they would talk about something with their parents unless they were upset. Despite my insistence that I thought my students were smart and capable of achievement as long as we worked hard, they told their parents that I was racist and had said that Hispanic and black students were stupid.

An administrator came to her class to talk with her about parents who reported what she had supposedly told her students. She said the administrator

... got the impression, however, that I thought the high school was “ghetto.” I do not think that my school is “ghetto” and I feel safe here but I do not agree that it is up to the standards of schools in more affluent communities. Schools in affluent communities do not make second year teachers without a masters in education department chairs. Schools in affluent communities do not hire college graduates from Teach for America. Schools in affluent communities do not have 50% graduation rates and only 40% of kids passing proficiency. At good schools, the truancy rate is not 17% and kids bring supplies to school. At good schools, they don’t need two deans and a dean’s secretary to keep the behavior under control.

My administrator was upset that I thought that students here were behind students at other schools. I know we have resources and are not extremely poor, but I also know that I would never send my child here. The infrastructure is too chaotic. There are too many long-term substitutes and brand new teachers. We have no consistency so it’s difficult to really achieve. I was correct in my last post when I predicted that my comments might end in controversy. Better controversy than apathy though.

Not only did an administrator come to her room to discuss what parents were reporting, but the next day she recounted getting “called down to the principal’s office.” The principal was primarily concerned that she had a negative opinion of the school being “at risk.” He questioned her assumption that her students were behind others in the district. As she had discussed statistics with her students regarding the achievement gap, he discussed statistics with her regarding the minority population of the school and the

number of students receiving free or reduced lunches. She thought her principal was ignoring the problems that did exist at her school and that she “probably should not tell my students about them even if I am right that they exist.” She did admit to learning something from this incident. She wrote that

...what I learned is that speaking about controversial topics creates a lot of headaches at school. Freedom of Speech is not alive and well because the balance of power is so delicate here. The respect for our principal is very low. People are afraid of him but think that he is just trying to turn around [the school] to advance his career and that he'll be out of here as soon as possible. I'm afraid that if he knows that I'm opinionated that he will not want me to be in charge of the yearbook...I think that I've avoided trouble this year because I've been too tired and beaten down to really care what happens. I accept things that people tell me to do because I felt too tired and too inexperienced to try to argue about it. The more energy I have the more risk I have at run-ins with the administration...I'm not sure how long I could last here as a career. I'd have to take over more than the math department!

She had come to the realization in her identity development as a teacher that her opinion was not valued if it conflicted with the opinions of the school administration. It seemed that just as the balance of power was delicate inside her classroom, it was throughout the school. Being “tired and beaten down” the previous year had caused her not to question the realities of her situation, and her inexperience had warranted her not to argue with the powers that be.

One has to wonder about the specific comment about her principal. She wrote that “the respect for our principal is very low. People are afraid of him but think that he is just trying to turn around [the school] to advance his career and that he'll be out of here as soon as possible.” Could it have been that this was also the opinion of the students of Ms. A.? In an earlier post, she admitted to having to contain her own students with “bribery and fear.” It could likely have been that her students sensed that she was only there for the short term, seeking to turn them around, and then be on to bigger and better things.

Late in her first year a medical emergency occurred when one of her students passed out and needed to be resuscitated. Paramedics had to be called and she found herself having to deal with maintaining the order of her other students. Even with the emergency taking place, she noted with frustration that “a student was unconscious in my room and I was still dealing with discipline instead of helping him out.”

The student was transported to the hospital, and Ms. A. found that the rest of the day she would still be dealing with discipline. Students used the situation with the medical emergency of their fellow student to wreak havoc. She ended up having to call a parent of one of the students who would not behave during the emergency and the parent accused Ms. A. of not having the ability to manage her students. This outraged Ms. A. and she wrote

... I hung up the phone. I don't even care whatever happens to this lady. I started screaming and cussing hysterically. My behavior management is my weak point. I was bad at it. I'm still not great. Somehow this woman knew that blaming it all on me and my failures was the way to get to me. I could not even get the stupid kids to shut up in an emergency when it really mattered and having her say that and me knowing it was true is devastating. I tore down the hall, the other science teachers emerging from their rooms to see what the commotion was. [Another teacher said “welcome to the club” and gave me a hug. I started wandering the school crying, trying to find out what had happened to [the student who had the emergency]. One of the Pre-Calc girls who had been so responsible saw me crying and reassured me that he would be fine. She asked me if I'd been like this all day and I assured her that I'd been pretending for my classes but now I could finally act like the scared young adult I was. A kid was in my class, under my watch and just didn't wake up. I was the adult in charge, responsible and just frozen. His eyes wouldn't open, he wouldn't move, and I was in charge of what was supposed to happen. Teach for America is not a joke, I have these kids lives in my hands. I'm supposed to know what to do but whatever prepares one for this? I just wanted to crawl back into my kid world.

This experience definitely brought light to her having to deal with a very adult and serious situation as a first-year classroom teacher. “Welcome to the club” and a hug from a fellow teacher; these were kind gestures welcoming her to a Generalized Other

role she had not imagined. She recognized that Teach For America could not prepare her for this type of experience. She discovered that TFA and becoming a teacher were indeed “not a joke” and she admitted that she needed to pretend in order to maintain the identity of a teacher and “adult in charge” the rest of the day for the other students.

### *The Generalized Other Student*

Her actual identity statement for who she was that afternoon was a “scared young adult.” The incident on the phone with the parent only opened her eyes up further to the area of her teaching which was to her still a weak point (managing student behavior). She was not the cause for the student’s medical emergency, and her response to the situation possibly increased this student’s chance of recovery. She was definitely still holding herself responsible for what she thought as a teacher she should have been able to control—the behavior of her students, or in Mead’s (1934) view of her enabling her students to take on what she, the institution, and even society consider the Generalized Other attitude, role, and identity students should have.

The final few posts of her first year of teaching found her balance in question as the positive relationships and ability to successfully manage her girls’ classes flip-flopped with the classes of her boys. In fact she wrote that it was “ironic that my worst classes turned into the better ones, just because of the sheer amount of energy I put into them.” In the two posts where she described this turnaround for the boys and the breakdown for the girls she mentioned knowing what to do to be able to manage better as a teacher next year. She wrote that “I’m ready to face the mission of shaping 35 kids into a good class where people do work and help each other and everyone learns.” This is a remarkable

Generalized Other statement of the attitude she believed her classes and students should hold – “people doing work and help[ing] each other and everyone learns.”

In a post titled “end of the year reflections”, Ms. A. recounted the closing dinner for the Teach For America corps members. She was definitely pleased with herself for making it to this point in her life. She posted that

I feel so accomplished about finishing the year. I’ve never told people that I was proud of something before. Not after doing well in high school or college or any other achievement in my life. But I am proud enough of finishing this year that I can say the words. Maybe I feel it’s okay because I failed so badly. Maybe since I suffered and was so mediocre, it’s okay to be proud.

She wrote that the speaker at the dinner advised those who were leaving the corps that year to “go out into the world” and should do what Ms. A. had been doing the entire year through her blog; that is they should tell *stories*. Ms. A. stated that “we need to tell stories about our students, to dispel the myth that upward mobility is as easy as the American Dream makes it out to be.” She promised that in the next year of her teaching, she would tell more stories about her students. She wanted to be able share what the reality of her students’ lives was like, inside and outside of her classroom. Not only did she want to tell the stories about the challenges she and her students faced, but also the successes. She then gave the following example of a recent success she saw in herself as a teacher and in her students.

When I asked questions to review for the final I could tell that students had learned something, even if I hadn’t tracked it as well as I might have. Something is happening that is good. It’s the kids who get to work just because they know that’s how things go in class. Stories. There are so many stories.

Her statement about the students who “get to work just because they know that’s how things go in class” was a recognition of the students finally accepting the Generalized Other attitude that she believed her students should have, and to her this “is good.” In

fact, her statement made it clear that in her understanding, before learning could take place the students had to accept the role of being a student, to take on the role Ms. A. identified as being a “student.”

In this post, she did tell a story. The story she told was of a life of privilege and isolation that she and her fellow TFA corps members came from. She wrote that prior to the experiences that TFA placed them in as classroom teachers, these corps members did not realize what “life was like going to an average school, from an average family.” She then made a Generalized Other statement that reflects the larger goal of TFA. Of those leaving the classroom, she wrote that

...now the TFA corp, armed with a powerful memory of what the real world is and what people are really existing through is going to mingle with those who have never been there or seen it. Sure poverty and inequity can be discussed over cocktails or in papers at a 35,000-dollar-a-year institution of higher education but now we have been immersed in it.

She later wrote in detail regarding the attrition rate of the majority of the TFA corps members leaving the classroom, calling it “ironic.”

We had our party tonight at a Country Club adorned with pictures of white men in polo shirts. It seemed ironic that the corps members are exiting the system to move on to bigger and better things because they are ambitious and brilliant and beautiful. My students often ask why I became a teacher if I had such amazing grades and had the opportunity to go to Ivy League Law Schools. I tell them it’s because I care but the truth is that most of us will move on to something bigger and better than our one tiny, overcrowded, hot dirty classroom. I think most of us will take the stories with us and it will change what we do, but we can move back easily into the rich, white world where most of us came from.

In this statement she gave an identity statement about the corps members being ambitious, brilliant, and beautiful. She asserted that it was because of this identity, that they were not only selected to be a part of the TFA corps (which allowed them to assume the identity of a teacher), but also allowed them to leave and “move on to bigger and

better things.” While she recognized that this is a truth regarding the attrition of TFA corps members from teaching, she believed that the stories of the experiences of these now former teachers were what will remain, even if they have left behind the reality of their “tiny, overcrowded, hot dirty classroom.”

Yet she was not leaving after that first challenging year where she prevailed over suffering. In fact, she closed the post with a designated identity statement about herself and her students for the upcoming year. In the statement, it was clear that the dinner and the speakers inspired her and brought out her identification as a TFA corps member.

Even though the TFA banquet seemed to be a culminating point in her first year, it was not quite over. There were two days left in the school year and she decided to let the class who had harassed her so much earlier in the year know how this treatment affected her. This prompted one of her students to ask “Miss you are not going to teach again next year are you?” She told him that she will, but “luckily not freshman boys.” The fact that the student would ask Ms. A. this question is evidence that even the students recognized the itinerate-ness of first year teachers at their school. While Ms. A. was not leaving just yet, she was very happy when the last day of school arrived. In her last post describing the events of a school day, she closed by writing about her feelings about having made it to the end of the year, her role as a teacher, and thinking she was finally an adult. After providing another cycling analogy, this post offered up several identity statements. First she admitted to not having to act like an “authority figure” and could be “friendly” with the students. While being close in age to several of the students, she recognized in herself a maturity level lacking in the students. She also believed that by making it through this first year teaching, she could finally assume the title of adult.

While somewhat in denial about her maturity, she did claim adult status, but she did have a desire to return to adolescence for at least the summer.

Ms. A. closed out the year by posting some thoughts about her mind and body being in need of “recovery.” She recapped her first year with thoughts of what she learned during this experience of teaching, of becoming a teacher, and always having to be “on top of everything.” As she struggled during the year to find balance, she appreciated the opportunities for teachers to recover. She was looking to the next year as starting a “new season” and would not post again until she returned to begin her second year teaching.

### Year Two

#### *Turning Tears into Triumphs*

Ms. A. made it through a tumultuous first year and as noted in many of her previous years’ postings she was looking ahead to a more productive and balanced second year. She began the second year with the story of her driving from her hometown with her mother back to the city where she was teaching. She opened the post with admitting to becoming emotional when she left her hometown because she was in fact “scared to go back.” Her mother asked her why she was crying and she told her that “so many awful things happened in my classroom.” She wrote that her “stomach gets [a] really scared feeling to think about it.”

While the drive from her hometown may have found her feeling scared, those feelings were replaced by feelings of comfort, happiness, and confidence when she returned to her school and her classroom. She in fact was surprised by these feelings.

Even more she felt a sense of “ownership” in regards to her classroom. She recalled the advice from her mentor teachers from the year before:

I remember what my mentor teachers told me my first month of teaching. “You have to act like the classroom is your domain. It is your space and people cannot mess with it.” I didn’t understand that then. I viewed it as a space paid for by taxpayers so that the children could learn. It wasn’t mine, it was theirs. Now I feel like the classroom is most definitely mine and they’d better not leave that scrap of paper on the floor or mess up my desks.

In telling Ms. A. how to act in the classroom, the mentors enlightened her to the Generalized Other attitudes of teachers in the “domain” of their classrooms. While Ms. A. did not take on this attitude during her first year, she then admitted that she understood this role she should take and that she was seeing that the classroom was definitely hers. She also felt much more efficient than she did a year ago. She worked on assessments for the upcoming year and provided some insight into what she recognized she should be doing more of as a math teacher. She also had some goals for her students this year beyond memorization of math facts. She closed this first post of her second year stating that she was optimistic even though she did have some fears. In a nod to the trials, struggles, and sufferings of her first year she wrote that “it has to be better the second time around.”

Her first posting after a full day of teaching found that it was in fact better than it was the previous year, but she conceded that “it is amazing how much I am still learning.” She still worked on maintaining order and control in her classroom and recognized that mayhem may ensue should she let her guard down. She was wiser and not making the same mistakes twice. It seemed that a year had made quite a difference in who she and her students recognized in herself as a teacher. She loved being able to refer to the previous year to her students and claimed that it gave her more “legitimacy.” She

pointed out that her new students even felt she was older than she was because of her new found confidence, all the while projecting herself “with an air of experience.”

Things were even better when she encountered her former students. She thought it may have been that the students respected the fact that she did not quit in spite of her first year difficulties. Of these students she wrote that it was “as if these kids expect(ed) to be walked out on even by the teachers who are paid to be with them.” She did not walk out, but she was questioned by one of her students as to why she was teaching when she could have been doing something else and earning more money. She admitted that it was a good question and she gave (most of) the following reasons for her teaching to her students.

I’m here because I know that there are students who need a good education. I’m here because when I tutored in college I saw many students memorizing lists of procedures with no understanding of what was actually going on. I’m here because I might make a difference. I’m here because I didn’t know what else to do with my life during senior year of college (I didn’t tell them that one). Sometimes I wonder how I even ended up in TFA. I just happened to apply to it on a whim the day before applications were due.

While it may have started as a whim perhaps, her growth as a teacher was recognized by her students. She was not in survival mode as she was the beginning of her first year. She was healthier and much more mentally stable. She did admit to becoming a bit emotional after pushing herself to the limit one evening cycling. While she may have cried several times the previous year because of how badly things were going, this time she cried for another reason. She noted that it was only for a second and it was

...not because life is awful, but because I was tired and worn out and needed to let down the I’m-the-perfectly-on-top-of-it-instructional-leader-of-the-classroom front for a second. A few tears seemed like the fastest way to do that. This year is going to be good though.

She had undergone, and was still undergoing a drastic identity transformation process. Her actual identity was now formed to be “the-perfectly-on-top-of-it-instructional-leader-of-the-classroom.” It is intriguing that she viewed this as a “front.” By doing so, she recognized the Generalized Other role and attitude that she needed to assume in order to be successful. She also believed that despite how tired teaching made her this year that it would make this second year better than her first.

She recounted a meeting with her administration and some fellow teachers to discuss how to incorporate math across the curriculum and into the various other classes being taught at the school. In this post she also mentioned how the TFA teachers at the school were more likely to attend these school improvement plan meetings. This was interesting in that it was one of the few posts thus far where she set apart the TFA teachers as a sub-group of the other teachers at the school. While feeling she had ideas that could benefit her department and help the school make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), she admitted to feeling disenfranchised because, despite being the only applicant, she was turned down for the position of being the subject level coordinator for Algebra.

Later in the same post she alluded to having some recent run-ins with the administration. In a conversation with one of the janitorial staff members about the problem of graffiti in the school, she shared her feelings that the students do not have the maturity to be able to respect his (the janitor’s) position as a person and as an integral part of the school community. She told him that she, while still young and learning, had seen herself mature since being a high school student who was now a teacher. He then offered her some advice related to her position. He told her to “be careful what you say. These walls have ears and eyes and the politics of this school can get ugly.” She

wondered if he had heard something about these “run-ins” (which she did not detail). He told her that he could tell how hard she worked and how she thought. “You have a lot of ideas and passion” he said, and then he added “just be careful.”

This brought her to a point of being able to question a self that was becoming more confident and could afford her the opportunity to question the status quo. She also recognized that any form of questioning or dissent in turn could jeopardize her remaining in the field of education.

It’s sad that those with ideas, those who work hard and fight for their beliefs are often the ones who are most persecuted. Some horrible things went on in my classes last year and I never got in trouble. Mediocrity and even failure is more acceptable than a hardworker (sic) with a vision for improving the system. My administration does care, meetings like today show me that they do, yet they fear too much dissent, too many new ideas. I’m skeptical that I can remain in education. The more I get a handle on my own classroom, the more opinions I will have about the rest of the school and the more energy to get myself in a mess.

This was a strong statement about a Generalized Other that she felt the administration did not want its teachers to become; one who voiced opinions, brought forth new ideas, worked hard, and may dissent. She felt mediocrity and failure were more acceptable than wanting to improve the system as it stood. It was clear from her first year of teaching to this point in her identity development process that mediocrity and failure were not words that she easily used to describe herself.

While her teaching life may have been easier, she questioned where she was heading and what the options were for her future. She listed some possibilities which suggested that she was still considering staying in teaching (although it may be by moving to a community college). It also highlighted possibilities which not only aligned with her teacher self, but of herself as a professional cyclist and/or graduate student in either journalism or mathematics. While not mentioned predominately in her blog, the

blog itself is evidence of her passion and talent for writing and so it was not surprising that she would consider a path that would utilize her talent for writing. Her mention of these options, while in the midst of several admissions about her second year going so much better than the first, could be construed that she was at this point only viewing her current teaching position as just “a job”, not a career which she could continue for many more years.

In October of her second year she highlighted the school’s open house (which found her much more organized than the year before). Ms. A. was now relishing in her new-found organizational prowess. She not only had learned from her mentors, administrators, and past experiences with her students, but also gave credit to her graduate studies that helped her better understand her students. The parents of her students appreciated that Ms. A. was a teacher in control and in touch with her students. She noted that at the open house

Parents smile when they meet me. One says, “You inspire my daughter.” Another tells me, “Thank you so much for calling home when my son left his notebook. No one else has done that for me. Please push him this year.” Another tells me, “My son says that you are really good at math. I know they will learn if they have an enthusiastic teacher.” I tell the parents how much I appreciate them being there because I know how much it matters.

Ms. A. was proud of the accomplishments she and her students had reached especially because she never “realized how hard it was to do it.” In terms of her becoming the Generalized Other expected of herself and her administration, she noted her progress “wasn’t so much that the room was clean this year, it was that I understood why it needed to be clean and how to keep it that way without picking up a second job as a custodian. Things have come a long way.” Indeed they had.

The next month would find Ms. A. blogging after a trip back to the home of her parents after the death of one of her grandmothers. On her return to the school she felt “overwhelmed by how welcoming it was.” Recall her drive back to the school with her mom after summer break when she had fears and a pit in her stomach about returning to the place that had hurt her so much her first year. She now found herself “pleasantly surprised with the feelings of affection I felt for the staff.” She returned to hugs, cards, and her students excited to see her back. This gave her a feeling of not only having done a good job in creating the organization and structure necessary to sustain in her absence, but with thoughts of possibly staying on past her two-year TFA commitment.

It was obvious that my classroom was going much better this year because in my absence, the structure I’d created remained. Students knew where to turn in assignments and how to do missing work. Some of them even found the worksheets in the future-handouts section and decided to do them because they figured it would be useful eventually. I wonder if I will stay another year at my school, but experiences like this make me realize that it’s possible.

Her first year posts reflected some dramatic struggles which she had with classes that contained solely freshman boys. Ms. A. survived, and through the changing of her schedule for her second year teaching, was apparently thriving without having to endure the same group of boys. The same cannot be said of the new teacher who took on the responsibility of these freshman boys this year. In a post titled “freshman boys: 1, Ms. K.: 0” Ms. A. told the story of “Ms. K.” who called in “sick for a day and decided that not seeing awful freshman boys everyday was more pleasant and never returned.” This was a clear reminder of the events Ms. A. had to endure from the same level of students the past year. To Ms. A., the leaving of this teacher left “a hole in our school.” She admitted that she knew why this other teacher quit because she too had so badly wanted to quit herself. She wrote that “it’s a shame she didn’t make it because she knew more math than any of

us and was always trying hard. I could see it in her when she limped into algebra meetings, head low, beaten down and tired.” Ms. A. had been to that point herself, and she did not want to go back.

Noting the loss of” Ms. K.”, a knowledgeable yet beaten down teacher, Ms. A. asserted that “this does not bode well for making adequate yearly progress in math.” This was yet another indicator of a teacher-self who had an increased value in standards, tests, and accountability. Interestingly, it was not until her final reflection after her TFA banquet the year before when she mentioned anything related to AYP. Beyond the survival nature of her first year, this second year she could concentrate on factors that loomed larger in the realities of public education policy.

A week later and the school suffered the loss of another staff member, this time it was one of their Assistant Principals. Of this Assistant Principal, Ms. A. wrote that

...this lady had been doing a great job. She was smart, driven and cared about education. I don't know what we are going to do without her. The school will not be the same. One of the reasons that we have so much trouble making AYP is that we lose our best talent too quickly.

While this person left for a completely different reason than the teacher Ms. K. (this Assistant Principal was promoted to be a principal at another school), the statement of the school losing its “best talent” and that being a possible cause for the inability to make AYP is striking. Ms. A., as a TFA corps member, had continuously struggled with her own obligation to stay the course for her two-year commitment. At the spring TFA banquet, she wrote that it was “ironic” that the TFA corps members move on to “bigger and better things.” While she did not note if Ms. K., who left due to the chaotic conditions of teaching the freshman boys, was a TFA corps member or not, she had in the past mentioned that her school was staffed with a large number of TFA teachers (albeit

with at least one veteran TFA'er). Via the two stories of the most recent staff casualties, Ms. A. made the correlation between teacher (and administrator) attrition and poor performance on state and federally mandated indicators such as Adequate Yearly Progress.

### *An Expanding Identity*

While not mentioning her identity as a graduate student a great deal, she did give occasional credit to some of the strategies and research she was learning in the program. With that being said, she made a comment in a subsequent post about the lack of challenge she and the other TFA teachers felt in these master's level education courses. As a teacher she valued not only the research strategies being taught, but also her undergraduate background that provided her with a framework to be a more accomplished student than many of her peers in these classes. She mentioned that these other teachers (her classmates) were nice and she did not mind helping them, but "we are frequently admonished by our professor for our inability to cite sources, write a coherent paper, and use the library to find sources outside of random unauthored web pages."

Ms. A. was nearing the mid-year winter break of her second year as a teacher, and as of yet she had not mentioned whether or not she would remain teaching, go into a different graduate program, seek work in another field, or focus solely on her cycling. Two of her last three posts before the break described her continued work on the team developing the School Improvement Plan. The team was tasked with developing a proposal that may enable the school to receive additional funding by becoming an "empowerment school." She noted that the school was already doing a great deal of what

is required to be considered for the funding, but she and the other School Improvement Team members had questions.

Ms. A. was opinionated on whether or not the school should take on this mantle of accountability. While giving the school more options in terms of how it spent its funding, more would be required of the teachers and she was not sure the majority of teachers were willing to accept this responsibility. She related some of the accountability responsibilities back to her own experience with tracking the data of her students during her first year. In fact, she wrote that “the empowerment model reminds me of Teach for America’s tracking system and you all know how well I did with that my first year despite my best intentions.” With that said, she added that she thought some of the teachers would not be willing to work in an “environment of collaboration” and that to make fundamental changes at her school, the entire staff needed to be willing to work harder. The “working harder” mentality is a theme that was maintained throughout not only her blogging about her first years teaching, but also about herself in her former identity as a student and athlete. While she mentioned that early on in her “TFA career” someone gave her advice to “work smarter, not harder”, she also noted the effort that implementing the advice takes. This was also somewhat in contrast to her earlier statement that “those who work hard and fight for their beliefs are often the ones who are most persecuted.”

As a member of the School Improvement Plan (SIP) Team she mentioned that at one time she feared bringing forth her opinions because her ideas could possibly help her get her into “a mess.” This did not stop the administration from asking her to be a teacher representative for the school as the staff met with district administrators regarding the

possible empowerment funding. Yet she was still apprehensive about speaking up and asking questions. She wrote that she “was the only teacher there [at the meeting] and thought that as the only one in the room without a business suit or wrinkles of experience around my eyes, I should just sit tight at listen.” When she returned to the school to work on the proposal, she noted that “back at the familiar table of our SIP meetings I felt ready to contribute.” These statements are representative that the circumstances of the social situation as well as the makeup of the group were factors which influenced her asserting her teacher self and opinions.

Back at the school she became very opinionated about the realities of the students who lacked the basic mathematical foundation to enable them to pass the math portion of the graduation test and receive a high school diploma instead of a certificate of attendance. The numbers of these students were staggering to say the least. Two thirds of the students at her school had not met the basic math proficiencies in order to fully graduate. While writing the proposal for the empowerment school project, she was keenly attuned to the factors that should be addressed. Yet she believed that these factors were beyond the scope of what she and the committee could submit in the proposal. Of this she wrote

Students are not learning effectively using the traditional procedural approach to learning mathematics. They cannot make new connections, problem solve or figure out new technologies that they will need for their jobs. Because they cannot connect mathematics to their lives they lack investment and meaningful understanding. Of course there is much more we could do to improve our school but I want to create a structure to fundamentally change the way we approach mathematics.

One can definitely note that well beyond the survival mode of her first year teaching, she was now questioning and seeking change in the fundamental structure of the educational process for teaching mathematics.

The other post before the winter break found her telling the story of taking a group of students on a camping excursion. Her role with the school's Earth Club took her and these students on an outdoor adventure that many had yet to experience. As the teacher in charge of these students, she pondered that "it's so good that they are outside running around having fun and I think that showing them [this experience] is more helpful in some ways than showing them math....Even though last night was frigid and the kids were the slowest hikers I've ever seen, the weekend was a good learning experience for all." Ms. A. was coming to an understanding that being a teacher was much more than delivering specific content in the required constraints of her contractual duties. Her taking on of these extra-curricular responsibilities were indicators that her identity as a teacher had expanded and at times were of greater value than those her traditional role entailed.

#### *The "Few" vs. the Rest*

A month after the Christmas break and Ms. A. was considering how she could motivate the School Improvement Plan team to do more in the area of math proficiency. Although a part of this team, she felt as if she was the only one that seemed to notice that it was because the students could not pass the math section of the required graduation test that half of the school's students do not actually graduate.

It is interesting that just as Ms. A. had written of being fearful of reprimand due to her ideas and opinions, she wrote

...one of the veteran TFA teachers who spearheads efforts to change the culture of the school has been depressed about the SIP team lately because nothing is happening and we are dreadfully far from making AYP. She regrets coming out of her hole and trying to change the school because she is only met with frustration when few are willing to participate or make an effort.

The “few” that this post brought up were another Generalized Other group within the school and teaching population that she had not mentioned in any of her earlier posts.

This group was the Teachers’ Union. Ms. A. and the other “veteran TFA teacher” assumed that one of the steps to the school making AYP status that year was for all of the teachers to work harder and more efficient which may mean working past contracted time (and going against Union rules).

Ms. A. developed a plan for a school-wide math implementation program where math would be taught in an interdisciplinary fashion across the curriculum. She submitted this plan to her administrator, and even though she believed it to be the right thing for the school to attempt at the time to help the students in their math proficiencies, she had self-doubts about being the author and messenger for the plan.

When I showed my administrator the plans for the meeting tomorrow she thought that it was too long because it extended past contracted time. I’m nervous about starting something and making decisions that will affect other teachers because I feel under qualified. No one else is trying to make a concerted school-wide proficiency effort so I think that even though I’m not qualified, I’m the one for the job. Of course I wasn’t qualified to teach when I started either and that seems to be going well now except even though I’ve been successful with Pre-Calculus, my Algebra students are still struggling. I wonder how I can help a school teach math if I can’t even reach my own freshman.

Her doubts about her own qualifications to propose a school-wide plan (a reflection of her teacher identity) were countered by being someone who came in unqualified to teach, yet who also experienced success from learning from her own struggles. This as well harkens back to Mead’s (1934) discussion of how a single individual can react against

the community at large (be it “the Union”, fellow teachers, administrators, students, parents, etc.). Mead stated that “we can reform the order of things; we can insist on making the community of standards better standards” (p. 168). Even with her self-doubts, Ms. A. felt she still was the “one for the job”; a job that no one else was willing to take with few even acknowledging the problem existed.

Her next post provided some of the most pertinent insight into her identity development at this point in her second year of teaching. She entitled and began the post with a quote from one of her “fellow TFA teachers.” Using this descriptive she again segmented the TFA teacher group at her school as a separate entity from the non-TFA teachers. The post also related to the identification of roles and responsibilities of other department teachers with whom she was trying to motivate to teach more math related concepts due to the failure rate on the math proficiency portion of the graduation exam.

Recalling the most recent school improvement meeting, she noted that the “TFAers” were “frustrated that there was no staff buy in” to her promotion of teaching math across curricular areas. Of her plan she noted that it “asks them [the other teachers] to do simple problems with their students and it’s meeting with tons of criticism because the feeling is that teachers can’t do it or just won’t.” She contended these teachers (the non-TFAers) will not put in the time or effort necessary because it would require them to work beyond contracted time and not get paid for their extra work. It was the improvement team versus “the teachers”, a group she was not holding identification with. She was not willing to accept the role and responsibilities of this group of “teachers”, but was accepting of those of the “TFAers” (all the while attempting to transform this other group more to its likeness). This frustrated both Ms. A. and the SIP team.

The SIP team is frustrated because we have no power over the staff and the administration is overworked and has no time to observe. I'm a second year math teacher and math is the absolute biggest problem for graduation and adequate yearly progress at my school and I have not been observed once. The administrator who was in charge of me left right as observations were beginning and her replacement hasn't done it yet. Her replacement seems hardworking and quite competent, holding us to high standards but has not made the rounds to my room.

Here Ms. A. provided an actual identity state of her being a "second year math teacher" (not a second year TFA teacher). She was also noting a problem with the expectations she and the other teachers were being held to, and the lack of support from the administration to accomplish simple administrative obligations such as observing the teaching of their staff members. She continued by stating:

Probationary teachers require at least nine observations and the district mandates that administrators spend a certain amount of time in the room. At a school with a huge turnover rate and tons of new teachers this demand makes it extremely time consuming for the administration to do anything to help the teachers grow. The state requested that the administrators do more quick "pop ins" because research shows that teachers improve when they expect occasional visits from the administration.

She identified her school as one with a "high turnover rate and tons of new teachers." She was one of these new teachers, and while not being observed herself she admitted she had never been able to be an observer and learn from more experienced teachers.

I know that it's horrible on my part, but I haven't really ever observed other teachers' classrooms. I watched one other teacher once for 25 minutes at the request of the administration and that is all. I know most people did it while student teaching but since I didn't really student teach I never did. I did watch other brand-new teachers teach at institute but that was more of an example of what not to do than anything.

She closed the post somewhat on the side of the other, non-TFA teachers. She concluded that "if anyone is going to observe others and collaborate, they need to be paid because asking people to do things out of their desire to help students succeed doesn't

really work outside of Teach for America.” While still acknowledging a Generalized Other TFA teacher who is different from that of the unionized, departmentalized, traditional teacher at her school, she seemed to be agreeing with this group that financial compensation is a component of their reality and identity as a teacher. She had noted in past postings her own proclivity to leave before the other teachers in order to train on her bike. She had also noted that she has had to separate and find a balance within her own life in order to not overly concentrate on her teaching and students alone. Her realization that these other teachers deserve to be paid to encroach upon their non-contracted time to implement new ideas (which may or may not work) was at least her recognition of a more complex identity of a Generalized Other teacher that she may or may not be becoming.

Mead (1934) used an illustration of someone playing baseball and that their actions are “determined by his assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game” (p. 154). Ms. A. took a glimpse into her assumption regarding the actions of her new administrator in her next post. She had written earlier of her disappointment in the school losing an assistant principal whom she felt “had been doing a great job” and “was smart, driven and cared about education.” She most recently posted that the replacement had not yet been able to observe her teach, with this possibly impacting her teacher growth and improvement. Ms. A. finally had the chance to talk one-on-one with this new administrator after a School Improvement Plan team meeting that was particularly “difficult” with “lots of pessimism.” After discovering that this new administrator was also “overwhelmed with the amount of other duties and meetings she was required to attend”, Ms. A. used words such as “sympathize” and “empathize” in her new understanding of the work this administrator must perform.

...it reminded me when I first started teaching and the kids expected perfection out of me, demanding that I manage the classroom perfectly, know everything about the school, be absolutely fair, and catch every word and action in the classroom. I wanted to scream “Do you think I’m not human? Do I not have feelings? Why do you think it’s possible for me to be everywhere and do everything all at once. Stop talking to me, asking me for things, and expecting that I have the answer.” Of course as a teacher and as an administrator you don’t get to admit these feelings but I suspect that most of us have them. When I’m frustrated by school-wide policies, I’ll try to remember the things that they have to deal with and that they are trying as hard as I am.

Ms. A. was giving a nod to the perceived Generalized Other roles of “teacher” and “administrator” as less than perfect humans being held to high levels of accountability both internally and via the social organization of the system. In one particular sentence earlier in the same post she also acknowledged the difference between this administrator and herself as a TFA teacher. Of this administrator, she posed the question “why should she be any more superhuman than me, especially if this is her career and not a two-year sprint for significant gains?” There is a definite indication in this statement that her continuing to teach would not extend beyond the two-year TFA commitment. It was not her “career” as being an assistant principal was for this administrator. This was also quite a designated TFA identity statement noting that her *raison d’être* was solely to work as hard as she could for “significant gains” in her students in an all-out “two-year sprint” before moving on to something else.

### *The Blog is Discovered*

As a blogger exposing a good bit of information about her teaching experience up to this point, one possibility she had not questioned in her posts was what would happen should her blog become discovered by her students (or administrators, co-teachers, etc.). This in fact did happen by a student in March of her second year. She entitled the post (which she password protected) as “Miss! I found your blog with google.” This came as quite the

shock, especially since the student made this announcement for the entire class to hear while she was teaching. She had a thought about her other students going home that evening and “googling” her. She wrote statements that reflected concern that, by reading her blog, her students may gain entry to an identity that she did not want to expose to them; one who at one point lacked confidence, was frustrated, and “wanted to give up.”

She still felt blogging and the TeachFor.Us blog site were valuable to her and fellow TFA teachers. She stated that she thought “sharing the struggles and problems honestly is what makes my blog worth reading at all by someone who is interested in education.” Yet her concern was still very evident.

I’m not sure what to do now. I know I already tried removing my name from every single thing related to this site but cannot for the life of me figure out how to do that even though I changed my email and everything. Any suggestions? Has anyone else had their blog discovered? Am I doing something wrong by writing about my experience? Legal advice anyone?

This seeking of advice from her readers was unique in this second year. She in fact seemed to not have as many readers responding to her posts thus far. By seeking this input, it did provoke a response from a fellow math teacher who had become an avid reader. The reader wrote the following to Ms. A.

Hi,  
I’ve been reading this blog for more than a year, and found the entry about students reading it in my Google Reader, though it has been removed now. I’ve appreciated your writings a lot and learned many things – and while I understand that you’re restricting access now, it is sad to be unable to read one of my favorite blogs! Under what circumstances would you add my wordpress account to your list of readers? I can’t find your e-mail address around here, but would you mind e-mailing me back?

Ms. A. posted back to this reader to let her (and her other readers) know that she figured out how the students found her and she “fixed it.” The same post also had another reader asking a question about a strategy to increase the students’ performance on the math

proficiency exam. These responses are clear indicators that her audience was learning from the experiences she chose to blog about and expose to the public. In email questions that I posed to Ms. A., I asked exactly who she thought was reading her blog during her first two years of teaching.

My mom, some of her friends, my best friend, random teachers here and there. I put a site meter on eventually and realized that people I didn't know were reading it and every once in a while I'd get a comment that would make me aware that others were reading it. I just met someone who reads my blog and once or twice I had private email exchanges with new teachers who'd read it but usually my reader(s) were completely anonymous.

I also questioned if she talked about her blog to her fellow teachers. She responded that

It [her blog] was a secret, especially because a variety of things on it like applying to grad school were not well known. I took pains to keep my name, school, town, etc. off of the blog. My personal friends at my school knew about it and they found it painful to read because they had had similar hard experiences. One time a student found it and I freaked out and password protected things. If my principal had found it...I would have been in BIG trouble. It would not have gone well, but I didn't really care because I was overwhelmed.

The post following her “freaking out” over the student finding her blog showed that she was finally seeing success in her teaching and her students. Her concept of teaching math across the curriculum was being accepted by teachers in other departments. She received a positive email from her department chair regarding her idea of a “rainbow math raffle” that enabled students to practice math in their other classes. Her principal was also pleased.

I got the coveted “good job” email from our principal for the first time in my teaching career. He sends out public displays of encouragement when a teacher goes above and beyond and I was pretty excited to get my email pat on the back. It's not much but it really does mean a lot to me.

For Mead (1934) this encouragement and success would have also meant a lot to her identity development process as well. These individuals (her department chair, principal,

readers of her blog, etc.) were recognizing in her a Generalized Other attitude of being a teacher, one that was finally showing signs of success.

While showing some success, it was not at all perfection in all of her classes. In the next post she recounted being intentionally hit by a battery thrown by a student. Of the students who witnessed the assault, none would admit to knowing who the battery thrower was at the time of the event. Later that week, one of her students did stay after class and informed her who the perpetrator was. From this, it gave her some “faith” that “some of my kids are good.” She spoke with a fellow cyclist who also happened to be a lawyer about the incident. He gave her some legal advice about ways she could hold the assailant accountable. The advice centered on how her students should respect her. This in turn prompted her to consider the difference in the amount of respect her individual classes shown towards her. The more advanced students in her pre-calculus class recognized in her identity as a teacher excellent knowledge of the content, and thus showed her more respect than her other classes. At this point in her second year, while she was able to manage her classes overall with greater success than her previous year, she was still puzzled about how to earn the respect of students who required more from their teacher than a person who knows the subject well.

Up to this point, Ms. A. had not written much about the role of parents with their child’s education (although she had written about positive and negative interactions with parents in previous posts). In the following statement, she distinguished the parental involvement philosophy of being a TFA corps member with thoughts of the larger Generalized Other group of “teachers.”

Teach for America corps members are taught to enlist the parents for assistance and make them partners in their children’s education. Although we share the

philosophy that parents can be key to success, we are also taught to never blame the problems in the classroom on the parents or use it as an excuse for failure. Teachers keep talking about how we are not only responsible for teaching our subject but also basic life skills. My roommate teaches her elementary school children social skills and I'm trying to show them that it's a bad idea to throw things at people. Whenever I talk to parents they are supportive and helpful so I have a hard time accepting the common teacher complaint that it is all their fault but when kids are throwing batteries I have to wonder.

While further cementing her identity as a TFA corps member (in particular her use of "we" in describing the TFA corps), the incident did bring forth within her a question regarding "teachers" as a larger Generalized Other group, to which she also uses the "we" and "our" pronouns. While not willing to place the entire blame of student misbehavior on the parents, she later in the same post provided an example of one of her students whose parent gave the okay to willfully disobey her teachers should the student wish. This, along with the battery incident, brought her to wonder if the "teachers" group of which she sees herself a part has a better understanding of the impact parents have on student behavior than do the TFA'ers. Also, she was wondering if teachers should be teaching more than just specific subject areas, but "basic life skills" which are not assessed on the high stakes tests her students must pass in order to graduate.

### *It's All about Math*

Her previous post found her wondering if she should take on the attitude of whether teachers should be teaching more than subject content. Her next post however is predominantly about the content area she taught...math. She gave various examples of why she considered herself a "math nerd." From having assisted a fellow graduate student with a challenging geometry problem to having taught a friend's fourth grade son ninth grade algebra; from having co-passengers on a plane trip attempt sample math proficiency graduation exam problems to entertaining a group at a party with a song

about pi. Ms. A. realized that these experiences over her last three weekends definitely qualified her for the “math nerd” moniker.

Despite the most recent incident with the battery assault, these experiences caused her to realize that she must have been enjoying teaching. Each experience gave her pause for reflection on whether or not to stay in the field as a teacher. She closed out the post by stating “life certainly seems to be on the up and up.” She then added that “there are so many endless possibilities for professional growth that I feel like I need to be a math teacher for at least another year to explore them.” Her use of the terms “professional growth” and “math teacher” are of particular interest. She compared her varied recent “math nerd” weekend experiences as “opportunities for professional growth.” These experiences increased her “math teacher” identity, which in turn prompted her to consider being a “math teacher for at least another year.” Recall from the statement of purpose of this research that a teachers’ professional identity is a construct that has been shown to increase job satisfaction, which has been linked to increases in retention. Ms. A.’s new found enjoyment of her job and her statement about possibly staying a math teacher for at least another year can be shown to directly support the purpose of this current research.

While Ms. A. may have an inclination to stay a math teacher for at least another year, her next couple of posts hinted that it may not be at her current school where she will continue to teach. She visited a high school where her mother was to be a guest lecturer. Ms. A. was enthralled at the school. She noted:

The school was so different from what I am used to. The students were enthusiastic and listened to the teachers. When I read the mission statement for the school I felt like it was the mottos I repeat over and over in my own classroom. They shared all my beliefs about how mathematics should be taught. The other teachers were math nerds just like me and I already felt welcome, ready to be myself. I’m not sure it’s possible to know where I want to be so quickly, and

maybe I take random signs too seriously. My mom just happened to be speaking there and needed me to drive her and I happened to love it. Now if they just happen to want me too life will be grand.

In discovering this school, she found another Generalized Other which she would like to become. At this point, Ms. A. would rather become a part of a group which shared her beliefs and attitudes about teaching, as opposed to trying to continue to reform the group she was currently a part. Even the students at this other school reflected a Generalized Other attitude that Ms. A. had struggled with embodying into the students she had taught over the past two years. There was also a connection to the other teachers whom she referred to as “math nerds just like me.” She believed that it was serendipitous that she had the opportunity to discover and make connections at this school; a school she hoped would want her as much as she wanted to become a part of it.

The next events in Ms. A.’s current teaching situation would also play a role in terms of her decision to stay teaching at the school. First she wrote about how the newspaper in her city published an article with a “huge red F across the front of a picture of the district Algebra assessment.” District-wide only 9% of the students passed the assessment and at her school it was only 3%. Secondly, after finding out this news, she was finally observed by her new administrator teaching the Algebra class that up to this point had been so challenging. After the meeting with the administrator regarding the observation, she admitted to feeling “like an utter failure.” The administrator offered suggestions, but Ms. A. conceded she had already tried every suggestion she had to offer and still the students were failing.

Midway through the post, she wrote of a walk she took post-observation with another TFA teacher. During the walk, the two teachers “vented and shared frustrations

and feelings of failure and talked about teaching in Private Schools and how much it hurts to be deemed a failure because you are teaching in a failing educational system.”

Later in the same post, she described an online discussion post that she made that same weekend for one of her graduate classes. The post gave Ms. A.’s insight into teacher attrition (a statistic which could soon include her).

I wrote that I understood why educators left the profession. It is demoralizing to be publicly deemed a failure by a newspaper that blames the teachers for “not trying to teach the standards” and spending too much time on remedial math. When students arrive at high school still failing on 4th and 5th grade standards that are critical for success in Algebra, I’m not sure what else we should do especially when we are criticized by the administration for moving on when kids are still confused.

*Saving the “Teacher-Soul”*

While her frustration was evident, she still felt what she was doing as a teacher was “necessary”, in spite of the fact that the “work was miserable.” That same weekend she decided to re-read parts of a book she had read over Christmas break in hopes of gaining some “peace and clarity” about her work and her future. Her reflection on the book prompted her to write the following:

My job is challenging and I get distracted from my purpose but it is a job I do out of compassion and caring for others...As a teacher I am on a quest for teacher wisdom, the ability to exist in a classroom and stay sane...As I wrote on my job applications to teach in [other]schools, I grew so much as a teacher because I faced huge challenges. Cyclists get faster when they climb bigger mountains. Suffering leads to success. I have certainly not reached “teacher enlightenment” yet but I’m approaching it more quickly here than I would at the fancy private schools I’m applying to in [another city]. Of course at those schools I will actually get to teach math as it was meant to be taught to students who love learning and I know that is my favorite part of my job and that my teacher-soul might burn out and die here before ever reaching enlightenment.

This excerpt provided great insight into her development thus far in her teacher identity, or what she was then terming her “teacher-soul.” She attributed the growth she

had made was due to the suffering and challenges she faced during her first two years of teaching. And while she was applying for other teaching jobs at “fancy private schools” she was doing so out of a desire to achieve what she had yet to have been able to achieve at the school where she began her teaching. She was also cognizant of the fact that attaining “teacher enlightenment”, and more importantly the existence of her “teacher-soul”, were in jeopardy and could possibly “burn out and die” if she does not leave her current teaching situation. She had reached a point of being able to write of her identity as a teacher, and as such she likened the process as that of being on a journey or a quest. And while her future “teacher-soul” may reside teaching in a different location, it was one that she hoped to maintain and enhance on her “quest for teacher wisdom.”

As she had previously, Ms. A. again admitted a realization regarding why, when, and how much she posts on her blog. She wrote “I know that I usually write the most when I am the most upset so I apologize if I’ve made it seem too negative.” There must have been some discussion on some of the other TFA blogs about the negative nature of the “Teach For Us” postings, so in response she gave an account of some positive events that had recently occurred. She also closed the post with a comment that was targeted to a particular group of readers, those new TFA corps members who were about to attend the TFA Institute. To these future corps members she wrote “Good luck to all the new people, waiting to go to institute. You have not made the wrong decision.”

Almost a week after the affirmation of the decision of the new corps members to have joined TFA, she made known that she had made a decision of her own. After a whirlwind, expense paid trip over her spring break to a private high school at which she had applied recently she made the announcement that she was hired to teach Calculus at

this school for the next school year. She stated that “I don’t know exactly what I did to deserve this but I suspect it has something to do with never giving up on awful freshman boys.” Not only did the school wish to hire her to teach Calculus, they also wanted to bring her on board to help the school create an outdoor education program. Of her being offered the position and the pieces falling into place for her to make the decision to say yes, she noted it was “serendipitous.”

With spring break over and a decision made to leave the school where she had developed her “teacher-soul”, there seemed to within Ms. A. a new sense of serenity. A few days after she posted her decision, she wrote about the success she was seeing in the behavior of her students. She also noted that despite spring being in the air, she was not going to slack up in her teaching. She also documented some very positive experiences, one which involved a trip to the Grand Canyon with the school’s Earth Club. She wrote that she “felt nostalgic about leaving because I know that Earth Club is important at [her school]. The teachers and students appreciate each other more outside of the fighting ring of the classroom.” Another positive experience was when the students surprised her on her birthday with a vocal performance. Here she again pointed out the various identities the teachers at her school were asked to take on: “psychiatrists, nurses, behavior managers, motivators, parents, and friends.” She then noted that “all most teachers want to do is teach their subject.” The latter is the identity Ms. A. wanted her students to have of her above all; a subject matter expert who would be able to impart her vast math content knowledge to her students.

Yet over these past two years of her teaching she had been forced to concentrate on other areas necessary in order to accomplish actually teaching math, especially

classroom management and student behavior (particularly with her freshman students). For Ms. A., her students should have been able to respect within her identity her content knowledge expertise, as she had written earlier in the year that the beginning teachers were “told in teacher training to tell students about our accomplishments in the first weeks of school so that they would respect us as professionals.” She later admitted that it took more than just the knowledge of her background and content expertise in order to achieve that respect from some of her students. She later posted that “I don’t know what it takes to earn respect but it’s not a degree in advanced mathematics.”

This lack of respect and having to take on Generalized Other roles (psychiatrist, nurse, behavior manager, motivator, parent, friend) that were expected of the teachers at her school but that she did not want to have to maintain as a teacher helped lead her to seek other employment where she may be able to focus more on solely teaching content. She may had been willing to maintain these other roles, but she noted “we’re [the teachers are] not trained to take on all these roles. But we do try and the challenge is good.” She did identify one specific challenge and role she did not want to assume. After two incidents at the end of her second year where students had brought a gun on to campus, the staff was told by a campus police officer that if they saw a weapon on campus they should “call the police but, ‘Don’t wait for us to come tackle those f\*\*\*ers’ (sic).” To this she responded she should

...face the fact that I might be asked to tackle an armed student and that the police really would want us to physically intervene if a kid was about to unload into some other students. In that moment I was 100% positive that teaching at a fancy private school was a great decision. Later that day at Trader Joe’s a couple of people commented, “You don’t get paid enough” when they found out I was a teacher. After realizing that part of my job description involved apprehending criminals with only my major in math as training I tended to agree with them.

While being somewhat facetious, there had been several posts over the past two years where Ms. A. mentioned her ill-preparedness to be teacher, but never her ill-preparedness in understanding the math content she was tasked to teach. She made great strides over her first two years of teaching within the areas of classroom management, student discipline, and earning the respect of her students, co-workers, and administration. Yet even with these successes, her students did not see great gains on their end-of-year district assessment.

*“Bigger and Better Things”*

As she prepared to leave by cleaning out her classroom, she wrote of finding mementos reminding her of her two years at the school, her time at the TFA institute, and her time at college. Her experiences being a teacher for her students made a definite impact on the life of Ms. A., yet she admitted that she was now escaping back to a world her students cannot. She recognized that her struggles made her stronger, yet she questioned if she was ever meant to be a part of “the trenches” in which she worked so hard the past two years. It was also poignant how she described the students’ reaction to her leaving, being sad and having a realization that “no one wants to stay at my school for long. They know I’m young and hardworking and can do bigger and better things.”

She did make it through her commitment to teach at this school for two years, and while she would not become a “career” teacher at the school, she would still be a teacher in another town and in a different situation. After her TFA Alumni Induction ceremony, she noted that she was much prouder of the “diploma” she received from TFA than even her college diploma or getting through her Master’s Program. She again stated she “was not at all sure that I’d make it through my two years with Teach for America. I’d never

wanted to quit something so badly.” She compared the pride she felt with the pride of her students who against all odds graduate from high school. Of these students she wrote that “they struggle, they want to give up, they see it as hopeless, but when they make it and walk across the stage to the blaring of their parent’s party horns they are filled with the same sense of accomplishment I felt tonight.”

### *Shifting Identities*

The reality of completing her TFA commitment not only left her with a sense of pride, but also sadness with a tinge of guilt.

My roommate and I discussed whether or not we could sustain the intense energy of being in a low-income classroom and suffer as much as we have here indefinitely. I am sad that I am no longer part of a movement; it is truly inspiring to be a part of a greater whole, working towards a common goal. The alumni are a part of the movement in the sense that we take the spark that TFA lighted in us, the outrage at the injustice of it all, and use this to propel us to continue addressing the achievement gap. Perhaps I’ll try to return to a job with TFA at some point. I’m feeling guilty about my fancy private school job.

She was now addressing herself no longer as a TFA corps member, but as an “alumni.”

Her Generalized Other identity as a corps member in a movement had shifted, but she hinted that it should now become a “spark” in her new identity (which was still a teacher) as she moved to a different point in her life.

As she walked through the door of her school for the last time, she wrote that it served as both “torture chamber and the place that made me what I am today.” She reflected on what she learned during her time in TFA and at the school.

I learned that I can endure more than I ever thought possible, that great suffering results in great growth, and that being useful and feeling successful matters to me more than money. I want to be part of a mission, to have my life count, to mean something. As they say, I drank the TFA koolaid. And although I smiled to think that I will no longer endure ridiculous class sizes, little parental support, endless bureaucracy and horrible district Algebra tests, there is a part of me that is sad about leaving. The people here did a lot for me. I’m wanted. The principal told me

yesterday, “If you want to stay I have a job opening for you.”

As a note, she mentioned that the other TFA teachers at her school were staying for the next year and “continuing the mission.” She admitted that there was still a lot of work to be done in terms of leadership at the school, and while she could not “do everything” she hoped to be able to do “something positive” in her new school.

### *Freedom without Fear*

The day after her last day at the school, she produced a couple of blog posts where she felt she was now “free” to be able to write what she wanted “without fear.” This new-found freedom did provide insight into her previous identity as a teacher at a school where it was looked down on to voice an opinion that was different from the administration. This was an identity that was not only enforced by the administration, but offered up as advice from the mentor teachers in the school. Ms. A. wrote that “the mentor teachers taught me in my run-ins with the admin to smile, to not talk very much and to agree because it was easier.”

The run-ins she referred to were when Ms. A. confronted her students and her administrator regarding the school’s academic performance and being a part of the “achievement gap.” This view of the school was not something the administrator would agree with nor would he want any of his teachers to make such claims. Ms. A. stated that “speaking of the school openly and honestly is often discouraged by the administration and people often fear repercussions for telling it how they see it.” She was finally able to openly post that she wanted to ask the principal “why he’d hire TFA teachers with only 5 weeks experience straight out of college if our school was really that amazing.”

One of her last posts of the year found her also with the freedom to describe the bureaucratic nightmare of the hours it took to print yearly attendance reports before she left that she was told “no one will ever see again.” This was one reason she felt so many teachers left the profession altogether, the bureaucratic hoops teachers were made to jump through for little or no rationale. Another reason she felt teachers left was due to being deemed a failure because of poor student performance on high stakes standardized assessments.

The last month of school I kind of gave up teaching the test because I was so frustrated with teaching a class of kids who couldn't do the work and talked and bothered me instead. Misbehaving and being defiant is easier than admitting defeat on math. I tell the principal that my class scored 33%, only 8% higher than random guessing and that it was demoralizing to be branded a failure based on a really hard test. He reassured me that I'm not but I insisted it was feeling powerless to be successful that would cause me to quit the profession.

After two years, the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness to a high achieving, bright, hard-working teacher did not cause her to leave the profession, but to leave the atmosphere of public education that imposed such demands. The Generalized Other Ms. A. had become over the past two years was one that she was willing to leave behind. She would now be moving towards another Generalized Other identity, one that would no doubt benefit from the experiences, struggles, triumphs, and failures from her first two years as a teacher and her involvement with Teach For America.

Recall that earlier in the year she had posted how she got into Teach For America and teaching “on a whim.” While it may have started as “a whim”, it was a whim which drove her to tears, caused her to endure sexual harassment and physical assault, provoked her to admit failure, had her question the bureaucracy and status quo, and allowed her to

relish in the all too few moments of success. The “whim” was also the beginning of her taking on of a new role and identity, that of teacher.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE STORY OF MR. Z.

#### Introduction

Mr. Z. graduated from what is considered to be a prestigious university in the Southeastern part of the United States and was hired to teach ninth-grade biology in a large urban school district in the same region of the country. The high school where he worked focused on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and his own high school experience was at a magnet school that focused on similar areas (mathematics, science, and computer science). He had blogged while he was in high school and college and when asked why he blogged he responded that it was a “cathartic-like process” in which he was able to express his opinions and “put them down in writing.” He stated that he “also wanted to put down thoughts that could be preserved” so he could “look back on and laugh/learn/whatever.”

#### Year One

##### *Big Goals*

The title of his first post included an actual identity statement (Sfard & Prusack, 2005) which found he was already referring to himself as a teacher, albeit a 5-week teacher who had yet to start teaching officially. The post was a transcription of a speech he gave to over 100 Teach For America (TFA) corps members while he was still at the TFA Institute and before he embarked on teaching full-time at the high school where he was hired. In this initial post we learn that Mr. Z. had deferred going to medical school to

join what he called "this movement." He explicitly stated that the reason he deferred was because of a "commitment to social change work." This signified what he believed the work of teachers to be - working for social change. He had also been involved in social justice work while in college via several organizations and had even worked in a migrant worker community one summer in China. He believed in the importance of teaching and he recalled that one of his Faculty Advisors at Institute told him that "teachers make all other professions possible" (another identity statement of what teachers do and the importance of teaching).

While at Institute one of the first student interactions he documented was the first thing a student said to him and it was related to his ethnicity (he refers to himself as being of East Asian origin). The student asked him the question "what are you?", which he said he expected to happen during "these two years", but he did not expect it to happen on what he called "day negative 1." This was also the first mention of the two-year commitment that TFA corps members agree to and suggests that he may have been already counting the days.

His first post not only highlighted his self-perception and frustration, but also his seeing progress on teacher responsibilities such as creating lesson plans. While still referencing his experience at Institute, he mentioned several times about working extremely late hours preparing to teach, and that he has also had numerous urges to "punch a wall." He finished that comment with stating that he "used to have a lot of respect for teachers. Now I have a LOT of respect for teachers." This was an indication that his respect for the work of teachers grew since having to do it himself.

His next post was still prior to his starting to teach at the school where he would work for the next two years. Mr. Z titled this post the "big goals we will reach..." and he was indeed making "big goals" for him and his students. What made this title and post of interest is the use of the pronouns "we" and "our" in the title and in his listing of the goals below:

- We will all score above an 80% on the End-of-Course Test for biology.
- We will all master at least 80% of the course objectives
- We will all complete one of the following final projects
  - A biological research project...
  - A 4-5-page research paper...
- We will all write a weekly 2-paragraph document on a current event related to science..

While this post was predominantly concerned with how Mr. Z. sought to ascribe success for his students relative to their test scores and projects, he was definitely tying his success as a teacher with his students' success on these assessments. He wondered if he was being "really naïve" about the goals he was setting or if he was actually "setting these kids up for success" by having such big goals.

Mr. Z. detailed what he considered to be a personal success with one student who had previously failed both semesters of biology, failed the summer school diagnostic test (a 6%), yet during summer school (under Mr. Z.) passed both semesters of biology and passed the End of Course Test with an 85%. Of his success with this student he noted that "you can't tell me I can't invest 'these' students in their own education."

While this success with this specific student caused Mr. Z. to have a great deal of confidence and hope for his future work with other students, he knew he would have his work cut out for him. He found out that only 20% of the students in the school where he

would soon be employed passed the same End of Course Test this student had to take. Of this poor percentage, he wrote

...seriously...20%? either I'm in for a really rude awakening, or the students in my school weren't pushed hard enough. I really can't balance confidence in my abilities with the fact that this confidence puts me at a huge risk for being slapped in the face come may [when the End of Course Test is administered]...or even in two weeks when I start teaching.

Regarding his "big goals" (which is a mantra of TFA), Mr. Z. received a comment on this post from one of his readers who also seemed to know him personally.

These goals sound ambitious but I know you have the ability to motivate people to go beyond what they think they're capable of doing. The training you had to do at the "Institute" sounds intense. I wish I could hear more about your experiences in detail but your (freaking long) speech captured a nice image he he. You are so hardworking and passionate, but remember not to burn yourself out.

While Mr. Z. did not respond openly on the blog to this comment, it does provide some insight into the identity that another person held of him.

A following post was titled simply "transformation" and it was surprisingly not about his own transformation in becoming a teacher but of the school at which he was hired. This post found him a bit frustrated about his school's movement to a "small schools model" and how it was impacting how the teachers (and possibly students) perceived themselves. Mr. Z. was worried about the divisiveness of what this may cause (teachers vs. teachers; students vs. students; students vs. institutional policy).

Drawing upon the roles that he had known of students attending other high school magnet programs (even his own), he was concerned about the differences this new model had over ones he was more familiar with. From a student perspective it was unlike any he had experienced and he feared what this model may bring. He stated that his personal opinion was that "it's stupid", specifically regarding students not being able to take

classes outside of their “school.” He also felt it was being caused by the “whole accountability and focus on test scores.”

He described how he had to spend hours moving textbooks in order to find the textbooks for his classes, though without much luck. This brought forth a comment that he did not realize his high school teachers had to come in “weeks before the school year in athletic wear and do manual labor.” This provides one of his first Generalized Other (Mead, 1934) statements about the role he felt teachers should be performing. It also provided insight into how this experience of doing the textbook search may cause his initial perspective of the varied roles and attitudes of teachers to evolve. That same day he became frustrated because of an event where he was helping another “school” with their textbooks. He was somewhat chastised by another teacher from his school for not helping “his own.” This person even stated that Mr. Z. may not receive help from others when his time needing help came along. He wrote that his reason for helping this other teacher in the first place was because “no one in my school is telling me what to do and I want to be helpful in any way I can.”

He did feel that there was unity with the “new teachers” across the school and among those whom he referred to as “the TFA kids.” At this point in time, which is still before he had officially taught his first class at this school, he seemed to be experiencing opposing Generalized Other attitudes from differing groups. Mead (1934) states that it is “the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self” and that the “attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community” (p. 154). After his experience with a fellow faculty member advising him not to help others outside of his “school”, combined with what he experienced in new teacher orientation

and the TFA Institute, he was questioning if there was a unity across the schools or a divisiveness caused by adopting this new model. It was also on the day of this post that Mr. Z. was able to meet and talk with his principal for the first time. He excused this tardiness in their meeting as to the principal being "super busy", but his frustration in not being "in the loop" and not able to get answers to his questions from his administration however was clearly shown.

### *Chaos*

On the night before his official first day of teaching, or what he referred to as "showtime", simply wrote 'I enter my school as a teacher with students tomorrow at 7:45am when I report for cafeteria duty (who ever thought that was a good idea?...). Here goes everything.' Two days later and "everything" was in an uproar. He wrote that it was "chaos. Just pure, utter chaos." His frustration during the pre-planning phase of opening the school was minor compared to the level of frustration he felt after school had actually started.

I'm really just spending time trying to create some organization into my life because there really isn't much at the school. Okay, well maybe I'm being dramatic, but answer this question: how do you teach when your students don't have schedules? How do you teach when you don't have a roster? How do you teach when your consequences have no backing? Seriously...shouldn't that be the FIRST thing you address in a school?

He believed that the lack of organization at the school was giving him insight as to why there was an "achievement gap" between the students in his school and others. Due to renovations during the summer he noted that the school looked better aesthetically, however he still thought it was chaotic and unwelcoming. He discovered that one of his students was trying to get transferred out of the school because of the disorganization of the first days.

In terms of his teaching he was already making predictions based upon the students' behavior thus far. He thought that his ninth grade students were "great" and that they were "outstanding individuals." The tenth graders were another story. Of them he wrote that some were "definitely looking for trouble, so we'll see how that goes with classroom management...something that is not my forte." He was already making a concession about an area of weakness in his teaching.

The night before he was to begin his second week teaching, Mr. Z. contemplated on becoming more organized. He felt he had a "solid plan" for the week, but that this plan could be thrown off by issues such as school assemblies, his classroom management issues, or student fights (which he had predicted early on based on the new model the school was embracing). He felt there was an overabundance of miscommunication that was not allowing him to follow through on his plans and maintain consistency across his classes. "Solid plan" and all, the next day would find his exasperation level at an all-time high. He also began to question whether or not he could continue teaching.

I really don't think I can keep this up. and honestly...I don't even think I'm doing that much. with all the chaos that's going on in the school and trying to make sure 6 classes are at the same place and having my classes exceed their maximums such that I have more students than I have desks...GAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH.

### *Putting Up a Front*

He claimed that he was getting through the days "just fine," but also that he had to put up "a front" to be able to keep his "sanity" and "positivity." When he came home from teaching and tried to relax, his head ached. This "front" that he was putting up was an interesting metaphor for the Generalized Other teacher roles and responsibilities he was having to take on. These included dealing with the chaos that continued in the

school, the moving around of students to maintain classroom order, having to kick a student out of the classroom, dealing with "power struggles with children", the massive amount of papers to organize, large class sizes, and the large number of students he had overall. To Mr. Z., becoming a teacher thus far was "a bit overwhelming."

He was particularly having difficulty with his fifth period class. In his next post, he claimed he "snapped" and kicked the entire fifth period out of his class on the previous day of this post. He did not say to where he kicked them out, but he did include the email he sent to his principal about the incident. In the email, he mentioned that before he kicked the class out, that he had tried "every single management strategy" he knew but "nothing seemed to work."

The vast majority of his students that period (18 out of 23) were late to the class to begin with, with three not returning from lunch. Students were leaving the class without permission, and when he stepped outside to talk privately with one student (whom he had just given detention), he saw paper balls flying across the room. He then told the entire class to leave. He stated in the email to the principal that he "completely lost control of the classroom and I feel like sh!t (sic) for it." He wrote that he will apologize to the class the next day, and that he felt it was unfair to the "15 or so students who were there to be focused and learning." He also wrote that he believed the behavior of the others who caused the disruption was "completely unacceptable, disrespectful, and immature."

Mr. Z. was finding that the development of his teacher-self and the self of the students who were properly behaving were hampered by a certain group of students who refused to take on the Generalized Other role of students. These are roles that are set and

interpreted by the institution and himself, and by kicking all of his students out of class he was refusing to maintain his role as a teacher while not allowing the students to maintain their roles as students in his class. He did however recognize that this action as a teacher was unacceptable and he would have to make amends. He stated that the principal was supportive and that she agreed that he had "messed up," yet she felt he still could "gain control" again. He told the principal that he would tell the class he had made a mistake in kicking them out of the class, yet he was also going to tell them "what they did wrong and what needs to change." Of this he noted that the principal told him "that it's amazing that this is my first year of teaching because many veteran teachers could not be humble enough to tell their class that they made a mistake."

His apology to the class allowed things to get better at least for the moment. He wrote that the day following his "snapping" was an "amazing day." He also wrote about his second day of being the assistant coach for the girls' volleyball team – another role he was assuming at the school. The taking on of this coaching role appeared to have been helping him balance his teacher role. He stated that even though he had to stay later at the school for the volleyball practice, it did provide him with a reason to get "away from my classroom and helps alleviate the head-hurting I used to feel."

As Mr. Z. entered into his fifth week of teaching and his 22nd year of life (he crafted his next post on his birthday) he admitted that "it's hard to really know what to think any more." The school was still dealing with scheduling issues, and it seemed they "started school for the third time on Friday." He wrote of several events that will mark the day memorable; assigning detentions, a student punching another, calling a parent during class, and having a parent show up after school because he had called the parent

about a vandalism issue. He says he loves "parents who support me....and I love the opportunity to call parents during the school day."

Mr. Z. made a few interesting identity statements when he wrote how he yelled at a student in response to Mr. Z. stating that he felt like he was "babysitting" instead of teaching. The student responded with a question of "isn't that what you're supposed to be doing?" Mr. Z. stated he told the student "no, I'm supposed to be making sure that you're a positive contribution to society." This statement revealed a belief that his role as a teacher was to ensure students contributed to society in a positive way. He closed the post by stating that his response to the student "felt good", but then wrote "omg I have no idea what I'm doing...."

An avid fan of reality television, Mr. Z. likened his life to someone who should be on a reality show about his life being a teacher. He gave thirteen reasons why he believed this; the first being that he was the only person of his ethnicity in the school building. This was an identity statement that he had made mention of in other postings regarding his East Asian background. He wrote that another TFA teacher overheard a comment from someone else referring to Mr. Z. stating that "I didn't think he could speak English, but he speaks better English than I do." These statements show that his ethnic identity had an influence on how his teacher identity was developing and how he thought he was perceived by others.

Barely seven weeks into his first year of teaching, Mr. Z. commented that he felt he was getting "more respect than veteran teachers." In terms of student misbehavior, he admitted that he was getting "sadistic satisfaction" when he witnessed "kids busted for marijuana or handcuffed by police." He also received the same type of satisfaction when

he would read a student's essay to find that by entering one sentence into an Internet search engine he was able to find evidence of student plagiarism.

The latter examples show that his teacher-self was feeling a sort of vindication when students were held accountable for their inability to maintain the roles and responsibilities of being a student. He, as the teacher (as well as other authority figures such as police officers), was responsible for holding these students accountable for their behaviors. Mead (1934) would contend that he was becoming a part of the community of the school, a "social process" which "influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on" (p. 155). By his taking on this Generalized Other attitude of a teacher he was beginning to exercise "control over the conduct of its individual members" (i.e. the students) (p. 155).

#### *Un-TFA*

He felt conflicted with what he believed was a "very un-TFA" feeling. He stated that he felt better when some students did not show up for class which enabled him to be able to "focus more attention on the now small group." This statement indicated that he recognized that as a member of the Teach For America organization, he should hold certain beliefs when it came to his students. The stark reality of his classroom experience was, however, providing him with real-life evidence that some of the TFA philosophies did not hold true in terms of his specific situation. As a TFA corps member, he acknowledged in his first post of aspiring to the "one day all children" mentality. Yet, he was finding that without some of these "children" in his class, he was able to do a better job as a teacher and could focus on the smaller group of students.

At the end of Mr. Z.'s seventh full week of teaching, he posted about some sporting events at his school that he had attended (varsity football and girls volleyball). After describing some aspects of the games and teams, he started to write "enough about stuff outside of the classroom" but then wrote, "scratch that." He believed that

...being involved in something outside of class, but still inside the school helps a lot toward my credibility and respect with the kids who do see me. They see me on the volleyball court, they see me at the football games...it matters to them.

According to this statement, his identity as a teacher was being enhanced by his involvement with the students and school activities beyond the traditional classroom walls.

He described a situation in which he had taught a concept for three days and two-thirds of the class had not learned the material. He stated that he believed he was "not teaching if only 1/3 of the class is learning." He wrote that he was going to have to do some "serious thinking" and structure activities that will help his students learn. He believed that they had misunderstandings about what he had taught and that he needed to correct these misunderstandings "before they practice with incorrect terms."

He gave some examples of how there were still organizational issues at the school. While the administration finally replaced two long-term substitute teachers, he noted that the bell-schedule was still "messed up", there was a lack of supplies, and he was unable to enforce discipline since there had been no consistent discipline system for the first several weeks of school. He stated that the veteran teachers at the school claimed they had "NEVER seen the kids in the school get this crazy." This could have caused him to ponder if his skepticism regarding the move to the "small schools model" was justified and his fears were coming to fruition; but he had other concerns, and he closed the post

with a countdown of days left...not to the next holiday break, the end of the school year, or the end of the week...but to the End of Course Test that would take place 127 days later in the spring. He told himself "you'll make it."

Mr. Z. detailed a trip to his college alma mater for homecoming weekend which he almost did not make because of the amount of teaching-related work he had to do to finish up for the end of the quarter. The trip did cause him to realize that he had changed since being a college student. He wrote that

...the whole thing was a really weird experience. It was the same place with the same people, but I guess I realized that I hadn't yet come to terms with the fact that I no longer belong to that place. I now belong to another place of education.

He attended the president of the university's leadership dinner on the Saturday evening of his weekend trip and wrote about how he "chatted it up with some people in charge of young alumni giving about TFA." He then described attending the president's ball, where again the conversation tended to lean towards his involvement with TFA. He found it "weird" to talk about his experiences thus far, and stated that his response to questions almost became scripted. He would answer that he was "physically and mentally exhausted", that he "love(d) the people and fe(lt) really supported" but that he was also "growing more and more frustrated by the day." He wrote that what he took away from this experience was a "great reminder of how important my work is." Friends told him they respected what he was doing, how proud they were of him and how they had confidence in him. He said these types of comments were "very welcome and much needed" especially in light of the fact that he questioned the difference he was making or will make with his students. He did believe that having the respect and support of people he respected and admired was needed for him to be able to get through the 27 weeks left

in the school year. After describing his college homecoming experience, his next post found him describing the homecoming week for his students at the high school. He stated he was glad to see the students showing so much spirit, but it was "bad because there's another thing taking away their focus this week." He wrote that on the recent report cards "I failed 60% of my babies." He wanted to let these students know that he had "set the bar high children, meet me there." His Generalized Other expectations of the attitudes and behaviors his students should possess was not wavering.

He had a group of advisory students whom he called his "personal homeroom." These students did very well in their classes, but he did not think he could attribute it to something that he had done. He thought he had possibly "just lucked out with a pretty decent group." He also told the story of a student who was not in his "school" but visited him to show him his recent report card. The student was proud that he was only failing one class, and Mr. Z. stated that it was really a different experience from how he himself would have reacted as a student with his own grades. This was an excellent example of how he used his own life and experiences that made up his former identity as a student to ascribe understanding to how these students should behave.

He noted that the next day will be the second Parent Teacher Student Association meeting of the year thus far. He was looking forward to the meeting as he believed the majority of parents he spoke with were "extremely committed and involved." He also believed the majority of his students did not suffer from "a lack of parents who care." He made an interesting identity/cultural assertion about how there was "this culture that exists among the students that builds when the parents aren't around" and he intended to try to counter that culture during the remainder of the year. In other words, it was a part

of his role as a teacher to involve the parents and circumvent the student cultural identity that formed when the parents were not present. This aggregated identity was one that was in opposition to his role as a teacher. This again hearkens to Mead's (1934) contention that he was undergoing a "social process" of becoming the Generalized Other which sought to influence "the behavior of the individuals involved in it" (the social situation of the public school environment) (p. 155).

### *Restructuring and Balance*

He also mentioned that the girls volleyball team he helped coach did not make it to the state tournament. From this defeat, he wrote that he and his roommate were going to see if they can "take over as coaches next year" (a designated identity statement that could possibly impact his identity as a teacher). He closed this posting with a wish that he could be "more coherent" and make more time for things like his blogging and playing volleyball himself with a local club. He wrote that he needed to "make some priorities because right now teaching is my life. A shift needs to happen if this work is to be sustainable for the next 1.75 years." This was his closing remark of the post and one of the first that hints that he did not plan on continuing to work as a teacher past his TFA commitment. It was also a recognition that without some restructuring and balance in his life, he may not be able to finish his two year commitment. Mr. E. would note later that his deferral to medical school was for a specific two-year time period, and that was in the back of his mind his entire time teaching (although he would still consider teaching longer than his two-year commitment to TFA).

Restructuring was to happen, yet it was not necessarily the kind that he had envisioned. He wrote in the next post that he was "still in some sort of shock" because he

just found out that morning his principal was fired. He stated that she was "so supportive and so positive" and that he could not believe this had happened. This posting took place near the end of October and the principal had only been there since the beginning of July. He could not believe that the district would let her go so soon because they felt the school lacked the progress it should have already made. He decided to talk to his TFA program director about this firing and she told him that there was really nothing he could do about it. She advised him to stay focused on the goals he had for his students. He ended up stating that he may talk with the district officials about the principal being fired, and closed the paragraph stating "this is bulls\*\*t (sic)."

He began the next paragraph with a statement that he did not want the readers of his blog to think that life at his school was "h\$ll (sic) on earth, because it isn't." He stated that he "really, really enjoy(ed) teaching as stressful as it can be." Part of the enjoyment stemmed from the time he was able to spend with other teachers, his students, and their parents. He stated that even though he failed 60% of his students the first quarter, he felt that now most of them were "invested."

He then brought up a TFA meeting that happened the day before in which a program director told him a decisive "no" when he had previously called her somewhat late on a Saturday evening with a question about ability "tracking" students. He stated that at the time he felt he was "one of the biggest, if not the biggest workaholics" in the TFA corps in his city. While recalling that his school only had a 23% passing rate on the biology End of Course Test the previous year, he still wondered if anything he was doing could, or would, have his students pass at a higher rate.

“Spirit Week” was also occurring at his school at the time of this most recent post and he reported the events from the perspective of the pronoun “we.” He wrote that “we had a really short and lame pep rally”, and “we got CRUSHED at the football game” (as opposed to “the students had a...” or the “football team got...” At this juncture, it seemed to be that he was identifying closely as being a member of the school and a part of the larger social organization.

Mr. Z. described a disturbing incident with a student in his class who was robbed by another student. The student was crying in his classroom, and while he was able to get the student to write a statement, a witness to the crime refused to comply and be a “snitch”. He wrote that “it’s just so interesting...this culture of snitching” and recalled that this has happened before. At the end of the school day, he described how his “now former” principal would not let the student who was robbed walk home (for safety reasons). About her reaction, he stated she really knew her students and she was “really looking out for them.” He credited her reaction as something to be valued in the identity of a principal. In doing so, he recognized a Generalized Other attitude that he valued in the administrator, yet obviously since she was recently fired, the district administration felt she was not living up to the roles and responsibilities they valued in an administrator. He went on to describe the other crimes he had seen at the school; teachers laptops and digital cameras stolen, door knobs ripped off of doors, other forms of vandalism, urine in the stairs, and the smell of marijuana. He posed the question “how are these kids supposed to learn in this environment?” He then used the “we” pronoun again asking “how do we change this environment?” In doing so he was acknowledging his membership role and the responsibility that it entailed for him to be a part of making the

changes he sought. He did provide some possible solutions to his questions (the need for more security cameras, more administrative positions, and improved communication). He had even proposed a new bell schedule that received the support of his "now former" principal but not by the four principals who were over the other "schools". Mr. Z. believed one specific principal was "unnerved" because he felt that the teachers were "telling him how to do his job." In terms of this principals' concept of teacher identity, teachers were not to impose their ideas about school management and administration upon a principal. These were the roles and responsibilities of a principal. Even though focus groups of teachers were formed to address some of these problems, his and the other teachers' ideas were not widely adopted. There was however an adoption of a new tardy policy that was developed by the work of the focus groups of teachers. He felt it ironic that it was his "now former" principal" who came up with the idea of the focus groups which allowed for distributed leadership of the school. This acknowledgement had him close the posting with a "sigh..."

Mr. Z. highlighted in his next post three students in a series of vignettes that described positive classroom experiences. He opened with a statement on how he needed to focus and appreciate the positives. In his first vignette, he described a student whom he thought would be one of his "top students" because she was "willing to put forth the effort." At this point it seemed he was feeling that it was not as necessary for students to understand the material to do well, they just needed to be "willing" to do the work. He described how she began to "slip" as she began hanging out with a "mean girl" group and that this student was "basically not being herself." He ended up telling her he was "soon to stop caring about how well she did" in his class.

He provided an interesting identity statement about not knowing if anything he said "sank in, or whether her tough front seeped into her inner self." It was not until she wrote him a note during a class reflection assignment that he was given a glimmer of hope. In the assignment she apologized for her classmates and how they were behaving, but most importantly she apologized for herself and how much she was disappointed in her behavior. She gave some designated identity statements of wanting to "be a Pediatrician" in the future and that she also can sing and wants to "be a singer." In her apology she claimed she "acted" like she didn't care anymore...but that she did care and wrote that she was very sorry for her recent behavior.

It is interesting that just as he had wrote of having to put up a "teacher front" for his students, this student also had to put up "a front" to be accepted by a certain group of her peers. By his acknowledging his disapproval in this new behavior, he had struck a chord with her that enabled her to see how by seeking to develop a Generalized Other role that he would admire as a student, it could prove to be more productive and perhaps allow her to achieve the dreams she held for herself. He spoke to her about what she wrote and how it was contradictory of her recent actions. At this point, he was not certain how things with this student would turn out, but he indeed felt he was on the right track to modifying her non-productive behavior and placing her back on the track for success. She also seemed to want to resume the Generalized Other roles and responsibilities that Mr. Z. felt students should have, ones that he initially felt were so strong in her identity.

His next student vignette was of a student with whom he had to seek parental help. Unlike the first student he described that started off on the right track yet was derailed due to outside forces in the school, this student started off the year by not even

showing up for class. He called the student's mother to let her know about his absences. Mr. Z. stated the student had told his mother that he was "frustrated with the class and was expecting to fail." The mother was shocked and after the conversation, the student started showing up for class and was even showing up on time.

He struggled, yes, but I could tell he was keeping at it. Yes, he failed the first nine weeks, and yes he failed his test, but by showing that he is putting the effort in my class, I'm more willing to put the effort in him. Yesterday during classwork, he was answering the questions independently and he was doing so correctly. He was farther along with the work than any other student in the room. At the end of the class, he looked up at me and said, "Mr. Z., I got it."

This acknowledgement of how the student's behavior toward his classwork impacted Mr. Z.'s behavior towards the student is enlightening. By assuming the Generalized Other role that Mr. Z. had for his students (showing up for class, being on time, doing the classwork), Mr. Z. was more willing to assume the Generalized Other role of the teacher (putting forth more effort in his student). It also showed his appreciation for the role of the student's mother. Mr. Z. was recognizing that his role was being made possible by being a part of a larger social group that included not only his fellow teachers and administrators, but also by the students and their parents.

He began his third story with an apology. He wrote that his readers needed to pardon his brevity in this account, "but the life of a first-year teacher makes it so that I don't have much time to talk." Here he identified himself solely as a "first-year teacher" and not more specifically as a TFA corps member. It also gave some insight into how busy he felt at the time (but was still finding time to post to his blog to record his stories).

His third vignette painted a picture of his being shown appreciation from one his students in his fourth period class. The student would stay after school and play games on one of the computers in Mr. Z.'s classroom. Mr. Z. wrote that he was "okay with that

because he doesn't make a distraction at all. He's really respectful and will go out of his way to help me out." Again this was a student who was displaying behavior (being respectful, helping out, not being distracting) that was conducive to Mr. Z.'s teacher-self. What made it even better for Mr. Z. was one afternoon the student appeared with a present in hand for his teacher. It was a bag of Doritos chips, and it seemed that Mr. Z. was a bit surprised by the gift. It appeared to give him hope that he was doing some things right. He closed the post with wondering if tomorrow when he returned to work if he would get even more bags of Doritos.

### *The Need for a Break*

His next post would find Mr. Z. at the airport waiting on a flight for a return to his family home for Thanksgiving break. Being at the airport allowed him some time to think and reflect on the past couple of months of being a teacher. He wrote that

...the thought "I've made it to Thanksgiving" popped up in my head. And for some reason that made me happy. I've taught a full 3 months... 14 weeks now. I still don't think I'm going to get to my goal of having all my students pass the (end of course test) (not even the state's goal of 67% of them passing), but I'm still giving it my best shot. I know I'm not an effective teacher right now, and that is so so frustrating.

He was working hard yet looked realistically at his predictions for how well the students may perform on the End of Course Test. His frustration was that he was not being effective in preparing the students for this test, and yet he was giving it all he had. He was in need of a break though, and this need caused him some concern regarding how well he was enjoying his work as a teacher. He wrote that "in regards to the school year, the idea that I am happy to have a break tells me that this isn't something I'm truly enjoying."

Yet this thought was quickly squelched as he countered to himself that "everyone enjoys breaks, I guess...and I need to learn how to enjoy them when I get them." He did

think others were worried about him and the possibility of his “burning out.” These were his TFA peers who felt this and he admitted that “they’re probably right. But right now I don’t know what I can do to get off that path” (of burnout). His recognition that burnout could be inevitable was a telling statement of the type of work he was involved in. He still felt the break had value while he even looked ahead to the next break on the horizon.

After this break, there’s just four weeks until Winter Break. One Institute stands between me and the end of the semester. And maybe hitting the reset button at the start of spring semester will be necessary and what I need to become more comfortable and become better at this teaching thing. I’m working harder and I need to figure out how to work smarter.

These breaks were being recognized as having intrinsic value to his becoming a better teacher. He recognized also that he needed to become “more comfortable and become better at this teaching thing.” He was coming to the realization that his working hard was not equivalent to working smart. This was an actual identity statement tied to a designated identity of what he wished for his future teacher self.

It was not only breaks that he recognized he needed to be more successful as a teacher. His next post, written on the day before he was to return to work after Thanksgiving, he remarked on how he needed to “take a step back” from the amount of effort he was exerting teaching. He was even questioning if he could make it through the rest of his commitment to Teach For America.

Right now I don’t feel like I want to do this beyond the two years. Maybe it’s because right now I just don’t see progress...in myself or in my students. Sometimes I feel like I’m just screwing them over. Sometimes I feel like I’m putting in 110% and getting 10% in return. And all I can keep telling myself at this point is to not be so obsessed over the short term...to understand that I won’t see the fruits of my labor until half a year from now. Will I last until then? of course I will...I think.

Although he thought he could last the entire commitment, he definitely showed signs of not wanting to teach past the two year mark. He was also counting the time (it was a year and a half for him to go).

And just as his peers worried about Mr. Z. burning out, he too was worried that he needed to get more sleep, focus on himself, and socialize more, yet he was not sure that even these goals for him were truly attainable.

Part of it I guess is that the more I work...it's like a distraction for me. It's a distraction from working on myself. And unfortunately this work is one of the ultimate distractions. the vision is so grand and the bar is so high that there's always something to do....and it's not like the something to be done results in an amorphous, intangible end...you see results...and so you always think...well, if I do a bit more next time, I'll get more results.

While he did not mention if the “grand vision” was born solely of just his being and becoming a teacher, the vision and high bar being set before him were most likely a reference of his membership in what he had earlier referred to as "pieces of a greater body, a greater whole...working toward the same vision” (being a TFA corps members). One can only ponder if his being “obsessed” with his work was a direct result of his participation with TFA, his induction into teaching from his school and administration, his work ethic, background and experiences, or a combination of all of these factors? His next post would seem to answer this question in terms of the weight that he gave to the influences impacting his teacher self-development.

#### *“Why Not?” and Resolutions*

It would be several weeks and after the school's Winter Break when he would post again. He acknowledged that he had been “putting off” this particular post. It was January, a mid-point in his first year of teaching, yet the beginning of a new calendar year and a time for reflection. He wrote that what defined the past year for him specifically

was Teach For America. He admitted that joining the corps was basically a “why not?” decision, one made in the middle of his interviewing for medical schools while he was also busy running a large student body organization at his college., He wrote that he

...decided to take this opportunity because I knew that if I didn't take it, I would sit around studying for med school exams always wondering what might have been had I done it. I would wonder whether I could do it. And contrary to the recommendations of my family, I accepted my position in (the city where he taught), finished off the school year and graduated.

He recounted the whirlwind of his TFA institute experience and the pandemonium of his first semester. To him it was a struggle to “keep up with the chaos of teaching.” He compared it to his institute experience, which had only been four weeks while the semester was eighteen weeks of teaching. He looked towards the new calendar year and wrote that he was “excited” to be going back to work, but then basically retracted that statement with a “well...kinda” clarification.

...I'm not going to lie. I'm not excited to be teaching again. But I am excited to try out new management systems. I am excited of all the things we have planned for the students. I wonder what that says...that I'm not exactly looking forward to teaching. if somehow I did continue in education, I think I'm much better suited for administration or policy. But maybe that's the me that's a first-year teacher speaking. honestly the greatest frustration for me is that I don't have it all fully planned...that I am struggling to find good systems and create effective lessons...that I'm losing sleep and have poor management of my time, which takes away from taking care of my own needs.

The above statement concisely reflected his struggles with teaching and in becoming a teacher. The “new management system” may help him be more effective in his role, and for this he was excited...yet not about teaching in general and he wondered “what that says.” While having held a longtime goal of attending medical school, he now considered the possibility of staying in education, but felt that he may not be suited to stay in the classroom. He pondered if this was just him speaking as a “first-year teacher”

(interestingly not as a TFA corps member). He recognized in his designated identity that he needed to be better at management and planning, and these impacted his current identity and personal needs.

As he had mentioned before, the Winter Break proved to be a much needed respite from teaching. He had made plans for this break to “retool classroom management, eat good food, spend time with family and relax.” Of these goals, he thought he had accomplished them all. He also went through his resolutions from the past year, checking off which ones he had accomplished and which ones still needed to be worked on. While he had twelve resolutions that he recalled from the previous year, he was only making five resolutions for himself for the upcoming New Year:

1. Definitely making it through this year feeling like I’ve accomplished something. Vague, I know, but I’ll only know it when May 23rd (I think) rolls around.
2. For...let’s say 80% of my students to pass the [end of course test] in biology.
3. Finish that half marathon in March.
4. Stay healthy
5. Stay happy. I figure those last two are vague enough to encompass everything.

While none of his previous year’s resolutions had anything to do with teaching, two of his five resolutions for the upcoming year were related to his “why not?” decision to join TFA and become a teacher. Just as he had noted in his goals for the year in his second blog post, his feelings of success were determinant upon the performance of his students on the end of course assessment. He also made resolutions to maintain a commitment to complete a half marathon race in a few months and to “stay” happy and healthy. The latter resolutions show that he was (at least at the moment of this posting) feeling that he was in a current place of health and happiness...and he wanted to maintain these attributes throughout the year.

*Sick*

A few posts later would find that, by no fault of his own, Mr. Z.'s resolution to stay healthy was not coming to fruition. He was admittedly not feeling 100% in his next post, and he titled the post simply "sick". He recounted having to work through a Friday while he was sick because he did not have lesson plans for a substitute, and then he ended up canceling a weekend trip back to visit friends at his former college. Yet in spite of being sick, his overall post was related to the positives he was seeing in terms of his teaching and experience at his school. He noted that things were "definitely improving", but he put it in the perspective of "when you're at the bottom, there's nowhere to go but up."

Just as he had earlier ascribed the "we" pronoun to his goals of success for his students and himself, he was now using the "we" to identify himself with his "school". The "school" was specifically the smaller unit which he, his co-workers, and students were a part. He had earlier admitted his frustration with the "small schools model", but now he was feeling his "school" was gaining in comparison to the other "schools" in his building. At the point of the posting, he felt his school was now "a very comfortable second just behind health sciences and research." And while he may not have planned far enough ahead to have lesson plans for a substitute when he became sick, he did state that "because of all the planning we're doing right now" (as a school) it should enable the students next year to have a "100% better experience" than the students had the previous year. A subsequent post would find him admitting that he preferred the administrative type of planning (such as developing instructional frameworks) over the "lesson planning/classroom management/on-the-fly stuff."

While he admittedly still felt a great deal of stress, Mr. Z. at least for the moment had hope. As a person who had previously extolled the value of the breaks in the school year, he was also painfully aware that there would be no other breaks until the spring. He was also quite aware that spring break was only two weeks before the End of Course Test which he placed so much value in his students passing. For now, he was just going to try and rest so he could be back “in full force” to face the tasks that lay ahead.]

### *Tired*

Mr. Z.’s next post was over a month later, and while he was no longer “sick”, he was now just “tired” (he entitled the post “I’m so tired”). The End of Course Test was only twenty days away, and this post found him not as concerned with the collective “we”, but with a determined introspection into his role within the school, its success, and the success of its students. He wrote that all he could do was

...pray that at least two-thirds of them pass [the end of course test], which would put me in place to help my school meet AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress]. I am putting all of me into this...just like I have with everything in my life. go big or go home. But maybe I’m going too far. [My school] has been and continues to be my life. And I guess you could question whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing. It’s good in that it’s the kind of drive and passion that’s needed to help turn around the achievement gap, but I know...I KNOW that I’m working harder right now...and not smarter. I know that it’s possible to challenge these kids while still maintaining my own sanity and having a personal life.

Again, his concern to be working smarter, not just harder, rose to the forefront.

While he had consistently placed his success with the success of his students, he was also accepting it as a personal responsibility and that he would “go big or go home.” He was giving it his all, and he gave insight into his actual and former identity stating that he had done this with everything in his life up to this point. He wrote that his school (i.e.

teaching) was his life, and this was telling of the identity he was developing as a teacher. He questioned if this level of commitment was wise and that he may be “going too far.”

Mr. Z. was developing an identity as a teacher who was all-consumed with the duties of his job as a first-year teacher and as a TFA corps member. It was this level of commitment, what he referred to as “drive and passion”, that he felt was necessary to impact the “achievement gap” that was faced by his students. Yet it may come at the price of jeopardizing his sanity and his ability to maintain a personal life separate from his teaching life. Later in the same post he wrote of how his roommates advised him to say no more often when asked to take on extra duties at his school. To this he felt that he was not capable of saying no and that his roommates (who were also TFA corps members and beginning teachers) were “not committed enough to this” since they were not taking on the same level of responsibility as he.

Even though he questioned his roommate’s commitment level, he wondered if they were happier than he was at the time. Although he admitted that taking on extra responsibilities excited him, he also was aware of the stress that it was causing. He recognized in his behavior something that had continued since his being a college student: the tendency to over stress over a situation to the point where he would “stop caring as a last minute defense mechanism.” It was a cycle that he realized needed to stop.

I can’t keep doing this to myself. I’m not running on enough sleep and I will continue to run on not enough sleep for the next few weeks and I’m actually not okay with it. And yet somehow despite what I’m doing, I really don’t know what my students are getting out of it. They like me, for sure. And for many of them I’m their favorite teacher. And many of them see how hard I work to help support them. But is it all worth it to me right now? I don’t know.

Mr. Z. had reached the point of questioning if the identity that his students had of him as a likeable, hard-working teacher was enough to sustain his efforts until the End of Course Test. He even questioned its worth specifically to himself (notice the use of the “me” pronoun). In particular regard to his realization of the Generalized Other attitude of his teacher-self, Mead (1934) noted that “since it is a social self, it is a self that is realized in its relationship to others. It must be recognized by others to have the very values which we want to have belong to it” (p. 204). He wanted to be a “nice, fun, likeable teacher”, and he felt his students did see him as such, but he also wanted them to know he was able to “maintain high expectations and put my foot down” when needed.

He recognized the lessons he had learned over the past year, but he was also ready for it to come to a close. He wrote “man, I can’t wait for this year to end. 10 teaching days to spring break...21 teaching days to the EOCT...two months to summer.” Yet his countdowns were not hampering his commitment and he looked toward a second year of teaching. He had found out that in the next year he would again be teaching ninth graders, but instead of biology he would possibly be teaching physics. He would also maintain a leadership role as being the ninth grade team leader. While he was admittedly tired and unsure of his effectiveness at the moment, he would not be quitting anytime soon.

His next post would be related to his “never-quit attitude” which he attributed to his being selected to be a part of Teach For America. Titled simply “persistence”, he recounted some advice he had given recently to a new TFA corps member. He wrote that corps members are selected “because we persist in the face of challenge and will problem solve our butts off to find a way to attain student achievement.” In terms of identity, his

advice to the new member was to not become discouraged if he was not able to attain the Generalized Other attitude that TFA held before its corps. Of this he wrote that he

...made sure to tell him that over institute and through the readings he'd see footage of amazing teachers who have come before him and not be discouraged when you don't become that because clearly those people are highlighted because they are the ultimate goal and vision of what we're here to do...but of course not everyone can be the best. At the same time, though, I told him (and myself through talking to him) that any of our experiences could be edited down into an amazing story of success that people would awe.

It is of great interest that he would admit that his advice to this new corps member was also advice to himself. He felt that the Generalized Other attitude which TFA sought for its members was an idealized version of "the best." Mr. Z. told the new recruit not to become discouraged "when you don't become that", with "that" being the Generalized Other type of teacher that the corps members should ascribe to becoming. Yet he was also recognizing the power in the experiences he and his fellow members were having. He started off the post noting how many "interesting stories" he had to share and why he needed to blog more about them. He also directly addressed his readers concerning the overall tone of his posts. Of his blog, he admitted that

Thus far this has really just been a space to vent all my frustrations and I apologize to those of you who think I'm suffering because of that. Not that I'm saying it's all butterflies and sunny days all the time, but there are many parts of this experience that I carry with me that are quite positive.

While he was not putting himself in the ranks of "the best", he had arrived at a realization that his stories were of value (even though they had showcased much of his frustrations about his acclimation into this new role and identity). His advice to the new member was "that whatever happens, he should persist."

As mentioned earlier, he was hopeful, but it was a hope that was tempered with fear. While he made the "official" announcement to his readers that he would definitely

be teaching for another year, he worried that the planning he and his fellow staff members had done would not come to fruition. He was even feeling guilty about a planning retreat the staff took to a “nice hotel” while he still lacked necessary supplies in his classroom. In terms of hope, he recalled a statement from one of his former high school teachers that “hope is just disappointment delayed.” Yet he asserted that unless they did plan and try, he would never know if his hope was warranted or if his second year would continue to be the way his first year had been.

While he recognized the persistence needed to be successful as a teacher, Mr. Z. was not as persistent with his blogging. He frequently started his posts with an apology to his readers for not having made a post sooner. He admittedly had to force his next post, and much of it was related to how his students viewed him in terms of his race and ethnicity. He recounted one interaction as follows:

Student 1: “Mr. Z., when I first met you I thought you were Chinese.”  
Me: “[Name], I am Chinese”  
Student 2: “what? I thought you were Asian.”  
Me: “[Name], china is in Asia.”  
Student 2: “oh...ha ha ha”

This post was also related to his predictions on how well his students would perform on the End of Course Test which was now only six days away. He was not feeling positive about their prospects. Only two of his students passed the diagnostic test, well below his initial goal of having all his students pass with at least an 80% (he later would alter that to match the state’s goal of a 67% pass rate). As he had from the beginning, he still tied his success with his student’s success on this specific test. He was now even referring to the test as “his” as he questioned the date that the district assigned

to the test for his school by writing “why is my end-of-course test so early, anyway?”

Other districts don’t have there’s [sic] until May. What gives...”

Early or not, the test was only days away and his next post was admittance by Mr. Z. that his students were not ready. While he lowered his pass rate goal to 67%, he only hoped for at least 26% to meet what the students the year before had accomplished. Any lower to him “would be flat out embarrassing.” It would be especially embarrassing due to the announcement that he had been named Teacher of the Year for his school. In his posting, he seemed remarkably unaltered, ambivalent, and somewhat embarrassed by this award which was an acknowledgement of his hard work and efforts as a first year teacher. He thought it actually made things worse in relation to how his students may perform on the test. I know I should be excited, and people are excited for me, but I honestly don’t think I’m TOTY [Teacher of the Year] material. Yeah, I worked hard. Yeah I persisted. Yeah I was a team player, but the big indicator of an effective teacher is student achievement, and I don’t have that. If say 50% of them pass the EOCT (I’m doubtful of that too), that’s embarrassing to have the title of TOTY and have only half of your kids pass the EOCT.

He could not get passed the Generalized Other image that he had of a successful and “effective” teacher who was primarily judged by the performance of his students on a high stakes test (what he referenced as “student achievement”). He may have discounted his hard work, his persistence, and his ability to work well within the “team” of his school, yet the administration, staff, and his co-workers obviously did not discount these qualities in their selection of the teacher who best represented the ideals of their school. They had yet to find out how well Mr. Z.’s students would perform on his hallowed End of Course Test, yet they still awarded him the honor of being their Teacher of the Year.

While still focused on reviewing for the test with his students, he admitted he “was not fully engaged with this job and ultimately my kids are suffering because of that.” In his words, he was “coasting”. He even titled the post “20 days” which signified the number of days until the end of the school year. As he had in earlier posts counted down to the End of Course Test, he was now bypassing that critical event (which was

only a day away) to look towards another finish line. Of this he realized that the next year was of more importance in relation to his efforts at the moment.

*The Institutionalized Individual*

He had “grand, grand plans for next year.” Part of his plan was to bypass how the district outlined its scope and sequence for the curriculum. As he was growing in his identity as a teacher, he was not feeling compelled to let the district mandate when and how he should teach. While he felt that he and the district had the same goal (that of student achievement), he was feeling experienced enough to make his own decisions about his students and their learning.

I’m so excited that I stayed up to map out my curriculum for next school year (sad, I know). I’m quite proud of myself. I’ll have to clean it up a bit, but I laid down the skeleton last night and it’s looking quite nice. The focus for next year will be critical thinking and application to my students’ personal lives over the curriculum. I’m going to touch on the standards and make sure we talk about material related to each one, but I’m not going to follow my scope and sequence as outlined by the district. I’m going to be more focused on my students learning and being engaged with the material than whatever the district tells me to do. Because ultimately our ends are the same (student achievement), it’s just the means that differs. but yeah...the idea is to focus on their critical thinking skills so that they will be able to persist in the face of questions of which the content we haven’t talked about in class...and still score higher than they would have had I tried to teach every little detail and overloaded them with information. Those are my plans on the academic side. I have many ideas for classroom management and investment as well...and I’ll spend an entire summer planning that out and thinking through the lens of various students.

He had spent the entire first year focusing on teaching when and what “the district” wanted its teachers to teach. For his second year he wanted to step out and make the learning more relevant to his students. Critical thinking would take precedence over content as he hoped to be able to instill in his students the ability to not only perform well on specific tests, but also perform well in their personal lives. He was beginning to develop a Generalized Other attitude about his role as a teacher that was beyond the one

the district seemed to be promoting. Mead (1934) would note that in this regard Mr. Z. was bringing his own response as an individual to the social situation of teaching. “The response is, in the experience of the individual, an expression with which the self is identified. It is such a response which raises him above the institutionalized individual” (p. 211). Mead goes on to provide more information regarding the expression of the “institutionalized individual”:

As I have said before, an institution is, after all, nothing but an organization of attitudes which we all carry in us, the organized attitudes of the others that control and determine conduct. Now the institutionalized individual is, or should be, the means by which the individual expresses himself in his own way, for such individual expression is that which is identified with the self in those values which are essential to the self, and which arise from the self. To speak of them as arising from the self does not attach them the character of the selfish egoist, for under the normal conditions to which we were referring the individual is making his contribution to a common undertaking. (p. 211)

In other words, while being institutionalized by the social aspects of becoming a teacher, he was planning on expressing himself “in his own way” in regards to how he will teach his students in the upcoming year. Mr. Z.’s acknowledgement that both he and the district have common ends in mind is a direct correlation to Mead’s individual being involved in a “contribution to a common undertaking”, which does allow for individual expression. Of this form of self-expression Mead would further provide the following:

We seek certainly for that sort of expression which is self-expression. When an individual feels himself hedged in he recognizes the necessity of getting a situation in which there shall be an opportunity for him to make his addition to the undertaking, and not simply to be the conventionalized “me.” In a person who carries out the routine job, it leads to the reaction against the machine, and to the demand that that type of routine work shall fall into its place in the whole social process. (p. 212)

...there must be some way in which the individual can express himself. It is the situations in which it is possible to get this sort of expression that seem to be particularly precious, namely, those situations in which the individual is able to do something on his own, where he can take over responsibility and carry out things

in his own way, with an opportunity to think his own thoughts. Those social situations in which the structure of the “me” for the time being is one in which the individual gets an opportunity for that sort of expression of the self bring some of the most exciting and gratifying experiences. (pp. 212 -2 13)

Mr. Z. was definitely excited about the opportunity to focus more in the next year on critical thinking, making learning more relevant to his students, and to follow his own sequence in the teaching of the curriculum. Making this decision to pursue teaching in a manner that may be different from the goals of his district was not a rejection of the Generalized Other attitudes that one should obtain, as the process allows for self-expression in terms of participation in a common undertaking.

He admitted that when he started he had “zero perspective” on planning and teaching. It was only through his experiences of crashing and burning that he was able to start to implement systems that would enable both he and his students to be more successful. By his acknowledgement that he would think “through the lens of various students” he was recognizing the importance of the student’s perspectives as learners, and not just his perspective as a teacher. This statement embodied his taking on of the general attitude of the student, which was integral in his becoming a more fully developed teacher. As Mead (1934) noted, “only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs (e.g. his school) toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged (e.g.. the teaching and learning process for himself and his students), does he develop a complete self or possess the sort of complete self he has developed” (p. 155).

He was also developing a Generalized Other attitude that reflected his role as a teacher-leader. His penchant for the administrative aspects that teaching had provided him was evident in his posts. He would (again) be the team-leader for the ninth grade

teachers at his school for the next school year. He had also accepted a role with TFA where he could “make sure that next year’s crop of teachers don’t repeat some of my mistakes.” As a transition team leader for eight new TFA corps members, he wanted to be able to impart the lessons he had learned from the experiences he had thus far in his teaching. This too signified his acceptance of his role to help others in becoming the Generalized Other they sought to become.

*“Significant Gains” vs. “Significant Impact”*

His next post was after the End of Course Test and he did not believe his students fared too well. He did believe that he had given it his best. He stated in fact that “he needed to believe this” and that he and his future students would do better in the next year. He wrote that “for the state of my school and the state of me as a first-year teacher, I tried my best.” He interestingly did not include “for the state of Teach For America”, and was thus showing a stronger tie to being a teacher at a school who was being held responsible for how he and it would be judged. Yet his TFA identity was still strong. He remarked on how TFA would be measuring “significant gains” for the upcoming year. He was also looking forward to his position with TFA as a transition team leader and was excited to begin calling on these new corps members. His principal also wanted him to be a part of the interview process when considering hiring a TFA corps member.

While the End of Course Test for his content area was over, he was being called upon to help students prepare for End of Course Tests in English and Algebra. He noted how he had to become “an English teacher” and he conceded that math and English scores on standardized tests were valued above the teaching of other subject areas.

Oh the state of public education and standardized testing...AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) is measured on math and English scores so...I guess they’re

kinda important. It's just frustrating because other classes are getting the shaft. My friend, another TFA corps member has barely taught her social studies class in the last week...nor will she teach next week because testing continues. After that there's only two weeks left...crazy...

He did however close this post with areas of his life that were beyond his teacher-self.

His highlight of the week was doing Pilates with his roommates. He was also able to focus a bit more on his musical self. To him, it was a good way "to focus my mind on something else though outside of teaching." Yet even though he had these other avenues to divert his commitment to his teacher-self, it was ever-looming in the wings.

What this fun all means, however, is that I have tons and tons of work to do tomorrow. I have to come up with a credit recovery plan for kids who failed the first semester (I came up with one before, but not enough students attended). I have tons of grading to do (about an inch thick of papers), create a summative project rubric, write a lesson plan for Monday, update my website, call parents...and if I have time, create an extra credit paper...yay teaching.

Nearing the end of the school year, and without the pressure of the End of Course Test looming, Mr. Z. was able to have his students work on projects that were beyond the scope of what the test may cover. Interestingly, one project that he chose to blog about was related to identity. Students would be exploring some aspects of their own identities, and they created surveys "to get other peoples' opinions on that identity, creating graphs and writing lab reports." He gave an example of a humorous exchange between himself and one of his students regarding a question related to racial identity and the hiring of people based upon race. His inclusion of this example showed that he was trying to impart to his students a better understanding of this aspect of their identity and he corrected the student's misconception regarding Japanese individuals also being Asian.

His next post would find Mr. Z.'s individual identity was again being tied to his students performance on the End of Course Test. He sadly reported that only 36% of his

students passed, well below his goal, yet better than the previous year's students. "I know I don't suck, but I can't help but feel like crap." He reported that almost an equal number of students scored just below the passing mark and could have easily been brought up to level needed for to be able to pass, and for this he blamed his limited experience and skill set.

...if I just knew what I know now about the basic, basic skills they need to work on...those 60's would become 70's. And the sad part is that I knew what those basic skills were from the beginning of the year...I knew exactly what I needed to do...I just didn't know how to do it. Well...I thought I knew, but I clearly didn't.

This was a clear acknowledgement of the contradiction in what he believed he knew earlier in his first year of teaching with what at that point in his teaching he felt he knew. His knowledge at that point was based on more than his institute experience, assistance from mentors and co-workers, and from his own past experience as a student. He held the experience of having been a teacher for an entire year, and despite the struggles, hardships, crashing, and burning, he felt because of these he would be a stronger teacher in the next year.

What this year has given me of course, is perspective. As my roommate said, it's been an observation year. And although my students were kinda(sic) like guinea pigs, if you consider it an observation year or rebuilding year...I guess I should feel proud that I improved the passing rate from 26% last year.

Even with a small improvement from the last year, it did not provide evidence that his "working harder" paid off to the extent that he had hoped. Earlier in the year he felt it was "drive and passion that's needed to help turn around the achievement gap", but even with putting his all into his teaching and the school, the self-sacrifices, and his "never-quit attitude" he still fell short of his goals for his students and himself and he made no excuses.

Even still...I can't excuse the fact that only 36% of my students passed. I didn't even get half-way to my goal. I did everything I could...I tried to the best of my ability at each point of the year...and it just wasn't good enough.

With this acknowledgement, he again looked forward to the upcoming break which would give him the opportunity to re-tool and reflect upon his teaching. He was still setting goals, but these were the goals of a more experienced teacher. He even provided a designated identity statement of being a "more effective teacher" in the next year which may also make his school more effective.

Now I have an entire summer to reflect. To look at how to teach those basic skills to get better scores and turn all those 60's this year into 70's next year. Maybe I should set my goal now...72% passing...they can do it...and they will because they will have a more effective teacher leading them in the classroom and a more effective school supporting them from all fronts.

First, however, he would have to face what he considered to be a "major character flaw" in his teacher-self. His next-to-the-last post of his first year of teaching found him admitting that there was something wrong with his "presence" in his classroom.

I don't have enough true belief in my heart that my students can succeed such that I don't perform with passion in the classroom. I work my butt off behind the scenes, planning out the lessons, but the executions of those lessons continues to be my fault...that and classroom management. I don't yet have a strong enough connection with what an effective student looks like, even though I myself was a successful student.

It was classroom management that was still a concern and he was not quite sure how to make the changes needed to impact his teaching in the next year.

I think it's that I let my students get away with too much. I don't know how to be strict and mean. But that's what's needed because that's what my students' lack. Actually...I guess they have strict and mean in their lives...but not in a consistent, productive fashion. And right now I don't know how I'm supposed to develop that within myself so that next year goes better. So that next year I can do less work and get a 70% passing rate on the EOCT.

Being able to provide a classroom environment where he could manage student behavior in a consistent and productive manner was a priority for his next year. But the year was not quite over and his last blog post found him recounting a field trip he and his students took to a town and island on the southeastern Atlantic coast. The trip went remarkably well, and Mr. Z. realized that sometimes the most effective learning and teaching occur outside of the traditional four walls of the classroom. It also instilled in him the value that experience plays in both his students and within himself. It also allowed him to see how it was difficult to compare his former student self, who had been a “successful student”, with the students he had at the moment.

If anything, this past year has taught me about experience. You can know a lot, but it is until you experience it and live it, that it makes any sense and you truly learn it. In teaching we talk a lot about prior knowledge. Experience is just that. As my roommate says, our students lack the life experiences upon which we can build concepts and effectively teach our subject matter. How do you teach about the ocean if a student has never experienced one? No video can replace the real thing. And I was fortunate enough to have those experiences because my parents took our family on vacations because I have immigrant parents and because I was a PBS nerd as a kid. And the question is how do you catch up kids sometimes 14-15 years worth of life experiences in just 9 short months? I know I can't, but I do know that I can start gaining their interests in exploring what else is out there...to see their world in a different light and build their joy for learning.

As he had mentioned in an earlier post, in his second year of teaching he wanted to make learning more engaging and relevant to the personal lives of his students. Through the field trip he realized that besides curriculum, it was experience which laid the foundation for future learning that was lacked by his students. He was seeing in his future identity as a teacher someone who should be able to help instill interest in “what else is out there” for his students. He considered his role as a teacher and the impact he made on the students this past year and for his students to come.

Are my students better off for having me as their teacher? Of course. I know I have made a significant impact on the lives of many of my students. Could I have done a better job? Of course. I think I did the best job I could, based on what I knew, though. But with the experience of my first year under my belt, this next wave of 9th graders will have it made...hopefully.

His statement on how he believed he had made “significant impact” on the lives of his students is most telling. “Significant gains” is a mantra and goal of Teach For America and its corps members, and it is judged solely on student scores on high stakes tests. Mr. Z. and his students did not make their “big goal” (another TFA slogan), but he still felt he had made a “significant impact” on his students lives. He seemed to be recognizing that in spite of the weight that TFA and his school district placed on assessments and high stakes tests to judge student and teacher performance, teaching was more than just preparing students for tests. The experience he had this first year would hopefully positively impact his students in the next so much that they will “have it made!”

### Year Two

#### *Doing Better = Less Blogging*

Mr. Z. continued to chronicle his teaching and experience into his second year, but at a much reduced rate from his first. When asked about how his blogging impacted his being a teacher, he was well aware that the rate of his posts in his second year was below that of his first. In retrospect, he wished he had blogged more often.

Unfortunately by my second year, you'll probably notice most of the entries were like..."wow, I haven't posted in a while...here are all the things that have happened in the last 3 months in boring, summary form." That was a product of my increased work load, but also because I guess in a way I felt more steady on my own two feet as a teacher. Still, there are many memories that I wish I had blogged about so that I can look back on it now.

His first substantial post of the new school year occurred four weeks after the start of school. It found him reporting that teaching was “definitely going much better than last year...maybe that’s why I haven’t written anything...there’s really not too much to document.” He had admitted during his first year of only using his blog as a “space to vent all my frustrations” and while he still may have had some frustrations in his second year, he was off to a better start.

I’m not saying that the difficulties don’t exist. They definitely do, but there’s something about the second year and having a year of experience behind me that almost desensitizes me to a lot of things. I also have the additional confidence from last year that I can lead my students (we call them scholars this year) to success. I have a new style of teaching and new systems in place that I believe in...a definite change from last year. Yeah, I’m probably not as planned out as I was last year, but I’m in a better place personally...and I even think my scholars are in a better place, oddly enough. Somehow I’m doing alright.

What a difference a year’s worth of teaching experience made, not only in his perception on his ability to be able to “lead” his students, but there did not seem to be the organizational disarray that had plagued the opening of school the previous year. He had taken the time in his summer break to rethink his teaching style and management system. The implementation of these had him “in a better place” at the moment of the post, and he believed his students were better off than those he had the year before.

He described his first year experience as having almost desensitized him to the difficulties that continued to exist. Having been acclimated to the world of teaching, he better knew what he should expect in terms of the behavior of his students and the issues that may arise organizationally at the beginning of the school year. These were issues that he had blogged about predominantly during the first part of the previous year, and while some of them may have still been occurring, he may not have considered them blog worthy at this point in his teaching. He was however still as consumed with his

commitments at the school. He as the team-leader of the ninth grade teachers and in spite of what he had thought last year, he was teaching a full load of five classes (instead of four). He and his roommate were also coaching the girls' volleyball team. Of this workload he asked himself "am I crazy?" to which he gave the response "I think so." It was definitely a full plate for him and he closed the post by simply writing "back to work..."

### *Deciding to Leave and Questioning Impact*

While he may have gone "back to work", his next post would find him admitting it would only be for the remainder of this school year. It was his 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, and he wrote that most of his students knew how old he was and that "it's my last year of teaching." He felt that being honest with his students about his age and this being his last year was helping to build better relationships with them. While he noted that "being 22 was defined by survival", he hoped that in this next year he would be able to "stop and smell some roses."

It was not all roses at the moment. He wrote that "during the school day, I feel pretty lost." Some of his students were "getting more and more out of line" and although it was only a few students, it was still a concern. He may have been feeling "lost" during the school day as a teacher, yet his after school commitment to being the volleyball coach seemed to have him feeling much more comfortable. He was also considering taking on another coaching position with a junior Olympic club team that he felt was similar to Teach For America. The club team was committed to bringing volleyball to minority, inner city girls, and he hoped he would be able to live up to the additional commitment.

In terms of his coaching-self, he struggled to help the team at the school build a culture of confidence, support, and positivity. It was not just the team, but the entire school that he thought had issues related to rampant negativity. In his role as a coach and a teacher, he sought to bring about a change in terms of this culture of negativity.

It's so frustrating to see them think negatively of others' successes whether it be calling kids nerds just because they're focused and doing their work, or getting frustrated at a teammate when they can't do something that the frustrated person themselves can't even do that well. Just like every person, these kids want the end result but don't want to work for it.

Mr. Z. questioned if he had been able to impact the culture change in his tenure thus far at the school.

How many times can I beat my head into a brick wall? These kids deserve so much, but I don't know if what I'm doing is helping them. One and a quarter years later and I don't see enough of the culture change. But...like I told my principal, we were working to stop a ball rolling down the mountain. it took us a year to stop the ball from rolling down any further...now it's time to start pushing it back up to its rightful place at the top.

He wondered "where do I go from here?" while he also revealed in this post that his current goal for the year would not be to focus solely on the success of his students on the End of Course Test (EOCT). This is a remarkably different perspective than the one he had his first year of teaching. Instead of just EOCT passing scores, his goal this second year would be the "long-lasting success" of his students which would be to focus on the infrastructure necessary for 95% of his students to be able to be promoted to the next grade level. Test scores would still matter, yet they would not be his sole indicator of achievement. He remarked that the students this year were a "brighter, better-prepared group than last year's bunch." He felt that because of this, combined with his new style of teaching and better classroom management, these students were already on the track to meet what he referred to as his "pacesetter goal" of having a 65% pass rate on the EOCT.

Part of the Generalized Other attitude that he felt his students should have was an attitude of trust amongst themselves. As a coach, he had posted earlier about working with the volleyball team on trust exercises (e.g., trust falls, blindfolded obstacle courses). As a teacher, he felt it was also a part of his role to also build trust and teamwork. He wrote about taking a group of students on an Outward Bound experience to help with team building. It was during this experience that the trust he had in this group of students was shattered. While on the ropes course, he had over \$30 stolen from his wallet that he kept in his bag. He noted that now he could not “trust a single one of them.” It also caused him to call into question advice he received from his co-workers regarding the attitude of trust he should have toward his students.

Other staff members called me foolish for even trusting kids to begin with, but innocent until proven guilty is what I say. If I set the expectation that they aren't to be trusted, then of course they're going to act that way. But somehow even when I set a high expectation, I get played a fool as well. Shows me what I know.

Several months into year two of teaching found his physical health again being impacted by his rigorous work load. It was close to a year before when he posted that he was on the “TFA diet.” At that time he credited his weight as being held down from staying in front his computer all night and all weekend and letting his muscles atrophy. At the point of this post he had lost another ten pounds, which was in his words “not a good thing.” He stated that “in fact it's a very, very bad thing.” Due to his work schedule, his eating schedule was not consistent. It was not only his eating schedule that was out of balance, but his personal life was as well. He closed the post wondering why he had such a problem with his “work-life balance” which was a component of the TFA rubric he did not feel he had under control.

*Racial and Ethnic Identity*

Once again he wrote about assumptions students make about his identity based on his racial and ethnic background. He had an encounter with one of the school's cheerleaders in which the conversation went as follows:

Cheerleader: are you Mexican?

Mr. Z.: ?...try again

Cheerleader: Indian?

Mr. Z.: try again

Mr. Z.'s student who was with her: he's Chinese

Mr. Z.: ding ding ding! we have a winner!

Cheerleader: oh, so does your girlfriend work in a nail salon?

Mr. Z.: wow, that's a pretty racist statement to make

Cheerleader: what?

Mr. Z. to a student formerly in his school: isn't that a pretty racist statement to make?

Student formerly in his school: yeah.

Mr. Z.: well, you're first making an assumption that all Chinese people work in nail salons

Cheerleader: well they do

Mr. Z.: secondly, you're assuming that I'm dating a Chinese girl

Student formerly in his school: I know, for all you know he likes black girls

Cheerleader: well I don't know, that's great if he does.

He wrote that this conversation was "all in the day of my life teaching for America." Mr. Z. even had a commenter to the post almost a year and a half after the conversation was initially posted, who informed him of how it was later used in a TFA Institute training. According to this commenter, his experiences with assumptions of his identity by students was not only proving to allow him growth and understanding of misconceptions harbored by prejudice, they were also being helpful to others as to what they may expect as they partake upon their own journey into teaching.

His next posting was almost two months later. He again was apologetic for his lack of posting on a consistent basis as he wrote:

Dang. I seriously need to do a better job of recording my experiences here. There are just so many wonderful and frustrating things going on day in and day out that it would be unfortunate to lose them as the past. I just don't blog because of my huge time crunch. It's about priorities, I guess.

This particular post was made two days before Christmas and he entitled it "best gift ever." It detailed a conversation between one of his more difficult students and the school principal. The student had found herself in a situation that could jeopardize her staying at the school and being sent to the alternative school (again). When the principal asked her why she wanted to stay at the school, she told the principal it was because she wanted to go to college and major in biology, and that Mr. Z. was the "best biology teacher ever!"

This affirmation of his efforts was definitely appreciated by Mr. Z., yet, it may not have been enough for him to consider staying a teacher. He wrote that he was still 95% sure he was going to go to medical school the next year, although the message from his student was not making this decision any easier.

I knew it would be tough to leave, and it is going to be. But right now medical school seems like a nice escape from the chaotic life that is being a teacher/leader in an urban high school. Right now I need to focus on what is best for me. And what is best for me is to move on.

Mr. Z. had seemingly made the decision to not stay a teacher after his commitment to Teach For America was over, forsaking teaching to attend medical school. At this point, it would be an "escape" from the chaos that being a teacher (or how he was now referring to himself as a teacher/leader) wrought. In spite of the success and affirmation of his students, he realized that he had to do what was best for him...and that meant leaving teaching.

*Not Letting Up*

He would only post two more times during this second and last year of his teaching. The first of the two was titled “the beginning of the end.” While he may have made the decision to bring his teaching career to an end (at least at the moment) he was definitely not going to coast to the finish line. He in fact made it a personal commitment to “refuse to let up.” An interesting aspect to this post was that he revealed one of his students had found his blog. As a blogger it had happened to him before while he was in high school. He had kept what he considered an open, online diary which contained his inner thoughts. Of this he recalled “all the trouble it got me into as I commented on peoples’ relationships and my honest opinions of them. Meh, we all got over it.” While he did not appear too concerned over the student finding his blog, he did make a concession that he should not “pseudo-curse” in his posts due to it now being possibly read by his students.

Mr. Z. did note that at this point he was getting additional help with teaching his own students. He had a graduate student assistant helping him teach all of his classes, his class sizes were much smaller than the previous year, he had a special education teacher helping with his advisory group, and he also had a “team-leader-in-training” assisting him with his team planning. Yet with all of this assistance, he still felt he was “struggling to stay afloat.” He also felt that his students would be more successful this year than his in the prior year, and that if they were not, it would be “sad” because he had so much assistance during this semester.

He knew part of the problem he had staying afloat was his taking on of too many additional responsibilities. He recognized this to be a part of his identity, and that he

could not help it. Yet even with this commitment and desire not to “let up” and “do too much” because his scholars “deserve the best”, he was still leaving the school and teaching to pursue becoming another Generalized Other as a medical school student. His final post would be a brief, bulleted list of events that had happened since his last post. These included the school possibly making Adequate Yearly Progress, his students having taken their End of Course tests, and his having visited his future medical school and his excitement about starting this “new chapter” of his life. He closed this final post as a teacher with a student shaking his hand and thanking him for taking a group of students to visit a local university.

Interestingly he did not follow-up this post with a report of how well his students fared on the End of Course Test which had been such a huge indicator for him of his and his students’ success. He did however make three follow-up posts over the year and a half after he left teaching that related directly to his two year teaching experience. The first post was about a note he found to his principal during his first semester of teaching. The note described an incident with a disruptive student, which he described as “not one of my prouder moments.” He felt that the note reflected the “reality of teaching in an inner city.” In the second post-teaching blog post he reported on the Graduation Test scores the students whom he taught during his first year teaching had made as eleventh graders. A fellow corps member sent him a text message that the scores were 86% in English, 96% in Math, 92% in Science, and 76% in Social Studies. He recalled his two years as being “an uphill battle” but he was now exuberant to the point of tears because he had played a part in the education of these students.

*Questioning the Decision to Leave*

His third and final post regarding his two years of teaching found him questioning if he made the right decision to leave teaching and go to medical school.

If I was in a better place in my personal life, better able to take care of myself, not already accepted to medical school and had a higher salary (just being honest)...I probably would have stayed in teaching. I know this is all talk now, but I was in a supportive teaching environment. My principal supported me, I had some great staff and parents, and, for the most part, my scholars appreciated me. And as much as the day to day was a struggle, by the end of my second year, I knew where to improve to make my third year smoother.

He continued his rationale for leaving, writing that it was “selfish” but that he “had to leave.” He thought back to the reasons he joined Teach For America, what he had also referred to as a “why not?” decision.

I did TFA because it was an opportunity to make an impact straight out of college for 2 years, rather than have to wait my 4 years of school and then possibly 3 years of residency to do meaningful work in an underserved area. But now after my 2 years, I’m back in this 7-year lull of privilege.

While he felt that his medical degree would eventually give him great opportunities to “really do some good stuff within communities like the one in which I taught” he did not know if it was worth it “in the long run.” He pondered “what if I don’t have a long run? What if my life ends before this path becomes more “valuable” than the other?”

He wrote that he would continue to support “quality primary public education no matter what happens down the road.” He left the possibility open of his returning to the classroom, or becoming a member of a school board, or at the least “asking kids about school performance in a doctor’s office.” He had even started a program as a medical student for high school students to encourage them to be better students and to immerse

them in the field of medicine. Yet the question regarding his decision remained. In the middle of studying for his own exams, he wrote

I can't help but think that amidst my passive studying for my upcoming exam, that I could be doing something active, preparing a young mind for his/her own upcoming exam. I guess all this is to say that teaching is a noble, critical, yet undervalued profession. And I appreciate and respect anyone who gives it their all in the classroom every day. In the meantime, the question continues to replay itself...

Mr. Z. may have left the classroom as a teacher to return to the classroom as a student, yet the Generalized Other attitude of his teacher-self was still a critical part of his identity. While unsure if he made the right decision to leave teaching, the decision he made to become a teacher through joining the Teach For America organization and working at the school at which he taught changed his life, himself as an individual, and who he will be in the future. This meant he also changed the lives of the students, co-workers, administrators, fellow TFA corps members, and parents that he came in contact with over his two years of teaching. As Mead (1934) noted:

As a man adjusts himself to a certain environment he becomes a different individual; but in becoming a different individual he has affected the community in which he lives. It may be a slight effect, but in so far as he has adjusted himself, the adjustments have changed the type of the environment to which he can respond and the world is accordingly a different world. (p. 215)

He may still question his decision to leave teaching, yet the impact of his decision to join TFA and become a teacher remains in his life and in the lives he affected as the Generalized Other teacher he became during those two years.

CHAPTER 6  
THE STORY OF MS. E.

Introduction

Ms. E. was a neuroscience major at a highly acclaimed private research institute of technology in the New England region of the United States. She graduated with two bachelor's degrees and was hired to teach middle school science in a large urban school district in the northeast. Ms. E. was by far the most prolific blogger of this study. She posted almost every day of her first two years of teaching, totaling 370 posts. She admitted she was not entirely sure why she blogged about the experiences she was having as a teacher. Of her commitment to starting and maintaining her blog so consistently she wrote:

I guess I started as a way to update my friends and family on what I was up to, as sort of an alternative to sending out a weekly email or something. But then it just turned into a habit and I felt sort of compelled to do it, both because it helped me blow off steam and also because people (or maybe just my dad!) would yell at me if I skipped a day.

Her blog would gain some notoriety on the "Teach For Us" site, becoming the most read blog on the site for her second year of posting. She had blogged briefly before her "Teach For Us" blog as she worked as a camp counselor for middle school students. That blog only lasted for two months, but it was of similar content as she gave a daily update or anecdote to her readers.

## Year One

### *New and Nervous*

Her first post was not about her Institute or her pre-planning experience; it was about her actual first day as a teacher. She initially joked that her first day may somehow result in her death, yet it found her still living, so she wrote the first blog post of her teaching career. While she felt the day “could have been worse”, she did concede that it was “still pretty rough.” She gave actual identity statements about herself as a teacher that she was “new and nervous” and students thought she was too young to be their teacher. One student incredulously told her that she looked 15, and the student thought people had to be at least 18 to teach.

Classroom management was already a major concern, and she felt the students could “behave for other teachers,” therefore, she believed they should also be able to behave for her. She in fact felt that one group of students behaved not for her, but because their “very experienced, very in-control” homeroom stayed in the back of the room while Ms. E. taught. She gave examples of what she considered to be “bad” student behavior: fighting, yelling, and being disrespectful. While she thought her students were not displaying these specific behaviors, they did have trouble paying “attention to the person in front of the room” (Ms. E.). She credited the student behavior that first day to their excitement to be back at school, and catching up with each other after their summer break.

Ms. E. was also excited, and she gave her students an “All About You” survey so she could learn more about them. The students gave some quite humorous responses, and she posted several of them on the blog. After she read the responses, she wrote that “I

think they are good kids, and I hope I can get the classroom management under control enough for me to not have to constantly be reminding myself of that fact.”

She had an amazing six comments to her maiden blog post of her teaching career. Most came from her friends and family, with one asking her “what have you gotten yourself into?” Another commenter gave her some teaching advice to not allow herself to become friends with her students, because “this is a tough age group and it is more important for all of you to exert your control.”

Her second day of teaching, which she noted “went a lot better” than her first, found Ms. E. trying out what she considered to be teacher behaviors in order to produce expected student behavior from her students. She felt her “whole teacher voice thing” was better and she was also giving students the “teacher look” to help manage behavior. In doing so, Ms. E. was already exhibiting aspects of a teacher-self that was arising from her understanding of the roles and responsibilities of teachers.

### *Classroom Management*

She was also recognizing in her role the responsibility of maintaining appropriate student behavior. Besides trying out her “teacher voice” and “teacher look” she introduced a couple of other procedures to help manage her students. She found a tuning fork that she could use to signal the class that they should become quiet. The only problem with that idea was that many of the students had never seen a tuning fork before. She wrote that it was “a little overwhelming since instead of getting them quiet it made them all call out questions, but it was sort of inspiring to see how genuinely curious about it” the students were.

She also started a procedure for counting down from five when she was about to begin a lab experiment or perform a demonstration for the class. In her first time using the procedure, she admittedly “hyped” it up so the students would focus on her and be cognizant of the safety needed when doing these experiments. She told the students that the chemicals they would be working with that year were dangerous and they would also be using sharp instruments. While admitting to her readers that the “most dangerous chemical they’ll be working with is vinegar, and they definitely won’t be getting any scalpels,” she told her students

If you are not careful, there could be an explosion, or someone could cut off their finger. I will not let you handle the lab materials if I think you might kill or injure yourself, so if I get to 0 and there is not absolute silence I will cancel whatever lab or demonstration I had planned.

For the experiment of the day, she donned her goggles and lab coat and made it look very “science-y.” In doing so, the students took great notice and became engaged and active participants in her lesson. She had realized that an element of being a teacher was partly making “a big show” of a lesson, and by her doing so she noticed that her students “got really into it.”

Ms. E. made sure to wear her lab coat every day to increase her students’ perception of her not only as a teacher but also as a scientist. She would later write that a student asked her if she ever took her lab coat off or if she was even able to take it off. Towards the end of her first week as a teacher, she also had students ask her about her identity as a “scientist.” The students found her science background fascinating and she allowed them at the end of class to ask her any science related question they had. Some of the questions were related to her being a scientist, such as if she knew how to shrink people, or make something explode, or even if she had won the Nobel Prize. Of their

science background, she felt it was “kind of a bummer to realize how little they’ve been exposed to (science) before.” Yet their limited background was not squelching their curiosity, especially when it came to knowing more about their scientist teacher.

Her last post of the week found her describing for the first time how she had tried to implement advice from Teach For America (TFA) and other experienced teachers. The advice was related to another procedure that she tried to implement for getting her students under control, which did not go as well as the earlier procedures she reported. She had one specific class that was more “rambunctious” than her others and she told them that class would not start “until everyone was in their seats and quiet.” This technique backfired and she did not start class until 30 minutes into the period after she, not the students, finally “broke”.

This post also would find her for the first time considering her students’ performance on a test to measure their understanding of basic science concepts. Her students had never had “an actual science class” before and their poor performance on the diagnostic test definitely showed Ms. E. that she had her work cut out for her. She was coming to an understanding that in order for her to be able to teach the standards that were required of her as a seventh grade science teacher, she would have to catch her students up with some basic conceptual knowledge. She wrote that she could not “believe they’ve been allowed to get to seventh grade without being taught these basic facts,” and she hoped that she would not “let them make it to eighth grade without them.”

### *Seeking Help and Assistance*

At this point, it should be remembered that for Mead (1934) it is the “organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called

the generalized other. The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community” (p. 154). Now into her second week as a teacher, Ms. E. found that the staff was truly reaching out to her in order to assist with her acclimation to the community of teaching and the school. This outreach helped her assume the Generalized Other role and attitude of her burgeoning teacher-self.

All the experienced 7th grade teachers have gone out of their way to offer me advice and tips, the Assistant Principals I work with (there is one for the middle school, and one for science and math) come check on me frequently to see what I need, and teachers I don't even know but who know that I'm new stop me in the hallway to see how I'm doing and ask if I need help with anything. I think I really lucked out in terms of my school environment.

She even received extra help with her most challenging class by being able to teach while their homeroom teacher remained in the classroom. Ms. E. noted that it really helped to have that teacher “shoot the evil eye” at whom she referred to as the “ringleaders” of her troublemakers.

Besides taking on her new identity as a teacher, Ms. E. was also required as a part of Teach For America to become a graduate student at a local college to work towards a Master's degree. She had mixed emotions about having to do this, stating it was “kind of cool” but that it may also prove to be “a nuisance given how much time it takes to do the teaching thing.” She was already recognizing the extent of her teaching commitment and did not seem to think it would allow her the time needed to focus on the Master's program. Fortunately, she did not feel the program would be “too rigorous,” which would enable her to complete the program without extensive effort.

The next several posts would find her lamenting on her students' behavior. Incidents such as her not being able to complete an experiment with all of her classes because they could not get focused (the countdown from five method did not work for

some) caused Ms. E. to consider starting to give her students detention. She tied the possibility of detentions to the scientific method by telling the students her hypothesis of “if I give everyone in the class detentions, the class will behave better during science.” To her readers she noted she would let them know how this experiment went, as she was still “collecting data.”

The homework she gave to her students that night was to write a paragraph on what they thought would happen with the “detention experiment.” One student’s response was directly related to how Ms. E. should be “harder” on her students so they “can understand better.” Ms. E. must have taken this advice to heart; the next day she would post about a speech she gave to two of her most challenging classes.

I prepared an intense speech about expectations and my new policy of laying the smackdown (sic), complete with an inspirational PowerPoint (set to ‘I Can’ by Nas) that showed how much time we waste over the course of the year if we waste 3 minutes a day (13 lost days!), 5 minutes a day (20 lost days!), or 7 minutes a day (31 lost days!). It was super dramatic, it had this countdown about 180 days of school left and 75 7th grade science standards to learn. Then I gave them each a list of the 75 standards, and had them write a silent reflection on what they learned from the presentation and the list of standards.

For Mead (1934), part of Ms. E.’s becoming the Generalized Other of teacher must also include her students becoming the Generalized Other of student. This meant they had to accept the roles and responsibilities that students should take on as a part of the larger social group of the school. It was a part of her role to influence the behavior of her students. In these terms, she was not only developing her teacher-self, she had to also be a factor in her students’ identity development process to become a fuller and more developed student-self. Only as Ms. E. and her students assumed the attitudes of the common social activity (teaching and learning) could the activity even be possible.

While Ms. E.'s "intense" and "super dramatic" speech may have worked for a moment to help foster better student behavior, its effects would not be lasting for a few of her students. The same day of the speech she gave one class six lunch detentions. She also found herself reaching a breaking point when she "completely lost it" with two students who wrestled over a pair of scissors. She recalled the anger that she felt over the situation.

I grabbed the scissors and started screaming at the class. I don't even know what I said, except that it involved the phrase "ABSOLUTELY UNACCEPTABLE" about ten times. I was so mad, I honestly don't know if I've ever been angrier.

Ms. E. felt comfortable enough to seek the help of her Assistant Principal immediately after the scissors incident. She remarked on how helpful he was and that he addressed the behavior with the two students, as well as with the entire class, that very afternoon. She also mentioned that they together sought the assistance of these students' homeroom teacher. She felt very "lucky" that she was "at such a supportive school."

It was obvious Ms. E. recognized that in order for her to become more fully developed in the role as a teacher, she needed the support of her administration and co-workers that week. She also began to seek the help of her students' parents. She made phone calls in the evenings and gave one fairly detailed report of a conversation she had with a student's mother. The mother thanked her incessantly for calling and letting her know that her son was not performing well in class, and while still on the phone the mother took some corrective action with the student. Of the majority of parents she spoke with, she noted that "they really want their kids to do well in school and are willing to help out at home to make sure that happens, even though they are often working a lot themselves."

About a week after this post, Ms. E. realized that while parents may be willing to “help out at home”, when it came to showing up at the school to meet the teachers at the school’s “Curriculum Night” it was another story. Only five parents out of around 120 seventh grade students showed up, and only two of these five had students in any of Ms. E.’s classes. Of this poor turnout she noted

I understand that a lot of the parents have to work (often more than one job), take care of other kids, run busy households, and so on, but it was still pretty frustrating to put in a twelve hour day for a 4% turnout. Oh well, I guess that’s what phone calls home are for...

Besides seeking the help of her co-workers, the administrators at her school, and the parents of her students, Ms. E. also sought help to become a better teacher from the advice of her students. She was trying to better understand the students’ perspective of what they needed from her as a teacher. She sent a worksheet home with her students that included the question “How can I (Ms. E.) help you?” and their responses to her “were pretty interesting.”

The students had various ideas of how Ms. E. could help them be better students and herself to be a better teacher. One was related to their seating arrangements; the students wanted to be able to sit by themselves and away from their distracting peers. While Ms. E. wanted to be able to accommodate this request, she could not because of her itinerant status. Ms. E. did not have her own classroom; she went to other teachers’ classrooms in order to teach the students science. She did not feel she could rearrange the seats in classrooms that were not technically hers.

The other idea the students had was directly related to Ms. E.’s behavior. One told her she should be “harsher with the ‘bad kids’ so we learn more in class.” Many of her students had recognized a generalized attitude which their teacher should possess in order

for them to be able to learn the prescribed curriculum (a generalized attitude for them as students). Ms. E. was surprised by this feedback because she thought she had become stricter than at the beginning of the year; but her students' recommendation for her to even become stricter was a "pretty good indicator that I need to step it up a notch." Later on she would receive reinforcement regarding her stricter behavior from one student who told her "there you go, Ms. E. *That's* how you're supposed to talk to them," with the "them" being a group of students whom she had given detention.

While she was struggling in the classroom, her graduate coursework remained unchallenging. Several of her posts mentioned the limited amount of work required thus far, with one entire class period spent solely on sharing the positives and negatives of teaching. It was, however, helping her to hear the other teachers' "crazy stories" and how it was "nice to know that I'm not the only one going through this..." She also found it reassuring to find out that her students were not the only ones who did "weird things," and that their behavior was typical of middle school students in general.

### *Issues of Race and Ethnicity*

Ms. E. blogged a great deal regarding the "weird" and interesting things her students would say and ask her. Racial issues and comments would arise in several of her posts over her first two years as a teacher. Ms. E. was a white, Jewish American teaching in a school where her students were predominantly Dominican (~85%) and African American (~12%). She blogged about how some of the students' comments stemmed out of their misunderstanding of race and what should be considered racist behavior. Of her own race and ethnicity, one student told her "don't lie, Ms. E., you're not Jewish. You're white!" Another student accused her of being racist when she called on another student

over him. She noted it was not the first time that a student had called her a racist. She felt many of the students thought a racist was a “white person who does something you don’t like”, so this time she took the time to explain to the student what it meant and why it should not be used in this specific situation. She told him that both students were the same race, so picking one over the other could not be considered a racist act. After this explanation, the student observed that he and the other student had different hairstyles, so he countered by saying “fine, then you’re a haircist!”

As mentioned earlier, Ms. E. found support in her development as a teacher in her administrators, co-workers, the parents of her students, and in the students themselves. Ms. E. also found a great partner in a co-worker who was also a first-year Teach For America science teacher. She described this teacher as being “incredibly awesome, and we spend a lot of time together lesson planning, grading, fighting with the copy machine, griping about our kids being ridiculous, etc...” She described one project where the two of them “combined forces” to write proposals for additional funding for science related materials from an online charitable organization that supports “micro-philanthropy”. Teachers, and others, can use the resource to post online their request for funds, and random individuals can support the cause by donating as much, or as little, as they are able.

This particular micro-philanthropic project also found Ms. E. seeking the support of yet another group, the readers of her blog. She had a growing group of readers and commenters to the site, moving beyond the family and friends she thought were her only readers. This was the first time she had outwardly recognized her readers (although she

had responded to commenters on several occasions). Of her request for donations she wrote

I promise I won't turn my blog into a guilt trip to give me money, but if you're feeling generous (the other teacher) and I would really appreciate any little bit you have to spare. Also, it's my birthday on Thursday, so you could consider it an early present.

She found her plea for funding fulfilled quite quickly because of her readers; the projects she and the other teacher submitted were completely funded after a couple of weeks. One of their projects provided lab coats and goggles for each of their science students. As earlier noted, Ms. E. wore a lab coat every day, and she wrote that her students were completely "obsessed" with her coat and the goggles she wore for experiments. By recognizing the difference in how she was perceived by merely wearing the lab coat, she and her fellow teacher were hoping to build an identity within the students of themselves as burgeoning scientists.

While she understood the power of what a lab coat and proper supplies could provide to her students in terms of their identities, she admitted that on a personal level she knew "pretty much nothing about what it's like to be a middle schooler" in the area where she was teaching. While she wrote that she had a "loooooong list of things I absolutely do not understand about my students", she did give her readers a condensed version. These included the student's "crazy slang", the "weird trends" that engulfed them, and their seeming inability to accept responsibility for their actions.

One action she as a teacher felt some responsibility towards was her students' performance on their first unit test. She had been teaching exactly a month when she gave this test, and it was on her birthday as well (which to her made the day not "the most exciting birthday ever"). The overall test scores were not terrible, and she had some

students that did really well. She felt she had “taught everything”, but wondered what happened to the students who did poorly. She questioned if they were “totally zoned out when I thought they were paying attention, could they not hear me because of other kids being distracting, or did I just not teach it well? Ugh.”

There was, however a bit of good news that was related to her birthday. When a few students found out, they tried to guess her age. They guessed 26, 29, and 31...a good bit older than 15, which she was accused of being on her first day. Obviously, her actions and experiences over the past month as a teacher were making her seem older in the eyes of the students.

Ms. E. did not wish to only post about the negatives she was experiencing as a teacher, and she tried her best to counterbalance any negative experiences with something positive. For example, in one post she listed ten experiences in alternating fashion regarding something positive that had happened that day and then something negative. A big positive that she posted about was the students having their first dance of the year. Ms. E. was a chaperone, and it was a good opportunity for her to see the kids in a different perspective, out of their school uniforms, and dressed up for the dance. A negative that happened that day was one of her classes became so disruptive that the principal, who was walking by at the moment, came in and “yelled at them for a solid five minutes.” She wrote that it “did improve their behavior for the day, but it’s always embarrassing to be caught failing at your job by your boss.”

A few days later and she again would have an “incredibly frustrating” day that found her questioning if she should be teaching at all. While she did not want to go into details and write about it “all over the Internet”, she did write that “for the first time I

came home and really considered how much better my life would be if I was doing (almost) anything else with it.” It may have been the frustration getting the better of her, but she was about to have an experience that would have her questioning not if teaching was right for her, but if where she was teaching was the right place for her as a teacher.

### *Uncommon School Visit*

Her school had the day off for Yom Kippur and her roommate convinced her to sign up for a TFA professional development experience to be hosted by a charter school that was a member of the Uncommon Schools charter network. Of this school, she noted that they

...take kids from very similar demographics as the ones at my school, and admission is determined solely by a lottery – some of them even have a system that gives preference to kids with the lowest test scores and/or the worst records. They have special ed kids, ESL kids, and ED (emotionally disturbed) kids – all from very poor families. And for the past five years, they have sent 100% of their graduates to four year colleges. I would give up a kidney, an ovary, a lung, anything, to work for them.

Obviously greatly impressed with what she witnessed at the school; she went so far as to write that she was moved to tears and it was “the most inspirational thing I have witnessed since joining TFA.” While she did state that her emotions could have been caused “partially because of stress and sleep deprivation,” she was overwhelmed with the behaviors the students exhibited, the positive culture of the school environment, and the high expectations it had for all of its students.

While inspiring, this visit caused her to question if she could implement some of the same strategies she witnessed with her own students. She realized that she needed to have higher expectations of what her students could accomplish, but wondered if it was not already too late in the school year to make the changes needed to do so.

I have already developed many bad habits that will be difficult to break. I wish I could start the year over and put many of the systems I now wish I had in place from day one, because I think adding them in this late in the game will be an uphill battle. I think it's one that will be worth fighting, though.

Determined to fight on in her “uphill battle”, Ms. E. implemented a new behavior management system that she learned about from the charter school visit. It was no secret that classroom management was a particularly challenging aspect of her teacher-self. She had one particular class that she had consistently referred to as her “bad class” and she had many individual students whom she highlighted in her posts because of their disruptive behavior problems. She had worked on behavior modification with these students, calling upon their parents and other “influencers” such as their coaches to assist her with controlling disruptive classroom behavior. With one particular student (whom she referred to as “one of the terrors of seventh grade”), she gave a notebook to write down his thoughts and feelings instead of disrupting the entire class. In one example of his disruptive behavior, the student came into the classroom and yelled at Ms. E. “I hate you! I don't care about science! Leave me alone!” The notebook would allow him to express his thoughts in writing, but Ms. E. also wanted to have a better system in place for all of her students in order to reward and manage their behaviors more effectively.

The behavior management system she implemented involved the students earning weekly behavior-based “paychecks”. Some of the incentives she noted they could purchase would be homework passes, or Ms. E. would take them out to lunch, or she would even allow them to purchase the privilege of being able to wear her lab coat. Of this new system she wrote:

I think it will be helpful for each kid to get a piece of paper every week that says, “Here is how you did this week, here is where you lost points, and here is where

you did well” – hopefully it will boost their awareness and accountability of their behavior.

A week later she gave out her first round of paychecks, and while some students were motivated by them others, who had low paychecks, were rather indifferent. She even had a student become upset because he thought he would be receiving an actual check for money and not for “Science Points”.

### *The Generalized Other Co-Teacher and Students*

In the same post as the paychecks, Ms. E. described another teacher whom she said had now become her “new best teacher buddy” (although she clarified that her partner 8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher was still her *overall* best teacher buddy). This new buddy of hers was the co-teacher in her Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) class, which had 50% of students with IEPs (Individualized Education Plans). Ms. E. had to teach the class alone since her original co-teacher was moved to another grade level over a month prior. Having to go solo was not only in her words “super-illegal,” it was also quite challenging. Because of the circumstances of the class and Ms. E.’s admitted struggles with classroom management, the students were consistently behind her other classes and their scores were much poorer.

Ms. E. felt her new co-teacher was amazing and because of her addition to this specific class, she felt more like “a teacher” than a “frazzled babysitter” for these students.

She’s one of those teachers who just has this... presence, and as soon as she walks in the room the kids all stop whatever shenanigans they’re in the middle of, sit up straight, and listen. Today for the first time I got through the entire lesson, we had successful individual work time, and I only had to deduct points from the paychecks of five kids. Five. Last week there were only four kids in the whole class who went a single day without losing points. Thanks to (the co-teacher), I

actually felt like a teacher with that class today, instead of a frazzled babysitter. If she gets moved to another position, I will cry.

Ms. E. recognized in her co-teacher attributes that seemed to radiate from her, and which the students sensed via the teacher's presence alone. The addition of this co-teacher to the CTT class could not have come at a better moment; the next day a group of principals from other schools visited the school decided observe one of Ms. E.'s classes. It was the one she now was co-teaching, and the observation went extremely well. Having this co-teacher made the CTT class one of her best teaching environments, and she noted that it was "the only class where I actually get through lessons and don't have to constantly tell kids to be quiet, sit down, stop punching each other, etc..."

While Ms. E. earlier mentioned not understanding her middle school students, she sought to become more aware of what life was like for her students. Again she was recognizing that in order for her to take on the Generalized Other roles and attitudes of teacher, she must also be able to take on the Generalized Other attitudes of her students. This included her coming to a better understanding of their personal lives. It was these lives she in fact wanted to change, yet she also knew the reason they did not pay attention in her class was because school obviously was "not the number one priority for most of my students." She believed strongly in the transformational power of public education and wrote that

I just wish I could do a better job of making them understand that even though all these other things are going on in their lives, the only way to get away from them is to get their act together in school. Otherwise it won't be too long until their kids are in the exact same place they are...

It was now November, and she shared with her readers a graph that displayed the "Phases of First Year Teacher's Attitudes Towards Teaching." The graph was of a school

year (August through July) and contained six different phases: Anticipation, Survival, Disillusionment, Rejuvenation, Reflection, and then back to Anticipation. Ms. E. reported that the graph was scarily accurate so far and according to it, she was in the throes of disillusionment. She was crossing her fingers that come January things would actually start to improve, as according to the graph she should start to become rejuvenated at that point.

She would definitely be in need of rejuvenation due to her increasing frustration with not being able to teach because of how much time she had to spend on behavior management. Ms. E.'s frustration stemmed from her inability to fully realize her teacher self because of the misbehavior of her students and her students were misbehaving because they were not fully recognizing Ms. E.'s teacher self. When administrators were present, the students behaved accordingly. When her co-teacher was present, the students behaved accordingly. When parents were brought in to sit with their children because they could not behave, the student then found it within his or herself to behave accordingly. Yet for Ms. E. it was a different story.

Mead (1934) recognized this frustration that arose because Ms. E.'s "self" as teacher "is a social self, it is a self that is realized in its relationship to others. It must be recognized by others to have the very values which we want to have belong to it" (p. 204). A value she wanted to belong to her identity was for her students to respect her role as a teacher and behave accordingly enabling her to teach. If the students could behave for others, then they should have been able to behave for her, and when they did not, frustrations arose.

Ms. E. was not a teacher who felt that her teacher identity stopped existing after she left the school at the end of the day. She had posted several times regarding students calling her on the phone in the evenings when they had questions about their homework. She had given the students her phone number and email address and encouraged them to use them if they had questions. On a bus ride back to her college hometown one weekend she described how two students had called her for help, and how “they’re always so weirded out by talking to their teacher on the phone that they are hilariously awkward.” Ms. E., however, did not feel at all awkward about talking with her students and parents on the phone. On the bus trip back she called seventy students to remind them about their projects being due and to study for an upcoming test. She noted that it took four hours to make that many calls and it drained her cell phone battery in the process. She closed this post by writing “They better frigging turn in those projects and do well on the test, or I will kill them.”

She graded the tests and the projects (at least the ones that were turned in) over Thanksgiving break. The scores made her feel “sort of bummed” because the students’ averaged only a 58%, which was worse than the previous unit tests the students had taken. She needed to “figure out what happened there” because she felt she had taught this unit “better than the last.” Here she was definitely tying her performance as a teacher with the performance of her students on tests. She would not have much time to figure out what happened on the last unit before starting in on the next unit of study. She wrote that “we better get better than a freaking 58% average on this unit test, or I will cry.” Of interest in this statement is his her use of the pronoun “we”. She was obviously tying her students’ performance on the next assessment with her performance as a teacher.

If the students were to perform better she would at least have to teach, which would not happen for one of her classes on the first day of the next unit. While her other three classes went “surprisingly well”, she noted that her “fourth and last class of the day, however, was a bit of a disaster.” She had written at the beginning of the school year (in just her second post) that this class would be her “biggest challenge for the year” and on this day her prediction came to fruition. The students in this fourth class were given an extra period of gym because the school’s art teacher had quit over Thanksgiving (and the students would have normally went to art before going to Ms. E.’s class from gym on that day). Ms. E. described what happened as follows:

Instead of being tired from the extra physical activity, they were HYPED up, and within five seconds of leaving the gym the worst fight I’ve handled so far broke out. Two girls were literally on the floor, each one grabbing the others’ hair and pulling as hard as they could while using their elbows/knees/feet to smack each other in the face. The biggest kid in the class, who is also one of the most mature, tried to get between them, and ended up getting the wind knocked out of him. Another kid who was standing nearby got scratched by a flailing hand and started to bleed. The whole thing was made worse by the fact that an eighth grade class was passing by in the hallway, so they crowded around the girls in a circle and started egging them on. It didn’t end until the gym teacher and security guard came to break it up and take the girls away – but then 20 minutes later they got sent back to my class! Needless to say, the lesson did not actually happen with that class.

Due to this event and the other stresses of teaching, Ms. E. was definitely in need of a substantial break. She was counting the days down in all of her December posts to the Christmas/winter break and was looking towards January to when the “theoretical upswing in the curve of first year teachers’ morale” should happen for her.

Yet she still had to make it through December, a month where she was noticing “holiday fever” already setting in. Besides continuing to document some outrageous student behavior, she had some good news that she hoped would impact how she and her

students viewed her as a teacher. She stated that her teacher status would be “more legitimized” because she would actually be getting a classroom. The art teacher quitting, which precipitated the horrific fight a few days earlier, would turn out to be a blessing in disguise. With a now empty classroom, Ms. E. and her 8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher partner would be able to share the room as their very own classroom.

While the new room should help “legitimize” her teaching self, she noted in the same post how a student in one of her classes found out her first name. She wrote that “now all the kids in that class are calling me by my first name in a sing-song voice, and refusing to call me my ‘teacher name’”. As in many of her posts, she found herself experiencing one step forward and one step backward in terms of the development of her teacher identity.

#### *Continued Support*

An area that Ms. E. found herself “lucky” in terms of her professional development was the support she was receiving from her administration and staff. On a day where she became physically sick during a lesson, she later on wrote how appreciative she was of the support she received that day and since she was hired at the school.

A lot of my TFA friends have administrations that are uncaring, uncooperative, or grossly incompetent, and work with other teachers that are just terrible. My administration is incredibly supportive – they hired a person to be a full-time first year teacher mentor! – and the other teachers I work with are just great. Today when I got sick (her mentor teacher) was so great at taking over my class, the AP was incredibly nice about figuring out a way for me to go home with three periods left to teach, (two other teachers) were happy to cover my last periods, and on my way out of the building a lot of teachers stopped me to see how I was feeling and tell me to feel better. If it wasn't for the other adults at my school, I don't know if I would have lasted this long.

While she felt that without all of the support of the adults at her school she may not have lasted as long as she had as a teacher, she still had nine days to go until the break. Ms. E. described a really positive event in which three of her students had saved enough from their “paychecks” to earn a lunch with their teacher (at their choice of McDonald’s, KFC, or Burger King). It was yet another opportunity for Ms. E. to learn more about her students’ personal lives and for her students to learn more about her as well. She wrote that they “spent a good forty-five minutes telling me all about their families, crushes, exploits, etc... and prying me for the relevant reciprocal information.” Of the “lunch”, which actually had to happen after school, Ms. E. thought “it was more fun for me than it was for them.”

In the same post she reported that her previous remarks about her supportive administration must have earned her “some good karma” because her principal told her that day he was creating a “private study room” next to his office for her top two or three trouble makers. These students would not be in her class for the rest of the grading period and would have to complete all of their work in isolation “learning from the textbook.” Finding this out made Ms. E “so happy!”

#### *Un-TFA*

Yet her happiness came at the price of her sacrificing a bit of her identity, specifically as a Teach For America corps member. She noted that her happiness was “very un-TFA” of her. She thought that it was acceptable to sacrifice one (or two or three) of her trouble-makers for the benefit of herself and the entire class. This highlighted the separateness of herself as a TFA corps members and herself as solely a “teacher”. The idealistic vision TFA holds for its corps was coming into conflict with the

realities of teaching in a high-needs urban school. While she was happy, she also wrote that she “felt sort of bad” for already identifying her most troubling student who would be the first to leave her class for the principal’s “private study room.”

Her next post found her still conflicted over her TFA identity. She took the day off from teaching because of the lingering stomach illness which caused her to leave early a few days prior, as well as “being absolutely unable to face my bad class for the Two Hour Double Period From Hell.” While home she worked on lesson plans and later on that day went to the nearby TFA office to make photocopies (which was free for corps members). On her arrival at the office, she noted:

...there were a bunch of nervous-looking twenty-somethings in suits sitting in the lobby. It took me a second to realize that they were college seniors at the office to interview for admission into next year’s corps. I was really tempted to warn them not to do it as I walked past, but there were TFA staff around and I thought they might not let me use the photocopiers if I tried to scare away their recruits...

She was obviously conflicted about whether or not she made the right decision to teach as a part of Teach For America. Yet after taking two other students to “lunch” after school the next day, she came to a renewed appreciation for the decision she made.

Ms. E. and one of the students had a conversation around his not doing very well in his gym class. She admitted to him that when she was a middle school student she did not do too well in gym either. The student responded to her that in spite of her not doing too well in gym she still had “a great career!” She wrote that comment made her “realize that even though my job is currently killing me, I am very lucky to be gainfully employed, making a decent wage, and in possession of a college degree and lots of options. Even though my kids drive me crazy, I want them to have those things too.”

As noted earlier, something else she really wanted her students to have were good scores on the Unit Four test. She would not be “bummed” this time as the average for this test was a 75%, which she considered a “huge improvement” from the 58% average on their Unit Three assessment. Again she was “so happy!” yet this time it was very TFA-like. She broke the test down by state standard, which was something TFA had taught her, and realized that even though her students had only achieved the TFA goal of 80% mastery on one and a half standards, that the “elusive TFA 80% benchmark *is* attainable.”

### *Hoping for Teacher Rebirth*

She returned to school after a winter break in which she was “hoping for some sort of teacher rebirth” to occur, yet alas it did not happen. On her first day back, she again sought the advice of her students as to what would make the second part of their year in science class better. One student did not think positive change was possible for their class, and this was the only student whose answer she “really agreed with.”

On a positive note, a few days later she would have a college classmate who worked for Apple computers come to visit her classes. Her classmate told the students that if they worked hard in school that they too “could play with iPods for a living.” While the students had “a million inane questions” for her, Ms. E. noted that they were particularly intrigued at their college class rings. It was inspiring that some of the students remarked that they too were going to earn such a ring one day.

In order to earn a college class ring, they first had to make it out of seventh grade which required them to pass a “super high-stakes” English Language Arts exam. Ms. E., in a fairly sarcastic yet realistic tone, noted that it did not matter if there were “trivial little complications like whether or not English is their first language or if they have a

learning disability”, students who did not pass this test would not be able to move on to the next grade. Because of the stress induced on the students by this test, two students “were in tears before the exam ever began.”

As January neared an end, her break as a graduate student came to its end as well. Her first semester class in her Master’s program was less than rigorous, many nights in class found her being able to post to her blog, catch up on emails, and post grades to her grade book. This semester had the potential to require more effort due to the fact she had to take three classes (instead of the sole class she had the first semester). A big negative to this already sleep deprived teacher was that it would also require her to stay in town until 9:00 pm on every Tuesday. She did have a bright side...it was only “fourteen more school days until midwinter recess!”

Her next post would find that “many exciting developments” had come to pass (in fact she titled her post just that). She learned how to use a scantron machine and could now say goodbye to “five hours of grading after every test!” She also found out that her school was awarded a \$25,000 grant to buy science supplies, and she and her partner teacher from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade went on a “massive shopping spree.” She even posted a number of pictures of the items they would be able to purchase because of the grant.

Another big development was that she was “deputized” to be a math teacher in order to teach measurement for the upcoming high-stakes math test. Now that the high-stakes English Language Arts test was over, the “panic” would be shifted to the upcoming math test. She explained that since measurement is “vaguely science-y” she was the one selected to teach it. Yet teaching math was much harder than she had expected, noting that it was “teaching a skill instead of a concept.”

*The Importance of a Good Day*

In one of her next posts (which also marked the exact halfway point of her first year of teaching) she was happy to report that it was “the first day I have actually enjoyed what I do – not just for a few minutes here and there, but for the whole day.” The day was a field trip and she noted how much fun it was and how “sweet and happy and *so excited*” the students were about what they experienced. While she had definitely experienced frustration up to this point, Ms. E. had yet to hint at leaving TFA early, if she would leave after her two-year commitment was over, or if she would possibly maintain her role and identity as a teacher beyond her commitment. Her finally having a positive experience as a teacher for an entire day found her commenting on the possibility of staying a teacher past her TFA commitment, or at least understanding why teachers remain in the profession. Of this latter prospect she wrote:

I think I finally get why people stay with this job, and why it’s worth working so hard to get better at it – I hope there are many more days like this in the second half of the year, and not just on a field trips.

Besides making it to the halfway point of the year, a few days later would find Ms. E. highlighting the 100<sup>th</sup> day of the school year. It was also the 100<sup>th</sup> morning of her having to get up before sunrise to prepare lab materials and make copies. It signified as well 100 nights of her going to bed with a pit in her stomach, something she noted was “sometimes smaller than others, but always there.” It also signified:

100,000 times telling kids to spit out the gum, sit down, take off the hat, put away the tech deck, stop talking, stop hitting, start working, get out a pencil... You would think they would get have got the hang of things by now, but they still react like I’m telling them completely new and outrageous information when I say that no, they can’t go to the bathroom right after lunch, just like they haven’t been allowed to go to the bathroom after lunch for the previous 99 days. It gets old.

The high stakes Math test would happen next. Ms. E. reported that it was another “pass it or get held back a year” test and she was hoping to be able to take it easy and get some reading done as she had while proctoring the English Language Arts test. It would not be so easy for her this time, however, as she was assigned to work solely with one student to whom she had to read the test aloud and then record his answers. As a result, she knew exactly how well he performed, or how poorly to be exact. She noted she felt like she was “filling out the paperwork to keep him in sixth grade for a second year.”

After the second day of testing was over, she announced that she had heard that student behavior would start to go downhill from there on out. It seems the students felt that since the high stakes testing was over, so was the school year. She guessed she still had “three months to find out” if what she had heard was correct, but wondered how much more downhill could behavior go from some of the low points it had hit already that year.

A couple of days later and she would be reporting not downhill student behavior, but some incidents she considered to be “small triumphs.” The first was related to her “hell” class who had a substitute in the period before hers. The students were working on some “pretty mind numbing busy work” in the substitute’s class. However, when Ms. E. walked in, one of her “bitchiest girls threw up her hands, (and) yelled ‘Finally!’” She ran over to Ms. E. and gave her a big hug. This made her feel that “at least they don’t see me as the worst possible teacher!”

The second incident was related to another class with a guest teacher instead of a substitute. It was her science class and the guest teacher was “supposed to be

demonstrating a ‘Constructivist Science Lesson’ for my benefit.” She went on to write that she was

...not the biggest fan of this particular way of teaching, so I felt quite vindicated when, halfway through the “lesson,” one of my boys waved me over and asked, “Miss, what is he trying to teach us?” I tried to summarize the objective for him, to which he replied, “Well why don’t you just tell us that?” At least they actually learn some things from me!

Her feeling that they were learning from her was diminished almost a week later when her students’ progress reports were sent home, which found many of her students failing science. Although Ms. E. had yet to teach an entire year, she knew what to expect from the students who were failing. She noted that “the kids always scream “HOW YOU GIVE ME A 52?!?!?” at me, like the list of 7 missing homeworks and 2 failed quizzes isn’t enough of an explanation.”

As noted earlier, Ms. E. sought the help of people she referred to as “influencers” such as the students’ coach if they were athletes. In what she called a “weird reversal of the typical ‘excellent-at-sports-but-a-train-wreck-in-the-classroom’ student”, Ms. E. was called upon as an “influencer” herself for a student who did great in science, but refused to participate in her gym class. The coach coming to her was an additional indicator of the increased respect as a teacher she had gained in her first year by her co-workers. This recognition by others within the given social situation is an integral part of Mead’s (1934) identity development process and in the becoming of the Generalized Other.

### *Transformation*

It was now the springtime of her first year teaching, and transformation was in the air. After a spring break in which she did nothing but sleep and eat for a week and a half, she returned to what she called a “quite tolerable” day. She even admitted that she missed

“a select few students over the break, so having them to look forward to kind of offset having to deal with the students I was secretly hoping would move away or get mono or something.”

The first transformation she highlighted was a student who had previously been unengaged in the learning process. Ms. E. noted that while the student was not disruptive, she mainly just sat in the back of the room and “doesn’t do anything besides her nails.” On the first day back from spring break, and the start of a new science unit, this student became really engaged in the lesson. Although not a favorite subject area for Ms. E., she tried to make this opening lesson on plants as fun as possible. It really worked on this student, who sat in the front, asked questions, and raised her hand at every question Ms. E. asked. It even got to the point of Ms. E. telling the class that she kept seeing the same hands raised, so she wanted to see some “different ones.” On hearing this, the student “exasperatedly put down the hand she had been raising and raised the other one instead!” Ms. E. described seeing this student’s excitement and transformation as “what a TFA moment.”

The next transformation she described was her own. It was her second day back and she posted the following observation about her feelings going into work that morning.

I had an oddly nice feeling this morning on the way to work, and it was nothing. It’s hard to explain, but I just didn’t feel anything – no pit in my stomach thinking about bringing (a specific class) up from lunch, no looming sense of doom about (a specific student) being off his medication since coming back from break, no preemptive headaches about grading or making posters or calling parents. I just felt like I was on my way to work, and that was that. It was actually pretty awesome. Maybe I’ve finally hit that upswing in the first year teaching curve that was supposed to start back in January?

Ms. E. may have found that upswing in her mood predicted by the graph she had shared in an earlier post, from the “Disillusionment” phase into a phase of “Rejuvenation”. Or maybe it was because Ms. E. saw that there was a finish line to the race she had been running. She closed the post by noting there were just “Forty-six more days!” until the end of the school year.

Her posts would continue to find her counting down the days, but in the days that were left she would find herself with additional teaching duties and responsibilities. She was asked to take over a self-contained special education class due to the unexpected leaving of a teacher. Teaching this class of five students would not be the only added responsibility to her already full schedule. A few weeks later and she detailed how she was having to work with students after school as a part of AIS – which to her meant “Academic Interventions Somethingorother” (she thought the “somethingorother” could possibly be “Services”). Basically, the district did not have enough money for summer school, so students who were in jeopardy of failing a class would stay after school to complete remedial work activities. The students she wound up teaching after school were her “greatest hits collection of student horror stories.” Her first day teaching these students was especially frustrating and she found herself questioning the worth of the program.

I don't mind staying after to help struggling students, but they have to want to help themselves. I'm thinking about asking to have the most disruptive students removed from the program so the other ones can actually learn something. I know it goes against the TFA motto of never giving up on a student, but I am getting sick of one or two kids constantly sabotaging the education of everyone around them. Ugh. Thirty-six days.

Once again, Ms. E. was finding a disparity between herself as a teacher who had to daily face the struggles of disruptive students and with herself as a TFA corps member who has

been told never to give up on a student. Her identity was developing as well to where she could not only go against the TFA motto, but she wanted to go against the AIS program itself by asking for the most disruptive students to be removed for the sake of the others.

A commenter to her post about the AIS program asked her if she felt TFA was wrong regarding their motto of not giving up on a student. Ms. E. responded with the following:

It's not so much that I think TFA is wrong, it's just that I have finite resources of time and energy and I'm beginning to wonder if sometimes it's better to just cut your losses with one for the benefit of the other 29... but then I still feel so guilty about that one.

The commenter replied back to Ms. E.'s response by stating:

Sometimes you have to. TFA calculates as if teaching is a two year commitment, and expects a short energy burst. Make up for experience with an amazing flash of intelligence and energy... But it only kind of works.

The commenter then clarified his last comment by writing that he was trying to say that "they (TFA) think that energy is an infinite resource, since you'll be there so short." Ms. E. had acknowledged her "finite resources of time and energy" yet had not at all acknowledged if she would "be there so short" as the commenter suggested. At this point she simply was more realistic regarding the energy that disruptive students took away from her, thus "sabotaging" the education of the others who were there to learn.

The next day found Ms. E. not as concerned with requesting the most disruptive AIS students be removed from the program. Only three students showed up for the after school remedial work, and she noted that it was "awesome!" As long as attendance would stay low, Ms. E. felt that the group would definitely learn much more than when all students were present.

Of interest in this post was a question Ms. E. received from one of the students present that afternoon. The student asked her if she would be staying on as a teacher next year. Ms. E. told him yes, but the student groaned when she told him she would not be moving up with his class to be an eighth grade teacher. What makes it of interest is not only her providing a designated identity statement of her continuing to be a teacher for at least another year, but also that she was designating that this student (who was working after school because he was at risk of failing) would be able to pass the seventh grade and become an eighth grade student.

#### *Continued Racial and Ethnic Issues*

Three students in the AIS program must have been the magic number, because a few days later, when five students were present, she called it the “afterschool group from Hell.” It was actually three of the five who were “out of control” and much of the misbehavior consisted of the students screaming racial slurs at each other. As noted earlier, Ms. E. had to face racial issues with her students that stemmed from their misconceptions of racial and ethnic identity. This day’s situation was fairly similar, and it again illustrated concepts of identity that Ms. E. found troubling yet intriguing and left her questioning how she should address this issue with her students.

Two days prior Ms. E. had posted about an incident that occurred where one student went “absolutely crazy” on another; flipping over her desk and kicking and screaming at him. When Ms. E. asked the student why she went so crazy, the student told her “You would understand if you heard what he *called* me!!” She thought that it must have been a racial slur, but it turned out the other student called her “swine flu”. He did not tell her that she had “swine flu”, but he called her “swine flu.” Of this Ms. E. thought

it was “doubly weird.” It should be noted that at the point in time of this incident there had been a swine flu outbreak that was said to have origins in Mexico

A commenter to this specific post told her she as well had students calling each other “swine flu” as a “negative nickname.” This other teacher taught predominantly African American students and she felt her students were using it “in a way to stereotype Hispanics.” Ms. E. did not think that was the case for her students, since they were both Hispanic, so she did not think (at the moment) they were being racist when they used it.

Two days later with her after school group she would indeed come to view that term as having racist connotations.. The students were using “swine flu” as a degrading term for being Mexican. Her students were also calling each other “taco” and “burrito”, other things they associated with Mexico. Two days prior she thought that since it was an Hispanic calling another Hispanic these “insults” it could not be considered racist. She later realized that her students were almost entirely Dominican and the terms were indeed perpetuating racist stereotypes. Ms. E. found it “incredibly unacceptable” and wrote:

I feel like whenever my kids use racial slurs against each other, they are saying that it is okay to use words like “Mexican” as an insult, when clearly it isn’t. It’s doubly frustrating to me because I don’t think they realize that to most non-Hispanic people, especially racist non-Hispanics, they might as well all be Mexican. It’s like they’re saying “it’s okay to be racist against certain Hispanics, just not the kind I am,” but the message that anyone (well, anyone who’s racist) who overhears them would get is, “It’s okay to be racist against Hispanics, including you.” Sometimes I just want to shake them and say, “You are all oppressed minorities who are constantly getting screwed by the system, stop fighting each other and unite against The Man!”

### *College Visit*

A few days later and all thoughts of racist discourse were pushed to the side due to some news Ms. E. would offer her readers. She had been dreaming of being able to take a small group of her students on a weekend trip to her alma mater (one of the

nation's top ranked institutions of higher learning), and her dreams looked like they were about to come true. She wanted to show the students what was possible "if they work hard enough in school" and her administration approved the trip. The Assistant Principal would even help chaperone and Ms. E. emailed her friends who were still at the college to get volunteers to help conduct lab tours. The college's Office of Community Outreach even gave her \$750 to help cover the travel costs. They still were in need of more money in order to help make the trip possible so, just had she had sought financial assistance earlier for her micro-philanthropic project, she asked her readers to help. To her possible benefactors she wrote that she would provide them with pictures of the trip and she would have the students write them letters "about how great you are!" Of the impact this trip could possibly make in her students' lives, she wrote "who knows, the kid you sponsor could end up curing cancer or inventing the next Roomba or other helpful robot, all because of you!"

The next day she wrote that not only her Assistant Principal was onboard, but the Principal as well and he was going to cover the costs of the teachers' tickets. She had already even received donations from some of her readers and the trip was looking like it would be a reality. She had definitely found within her teacher-self the ability to ask for help when she needed it, and this time it was to accomplish the dream of instilling in her students their own designated identities of one day being a college student.

A few posts later and she reported about an extremely productive day where students were excited and engaged in a "Jeopardy" review activity she did with her classes. It was so productive that she wrote that one class

...actually got through every single question in just over half of the period – and I’ve never had a class make it through all the question before, even in a double. I had to wing a ‘partner review mini-quiz’ to kill the extra twenty minutes.

This found her reporting that “the best part of the day was that it made me feel like an actual teacher, not just a crazy lady who screams at twelve-year-olds all day.” Having a group of students who were “focused and learning” led her to making one of the most telling actual identity statements to date, as she finally felt like an “actual teacher.” Ms. E. had found that her identity as a teacher was also tied to her students being “focused and learning things.” That was the Generalized Other attitude and role she felt students should have, and in order for Ms. E. to be the Generalized Other “actual teacher” she sought to be, her students had to be the students she envisioned.

She was also feeling positive about own designated identity as a teacher. She had learned quite a lot about herself as a teacher over the past year, and while it was not yet over, she looked forward to a better future. She wrote “I can’t wait to next year, when I can know what I’m doing from the beginning and hopefully have kids paying attention and knowing things on a daily basis.” For Ms. E., the best was yet to come and while still counting down the days, she closed the post noting how sad she will be at the end of this year if all days turned out to be as productive as the past day had been.

Her next post would be fairly short, but it offered a designated identity statement that should be noted. Ms. E. taught in middle school students in a school that also housed elementary students. A second grader, who had a first name that was the same as her last name, was intrigued with Ms. E. and their names being the same. Every time he would see her would run up to her and give her a hug. Of this she wrote “let’s hope he retains his adoration for me if he’s in my class five years from now...” While she may have

recently posted her looking forward to teaching in the next year, she had yet to include any hints that she may want to maintain being a teacher past her two year commitment to TFA until now. She still was counting days till summer, and at the moment of the post there was only twenty-four days left!

Almost two weeks later and Ms. E. was almost forced to leave teaching (at least at her school) because of economic conditions beyond her control. She found out 13 teachers, including several of her friends and other TFA first year teachers, were being “excessed”. She explained it as follows:

“Excessed” basically means “let go,” not because of incompetence, but because there is no longer room in the budget to fund that teaching position. Several thousand teachers are currently being excessed across [the city] because the tanking economy has drastically cut the DOE’s budget. Because my school is big enough to have a lot of teachers, we are also big enough to lose a lot of teachers – basically every non-tenured (has taught for less than 3 years) teacher lost their job today. The only reason [she and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher] are safe is because we teach science, which is a high-need certification area and therefore exempt from the “newest teachers get excessed first” rule.

Ms. E. went on to describe one of the TFA co-workers who would be leaving after the year because of the cuts. She was especially depressed about the school losing this teacher, but she then went on to provide a bit more information about herself and her joining TFA. She had initially wanted to teach elementary school, not middle school science, but TFA placed her as a secondary science teacher despite her grade level request. She felt she could “stop being upset” now because “if I had gotten my wish then, I wouldn’t have a job now.”

A highlight of Ms. E.’s year was on the verge of happening, which would not have been conceived had it not been for her becoming a science teacher. The weekend trip to her alma mater was indeed about to happen, and she was so excited that she could

barely sleep the night before the trip. While she feared the day would be disastrous, it turned out to be an “amazing day for everyone involved.” Once they all arrived safely at the campus, Ms. E. led the students and chaperones on a tour in which the students were amazed that a college “could be its own little self-contained city.” Next they visited a lecture hall and the students had a question and answer session with teachers regarding life at the college.

They were pretty incredulous at the notion of being individually responsible for attending class, doing homework, and studying – and that if they didn’t do one of those things their professors wouldn’t call their parents and hold them at recess to make up work, they would just fail them. Quite a change from what they’re used to.

The students were next broken up into groups so they could visit four smaller labs. In these labs they were able to view first hand state of the art innovations in robotics, digital, and interactive media. Ms. E. thought the labs were the “best part of the day.” After the labs, they all went to visit Ms. E.’s old dorm, which included a barbecue dinner in the courtyard and a visit from the college marching band. Ms. E. even joined the band on trombone even though she had not played since graduating, She added that one of the senior band members was signed on to start TFA in the fall. Of this soon to be teacher, she wrote that

...it was nice to be able to show him a bunch of awesome kids having a great time so he knows what to look forward to eventually. I know I would have felt better when I was slogging through the fall if I had seen something like today and knew it was possible.

Ms. E. had made this trip a reality and she was able to not only enlighten a future teacher, but was able to provide her students with an opportunity they never would have had it not been for her. She provided these students with the opportunity to “meet people who have done everything from design iMacs to discover stars, all because they went to

college – and to hear that they could do awesome things like that too if they studied hard enough.”

### *Acceptance of a New Identity*

On her return to school after the big trip, Ms. E. noted how a question from one of her students had her considering how much she has grown into an acceptance of her role as a teacher. One of her students asked her, “That place is so cool, why did you leave to come here??” She responded in the post by stating that “Whereas in September I probably would have cried and said ‘I don’t know!’, I was able to answer, pretty much entirely honestly, ‘To hopefully make it so that you can end up at (that college) in five years.’” Her identity was no longer a student at the college they visited, nor was she the same beginning teacher she was earlier in the year. She was now coming into a Generalized Other self who was trying her best to instill the possibilities that her students could realize in their own lives.

She had made it to the end of her first year, and as she had done at the beginning and middle of the year she sought feedback from her students as to “what to change next year.” Her students were as forthright and honest with her as they had been all year. Many felt she should be stricter, which was also a theme from her surveys earlier in the year. They had the impression she had to control her classes by screaming and yelling, but several were thankful for the experience to have had her as a teacher, her knowledge of the subject, and that she made science “awesome”, “fun”, and “cool”.

Her last day teaching for the year would also be the last day she would post until the next year. She was admittedly exhausted, instead of feeling elated or depressed (or both at the same time) as she had thought she would feel. She did not feel it was hard to

say goodbye to the students, because as a seventh grader they would still be in middle school next year and she would still be able to see them.

Several students gave her some “goodies” on the last day, with one being a card from a student who included in her note to her how much she “reeeeeeeally” appreciated Ms. E. allowing her to go on the college trip. The student wrote “It was so awesome that there are no words for its awesomeness. I will miss you alot.” It was not only her students who showed their appreciation for Ms. E. on the last day of her first year. She also received her own teacher “report card” in which she received a satisfactory rating on all of her duties and responsibilities. Her Assistant Principal included statements in the “Additional Comments” section that touted her ability to foster a love of science in her students and to create real-world connections by her arrangement of science field trips and her college campus visit. He even told her he would be placing a separate letter of commendation in her personnel file about the campus visit. She was already beginning to plan next year’s visit.

Ms. E. closed out her first year on a high note with her students and administrators. She wrote that she wanted to close out her blogging with something profound about her first year teaching experience, but she was too “worn out to think” at the moment. She did write the following:

I think the biggest thing I’ve taken away is how hard it is even for the kids who are working their butts off to get a good enough education to get out of the cycle of poverty many of their families have been stuck in for generations – to say nothing of my multitude of students who have already been in and out of institutions from homeless shelters to jails, places most people born in affluent areas will never see the inside of, before they even hit puberty. Someone once asked me to sum up my first year with TFA in two words: Poverty sucks.

## Year Two

### *Learning from Experience*

Ms. E.'s summer vacation, which she called the best summer of her life, seemed to “fly by in about five seconds.” Her first post of her second year found her recalling the tearful return to the city where she taught to set up her classroom for the upcoming year. Unlike the year before, when she started as an itinerant teacher moving from classroom to classroom with a cart and was then thrown somewhat hastily into a classroom in January, she and her fellow science teacher now had time to organize their classroom and lab before school started. They put into place a new desk arrangement (that she called “infinitely better than the old one”), and also noted of plans to implement “a ton of new systems and procedures that will hopefully result in a considerably less stressful classroom environment.”

She was utilizing her experience from her first year to address the single most issue that plagued her – classroom management – and by doing so her second first-day of teaching went “much better” than her first first-day. She wrote that she “was about a million times more relaxed. Not because I think it won't be hard this time around, but because this (year) I know what to expect and how to pass all the stupid little tests the kids put you through.” She felt that some things, like noticing gum chewing, were “small things” but added up “make a big difference” in terms of her classroom management and maintaining discipline.

A fear she had was that her students from the previous year (now eighth graders), whom she stated knew her once as an “incompetent first year teacher,” may somehow ruin her “cred” with her current students. This fear was the most stressful part of her first day back. She even told her readers that they would be disappointed that she had no

“hooligan” stories as the students she had that day were “still in perfect behavior first-day mode.” This first day was markedly different than a year prior, when she was “new and nervous” and her students paid “no attention to the person in from of the room trying to get their attention.”

Things were not only different in terms student behavior and classroom management. She was assigned to teach a bilingual class in lieu of the CTT class she taught the previous year. She wrote that this new group of students had “an amazingly competent homeroom teacher for the last three years,” and “as a result, they have pretty thoroughly internalized the basic rules of being respectful.” She would, however, be teaching two students that did not speak any English, and she was not sure how to proceed. In a reference to her experiences from last year, she thought that she may end up “miming a lot, which is infinitely better than shouting.”

There was also a change in the school’s Academic Intervention Services (AIS) program. Instead of having the program afterschool and with her own students, she was assigned a group of first grade students to work with every Monday through Thursday in the mornings before the regular school day started. She was “super excited” about this endeavor as she thought it would be “nice to start the morning with some cute little kids, who hopefully won’t be as difficult as my regular students.” As she had mentioned in her posts at the end of the last year, she had initially wanted to be assigned to teach elementary students when she signed up for Teach For America. Now she was going to get the chance.

Her first science experiment of the year found her coming to a realization about the inequities some of her students faced, specifically her bilingual class. The experiment

was a demonstration in which she asked the students if she could borrow a dollar bill from one of them, set it (seemingly) on fire, then returned the bill unharmed to the student. It was a big hit her first year and she noted that she did it to show her students “the coolness of science.” With all of her classes, getting students to offer up a dollar bill was not an issue, until it came to her bilingual class. Not one student offered up a bill (one did have a quarter) and Ms. E. was also without a dollar bill of her own. Finally, a student hesitantly produced a folded up bill that he had been carrying in his shoe.

He was obviously really nervous about parting with it, so unlike with the other classes, I assured him ahead of time that he would get it back unharmed. I wonder why the students in that class seem to be so much worse off financially than those in the others – I suppose that while almost all of my students are immigrants, the ones in the bilingual class are much more recent. It sucks that the sweetest and most respectful kids are the ones who can’t have the nice things they deserve.

Just as Ms. E. had observed in her final post and summation of her entire first year, she again was struck by just how much “poverty sucks” for her students.

While the bilingual class was breaking her heart, the first graders were in fact stealing it. After working with the students for one day, she wrote that she was “teaching the wrong grade.” She immediately noticed the differences between her middle school students and the first graders. Middle school students would barely make eye contact with her; first graders were fighting over who would be next to hug their teacher. With middle school students, fights would start and not allow her to start a lesson on time; with the first graders lessons would get delayed because a student could not get a jacket off or a sweater over their head.

It was not only the first graders that were feeling affectionate towards Ms. E. She was shocked to find out that her students from last year who “absolutely *hated*” her, loved her this year. Many of the “less-than-lovable alums” told her they wished she was

still their science teacher. To Ms. E., this was akin to being in a parallel universe or something out of the “Twilight Zone.”

It appeared that Ms. E. had taken the advice of her students from the previous year to be stricter with her students, yet this discipline was not without consequences. She reported she had a student threaten to “shank” her when she would not let him go to the bathroom (a few days later he would tell her “shank” meant hug in his “hood”). Another student called her “evil” because of her strict grading policy over notebooks, which actually took as a compliment. She also called a student’s mother about her daughter’s constant talking in class and the mother insisted on coming in the next day to meet with Ms. E., who thought that it being so early in the year the other students may be “intimidated” seeing she was already calling parents. The mother did show up the next day, yet the student decided to skip school. This turned what would have been a minor parent-teacher meeting into a full blown intervention with the student, the mother, Ms. E. and an administrator upon the student’s return. Of this outcome, Ms. E. wrote “I love it.”

These difficult moments with her students were mitigated by what she would refer to as “Aww” moments. One of the “awws” came from one of her former students, who wrote a report for her English class about her favorite teacher – Ms. E.

It was two typed, single-spaced pages about how I am the best teacher ever, and it actually made me cry a little bit. It is my goal to somehow acquire a copy, either from [the student] or from her English teacher, so I can read it every time I have to resist the urge to strangle this new kid who apparently cannot resist his constant desire to grab his crotch, thrust it, and sing the Meow Mix song at the top of his lungs. I am not making this up.

While Ms. E. was in love with working with the first graders and her bilingual class, she wrote that she still was enamored with the charter school she had visited the year before. She even called it her “obsession”, as she was extremely impressed with its

organizational effectiveness and culture of achievement. Part of this continued obsession seemed to stem from procedural issues at her school that would lead to the loss of instructional time.

*Continued Discipline and Racial Issues*

The other part of her obsession was probably related to the fact that her new year honeymoon with limited major discipline problems was over. She had a new student who was causing severe classroom disruptions. She gave an example of an exchange she and the student had after the student moved a file cabinet and tore down a poster in order to get to a bathroom that had been physically blocked so no one could use it. Although she noted her urge was to scream “What the hell is wrong with you?” she suppressed it and calmly asked him to stop. She then wrote how the conversation proceeded:

Student: Stop what? What am I doing?

Ms. E.: Do you see that we have a filing cabinet in front of this door? Do you think that means we ever open it?

Student: Hahaha, what did you say?

Ms. E.: Filing cabinet?

Student: Haha, that’s not a word! That’s a desk!

Ms. E.: No, this is a desk \*she points to desk\* [She noted in retrospect she should not have even engaged that remark]

Student: No, that’s not a desk! That’s a desk! \*he points to filing cabinet\*

Ms. E.: Alright, do you see that we have a piece of furniture in front of it?

Student: Haha, you said it was a filing cabinet! Now you say its furniture! You don’t know what it is!

Ms. E.: \*digging fingernails into her palms\* [Student’s name], you see that the door is blocked, why would you think it was okay to rearrange the classroom?

Student: It was an emergency!

Ms. E.: You just went to the bathroom 15 minutes ago, how could it be an emergency?

Student: I’m not scared of you! I’ll do what I want!

She sent him to the Assistant Principal following the exchange, and the student told her he was not scared of him either. He even threatened that he would behave even worse for her on his return to class the next day. She immediately began the paperwork

process of having him sent back to the self-contained special education classroom from which he came, but she knew the process would be arduous since she had dealt with it before. It was but one more reason for her obsession with charter schools.

She not only had to deal with the bureaucracy of having a disruptive student removed from her classroom to a more suitable environment. Another issue from the previous year was racism, and it again resurfaced due to the action of a student who was already two years behind others of his age group. The school was trying to accelerate a group of these over-aged seventh graders in the hope they could pass the high stakes tests needed to skip a grade level and go straight to high school after seventh grade. Teachers of these students (which included Ms. E.) had an academic and behavioral “tracking sheet” in which they gave a daily numerical grade from 1 to 4 at the end of each class (with a 4 being “perfect” and a 1 being “unacceptable”). The student was fairly disruptive and disrespectful one day and Ms. E. gave him a “2”, which she considered quite generous, on the tracking sheet for his behavior. As a result, she reported “he absolutely flipped out when he saw it and started yelling ‘This is why I hate white teachers! This is why I hate white teachers!’”

Having students call her racist was an identity element she consistently felt was unwarranted, and in fact was the one that frustrated her the most. She felt that “99.9%” of the time it was “their accusation that is racist, not whatever I did.” She continued by stating

It’s not like a black teacher would have given (this student) anything but a low behavior grade after his spectacular display of disrespect today, but because I did it he assumes it’s because I’m white – isn’t that the definition of racism? Argh. Of course, trying to have that rational discussion with him did not go over well at all, because, as he put it (and I’m sure a lot of my students are on the same page), “racism is when a white person does something mean.” I know there’s still a lot of

racism out there and I'm all for calling it out when you see it, but it drives me absolutely insane that my many of my students refuse to learn what it actually means.

While the hating “white teachers” racist comment may have made her feel separate and disconnected from this particular student, she would soon take part in an activity with all of her students (including the one who made the comment) that was meant to build trust, unity, and cooperation. She and her students went on a field trip to a “ropes course,” and while Ms. E. may have been a bit “apprehensive” about doing these team building activities with certain students, she ended up stating that it was “super fun!”

### *No Longer a Battle*

Ms. E. had noted in the past, and once again in this post, that she loved being able to interact with her students “in a not-authoritative way.” During lunch on the day of the field trip, her students were finding a great bit of joy in rolling down a hill. The students begged Ms. E. to roll down the hill with them, and when she did they were “absolutely thrilled” and hugged her telling her “Now you’re one of us! Now you’re with us!”

It was not only building relationships with her students on a personal level that was making the year better for Ms. E. as a teacher. In her next post, she asserted that she no longer was “approaching each class period as a battle.” Her relationship building did not mean that she was letting up on her maintaining stricter control over her students than she had her first year. In her birthday post, which was also the date of the year’s first dance (which she chaperoned), she told the story of a “proud teacher moment” at the dance. A student, whom she had to tell “a hundred times a day” to take off his hood was at the dance. While wearing the hood during the school day was against the dress code, at

the dance the students could wear them as well as hats. The student had his hood on at the dance and when he caught the eye of Ms. E. he instinctively took off his hood without her saying anything. She described this exchange as a “nice birthday present.”

While the “teacher look” that she gave the student at the dance may have worked even when she did not need it to, she still had some students that were in need of much stronger intervention. The student who threatened to “shank” her then threatened to kill her a few days later. While this and some other actions would not allow him to return to the classroom until he had a psychiatric evaluation, she unearthed quite a history of this student and his past actions. She also had another “creepy male student” who seemed to have an obsession with touching her, which she reported to her Assistant Principal. Furthermore, the next day she posted about a field trip that she deemed a “failure” which found her returning to the school in a “generally frazzled state.”

Yet she still felt things were better than her first year, and was able to offer up some second-year teacher advice to a commenter on her blog. The commenter was a first year TFA teacher teaching middle school science, but reported that she was “not doing that well at it.” The commenter loved Ms. E.’s blog, especially its “straightforward humor and voice.” Ms. E. responded to the commenter by writing:

Haha, don’t worry, no one thinks they’re doing well at it in the beginning – you should see what I had to say last September! I promise, just showing up every day means more than you realize...and it gets so much better once you learn to laugh off most of the crazy stuff middle schoolers do.

While she was still showing up everyday Ms. E. acknowledged she still had work to do in terms of maintaining control of the students in her classroom. The first Professional Development day looked promising in that area, but it would not turn out to be the help she needed. Another area she felt she needed some help with was re-teaching

content to students based on data that showed they need remediation. She found out that the charter school she was so enamored with would be hosting its own Professional Development day, and her administration allowed her to attend. Unfortunately, once she arrived she found out the re-teaching session had been canceled, so she spent the day observing classrooms. Even though both of these professional development opportunities failed to help Ms. E. in a meaningful way, she was still recognizing in herself weaknesses she needed to address in order to be the Generalized Other teacher she felt she should become.

There were parents, however, who had a Generalized Other attitude about Ms. E. as a highly competent and inspiring teacher in spite of Ms. E.'s feelings about what she still needed to work on. At a parent-teacher conference day she described a meeting with the mother of one of her students:

...every compliment I gave her kid she turned right back around to me ('she's only doing all her work because *you inspire her*'), and she began and ended by earnestly shaking my hand and telling me how thankful she is that I 'work so hard to teach my daughter.' When she asked me if there was anything she could do to help her daughter, I wanted to ask her to go to a few other kids' houses and start raising them too.

Her latter statement showed how she still felt that the education of her students was a team effort, one that required caring and competent parents as well as students who were caring and competent. Having this support would make her continued development as a teacher much easier.

A couple of weeks later found that just as it had in her first year, playing a review game of Jeopardy made her again post how she "felt like a teacher who has fun with her students, and not like a babysitter who runs after screaming children." That same day also

found that she had a defender in a student, which to Ms. E. was “refreshing”. She described what happened after she told a student to spit out his gum, stating:

...he got nasty with me, saying ‘where do you think we are that you can tell me what to do?’ Before I could respond, his neighbor smacked him upside the head and said ‘she thinks we’re in her classroom, where you shouldn’t be chewing gum in the first place!’

### *Inspired by her Students*

While Ms. E. had a penchant for writing about some of her most challenging students, she still would record a couple of “student profiles” in her second year about some of her most exceptional students. The first profile found Ms. E. describing a student who went above and beyond on every assignment, no matter how small or minor it was. She described her work as always being “awesome”. The student was also “ridiculously nice” and would help her classmates as much as possible and always in a non-condescending manner. She even told Ms. E. she was extremely excited to have found out that she was going to get a microscope and slide kit for Christmas that year. A commenter to the post found it extremely inspiring and wrote:

I applied to TFA this spring and I’ve been reading your blog throughout the application process. I just wanted to let you know that this entry was beautiful and moving. It’s TFA blog entries like these that make me super-excited for the possibility that I might get to work with students like these next year!

While Ms. E.’s blog was inspiring others to join the TFA movement, she for the first time posted that this second year would indeed be her last. Her decision was made public in her first post on her return after the winter break. She recalled that her return to school after break her first year was much more difficult, and she had “spent the last night of the break sitting in my apartment crying at the thought of having to go back for another six months.” Now she informed her readers that her next six months would be her

last as a TFA teacher. She wrote that she could “finally see the light at end of the tunnel.” She even consoled herself by linking to an article that reported recent research that Teach For America corps members generally do not commit themselves “to a life of civic service” after they leave the corps, or how Ms. E. put it “after I’m free.” Because of this she felt she was not a “terrible (or at least, unusual) TFAer.”

Her decision to leave teaching as a “TFAer” in no manner limited the amount of posts she would make over her final six months as a teacher. She was also still learning and becoming enlightened as to who she was as a teacher and how her students perceived her. She gave a mid-January account of a day when she totally lost her voice and had to depend on her students to get through the lessons. It was also a testimony to how she structured her lessons with procedures that students knew to follow without her at the helm. She picked a “loud mouth kid” in each class to lead the lesson, and she never had to tell them what to say or do.

Ms. E. found that her students finally recognized her Generalized Other role as teacher, and even though she was unable to speak they respected her role and could continue in their roles as student without her having to talk. The students she selected to lead the classes even knew enough of what their teacher’s role and attitude was and were able to perform in her stead. And while she still had a bodily presence in the classroom on that day, the next day she needed to stay home to recuperate.

On her return the following day, she at first “almost lost it” when her clipboard on which she kept all of her grades, attendance, and paycheck points was out of place. Yet when she found it she was “pleasantly surprised to find that some student, I don’t know who, had simply gone through and neatly made a note of everyone who was absent for

the day, carefully matching the symbols that I use to take attendance.” Even in her complete absence her students were taking on her responsibilities in an effort to help their teacher and maintain the decorum she had set forth in her classes.

The administration at her school was also recognizing her successes with her students and her ability to be an effective teacher. The school decided to implement midterm exams that year, and the teachers developed cumulative midterms that would be administered under state testing conditions. On the day of the test, she reported her students did “really well.”

I was afraid that they would all fail it miserably, and then all the other teachers would point and laugh at me. The mean and median were both around 70%, and there were only THREE questions that more than 25% of students missed. That means I didn’t totally suck at teaching any one particular thing! My AP even complimented me when he saw my score report, and then asked where I got my questions from. I told him they were from old state exams, and he said, “Good, then they didn’t do so well because it was easy!” I feel so competent.

Her comments show that she still needed to have the approval and respect of her fellow teachers and administrator in order to bolster her self-worth as a teacher. She also felt this approval and respect partially came from how well her students performed on an assessment of the content she had taught. She may have felt competent as a teacher about her students’ performance on the midterm, yet she still had a handful of students that continued to be disruptive and disrespectful in her classes. That was about to change as one day soon after the test she was given what she called “the best news ever,” which would in fact alter her fate with these particular students.

The news was a new program called “7+” in which seventh grade students who had been previously held back would be taken out of their classes and placed into an accelerated program designed to catch them up with their age group. The students would

be taught by the “most veteran teachers (including the AP himself).” The school initially did not think they would be able to implement the program due to budget cuts, but then

Ms. E. reported that

...some money and schedules got moved around, and God smiled down from Heaven and performed a divine miracle, and now the program is happening!! I’m trying not to get too excited because I’ve been burned before by awesome things that are supposed to happen and don’t, but at today’s faculty meeting both the AP and the Principal said it would be happening by the end of the week! Why would they both say it to the whole faculty if it wasn’t a sure thing, right? I really think I need to go sacrifice a lamb or something, because this is the best thing that has ever happened to me at my school...No more scrapping fun lessons and activities for the 27 good students because 3 students are so explosively misbehaving! And I don’t even have to feel guilty about it, because those 15 students are still going to be receiving quality instruction, and are even getting a leg up on their chances of graduating high school!

It was already April of her last year at the school and she was in the midst of planning another trip to her college alma mater. The trip was an overwhelming success the past year, and she wanted a repeat performance. She again reached out to her readers, many of whom made the trip possible by their generous financial contributions or by contributing their time to help manage the events, tours, and meals for those who were involved in the visit.

As noted before, Ms. E. valued her readers and not only sought their assistance with helping to finance the college trip or micro-philanthropic projects, but she also sought their advice (e.g. as she did when her student did not take the test for the summer program). Ms. E. had a fairly consistent group of commenters that included her parents, her sister, friends from college, and the occasional TFA corps member. She also had a fairly frequent commenter who she did not personally know. This commenter was also a blogger and teacher, and when asked if she responded to comments left on her blog, she gave the following response about this particular commenter:

I would get in extended arguments with (this reader/commenter), because he was super pro-union and anti-TFA, and he would leave comments that just infuriated me! I would get really upset about it and then feel stupid because I don't actually know him. I also never understood why he bothered with me and my blog if he was never going to change his mind about anything.

Recall that for Mead (1934) it is “the organized community or social group” which brings forth the Generalized Other (p. 154). Ms. E.’s response in regard to her reaction to this commenter is striking in that it brings to light just who she valued as part of her “organized community or social group” and the commenter was not one of its members. She did not “actually know him”, yet it could have been that because she acknowledged his comments that he felt he was somehow getting through to her, and thus leaving more comments.

Ms. E. did in fact value others in her community (as a teacher and TFA corps member) and had posted as such in the past (with regard to her co-workers, administrators, fellow TFAers, her students, her students’ parents, former classmates, family members, etc.). These were the influential community members that were helping her develop into the Generalized Other teacher she was still in the process of becoming. A voracious blogger, she admittedly did not read a lot of other blogs other than a couple who “seemed to be of a similar mindset” as hers. She also stated that “sometimes I would end up on a non-TFAteacher blog, but usually they were so pro-union and anti-administration that I was put off.”

While she may have felt “put off” by these other blogs and the rabid commenter to her posts, her students were continuing to amaze her with their and their appreciation for the job she was doing as their teacher. She profiled a student whom she called “the sweetest child to ever exist on the Earth.” Ms. E. had continued her paycheck system this

second year, and this particular student, who had amassed quite a lot of points, lost the binder that held all of her paychecks. Because Ms. E. knew she was saving them up for something special, she decided to give this student whatever classroom reward she wanted. She described the exchange that followed:

She said she didn't want anything. I pressed her on it – "Don't you want me to take you out to lunch?" "No, I don't want to waste your money." "Don't you want to watch a movie with me after school?" "No, I know you're really busy and I don't want to make you stay late." "Well, what could I give you as a reward for all your hard work?" "You give me an education every day, that's the best reward I could ask for!"

### *The Best Reward*

The day after she posted this profile, Ms. E. would receive what she may have considered her "best reward" for her students' actions. As a part of her graduate program she had to take a class offered in connection with the local Museum of Natural History. The class was titled "Using the Museum as a Teaching Resource" and she noted it was "definitely the best class" she had taken in the program. The final project for the class was taking her students on a field trip to the museum. She had taken her students on a trip to the same museum last year, but this time, because of the class she was taking, the trip was much better planned and organized. She noticed a striking difference between the two trips.

Towards the end I was approached by a museum staff person, at which point I panicked as I remembered us getting chastised by security guards during last year's less well-planned [museum] trip, but she actually *complimented* me on how engaged my students were with the activity and how well-behaved they were! Never in a million years did I think I would ever see the day where I got a compliment for my students' behavior – it was like being in an episode of *Sliders* where everything is just slightly off from reality.

Reality would unfortunately return to normal a few days later when Ms. E. received the "worst and most kick-in-the-crotch surprise of the day." The "7+" program

which took her most academically and behaviorally challenged students out of her classroom was being disbanded. It had only been a month, yet because of staffing issues the students had to return to their regular classrooms. Ms. E. thought these students returning was “worse than if they had never been taken out.” She jokingly wrote that she should have gotten pregnant in the fall, as had several of her fellow teachers who were now on maternity leave which helped cause the “7+” program to end. She closed the post with a request for one of her readers to come visit “and take a crowbar” to her knee. “Nothing fatal, I just want to be incapacitated for a few months, please.”

Fortunately for her and her students, none of her readers took her up on the request. She was counting the days down to the end of the year again, but she was also counting the days down for the college trip with her students. At the end of many of her posts she would give a “shout out” to her friends and donors who were making the trip possible. The trip was a milestone in her teaching the year before, and she had also reached another milestone, she completed her master’s degree.

Completing her graduate degree was required for her to work in the district where she was employed and to earn her teaching certification (as well as to be a part of Teach For America). Her experience in the program was less than challenging, to say the least. To her, the degree was more of a testament that she had been “conscious for the past two years” than her actually learning anything. She wrote that a telling sign of the academic rigor of the institution was that it had advertisements on the subway encouraging would be students to text them because “u may b eligible 4 financial aid \$.”

This post found her least favorite reader and commenter leaving his opinion and extolling the virtues of the institution where she received her Master’s degree. He had

attended the same college, and was quick to jump to the defense of his alma mater and apologize that she did not learn as much as she “should have.” Just as Ms. E. did not find value in his opinions in the shaping of her teacher-self, neither did she find extreme value in the majority of courses she took in Master’s program. She responded to the commenter that her time would have been better spent over the last two years “observing expert teachers.”

She may not have been able to observe as many expert teachers over her two years of teaching as she had liked, but she herself would be observed for years to come. Her school’s mentor teacher asked her if she would play the part of a “new teacher” in a mentor training video that was produced by the school system. She thought at first the production would be just the two of them in her office with “some guy with a camcorder” but when she showed up at school for the video shoot she found the library “practically transformed into a TV set.”

They had set up all those fancy lights on stands with shiny metallic sheet thingies, several professional-looking cameras, and even had tiny little microphones to pin to the inside of our collars. Fancy! They even made me wear makeup, which those of you who know me know is very unusual. The actual conversation we had was a little awkward, because they didn’t really give us any directions besides “act like it’s your first meeting,” but then every few minutes they would stop us and tell us we were doing it wrong. They even said “cut” and “roll camera 2” and fancy-sounding stuff like that between each take, and kept darting in to pick lint off our sweaters or adjust our hair. I felt like a movie star, especially at the end when they thanked me for my time with a \$20 Staples gift card.

### *Dealing with Tragedy*

While she was still reeling from the release of her acting debut, tragedy struck the school. Over the weekend after her post about the video, two teenagers were shot and killed right at the entrance to the school. One of the young men was even a former student. Ms. E. was appalled at the lack of public response over this tragic event. There

was very limited media coverage, and it gave her pause to consider the value society placed on the youth in her school's neighborhood. Her having been a teacher in this neighborhood and having had personal ties to her students she had given her a new perspective about their lives and a society at large that did not value their worth. She wrote:

...it's just that having had this job for two years it has become very clear to me that there are entire populations within our country that basically don't count. They get completely screwed over from basically the moment they are born, if not conceived. The school system that is supposed to help them secure a better future is largely dysfunctional, and with yet another year of budget cuts and teacher layoffs ahead, it seems unlikely to get better.

In this statement, Ms. E. was coming to terms with her belief that the school system should be a mechanism for her students to rise above the violence and economic suppression they faced daily. Yet because the system itself was dysfunctional, it could not help the students who needed it the most. Her "least favorite commenter" left a remark that he believed she was implying that the school system was "designed to harm your kids." Ms. E. disagreed and responded that she did not feel it was "designed to harm anyone," but that it was "designed to succeed in certain demographics, and my kids aren't one of them."

While it would be her last year, Ms. E. was determined to have her students see their potential beyond the school system and their neighborhood. This drive was a primary reason she implemented the field trip to her college alma mater. She wanted to give her students not only a glimpse into what her life had been like as a college student, but a glimpse into their possible futures. The day before the trip, Ms. E. viewed a documentary entitled "The Lottery" that she had been waiting to see. It was about a charter school and the lottery students from "failing school districts" had to partake in if

they wanted to attend the school. It was no secret that she was obsessed with charter schools, as she had posted about charters as a whole, and Uncommon Schools in particular, several times in the past.

The movie inspired Ms. E. to reflect upon her experiences in an urban, low-income, challenging school environment over the past two years. While she posted that she understood that going to a charter was not a “guarantee of success” for students, she still felt it had advantages over the “antiquated” public education system she had been a part of. She felt her school had been weighed down by a “ridiculous bureaucracy” that did not allow for flexibility to enable students to succeed. She also felt that policies that served to protect adults over children, such as the inability to fire incompetent teachers, were extremely damaging to the students who were impacted by these protections. She noted she was not against the teachers’ union, but felt that they were at least partially responsible for allowing the system as a whole to continue to fail the children her school served. She frustratingly noted the following

...having seen firsthand what happens to the kids who are systematically failed by public schools, I think their parents at least deserve the choice to get their education elsewhere. I would not send my child to the school where I teach, and I don’t think anyone else should have to send their kid to a failing school either. Sorry for the long rant, it’s just hard to see kids everyday who you know are most likely headed to jail (or have already been there), teen pregnancy (we actually have several kids with kids of their own, despite being a K-8 school), and other shitty situations – especially when you know that it has nothing to do with the kids and everything to do with the adults around them. Argh.

She closed the post with the hope that some of her kids could possibly get into a charter high school once they left her school. But in the meantime, the trip to her college was the next day and she again was so excited that she would hardly sleep that night.

*College Visit, Part Two*

After a fairly peaceful three hour bus trip that began early that Saturday morning, the students were greeted with a surprise breakfast of muffins and juice donated by the department where Ms. E. did her undergraduate studies. The department would also be providing lunch that day, but first they treated the students to a cow eye dissection. After watching one of the professors demonstrate how to perform the dissection, each student was given their very own cow eye to dissect. After the dissection, the students were able to keep their paper lab coats, and one student wore his the rest of the day and promised to wear it to school on Monday. It was a remarkable connection back to Ms. E.'s habitual wearing of her lab coat, the grant to buy lab coats for her students, and how they made her students feel more "science-y".

After a lunch of pizza and cookies, the students were able to have a question and answer session with some students at the college, one of whom was from the same part of the city and state as her students. Before heading out to visit robotics and state of the art media labs, the students were treated to goodie bags that contained items donated by every department at the school. Ms. E. noted that it was like Christmas morning, and it made a big impact on the students. They also visited the college bookstore and the gym, but became tired of walking so they retired to an open classroom for a discussion about college life. Ms. E. wrote:

Most of them had no conception of what you have to do to end up at a place like (this college), and were incredulous that you have to do things like pay to take a test and get your teachers to write letters about how awesome you are. I wish I could follow these kids through high school and make sure they take the SATs, write their essays, get their recommendations, order their transcripts... It is hard to do all the paperwork to apply to college when no one in your family even knows what is required. Sigh.

At the end of the day, the students were able to visit Ms. E.'s old dorm. Over her two years teaching, Ms. E. had worked hard to understand the personal lives and situations of her students. This trip gave the students a glimpse into the personal life of their teacher. She felt that it was a "revelation" to the students that she had a life before she met them and outside of being a teacher. There were even some pictures of her still up on her hall's bulletin board. She noted that as they were leaving, she heard a student say, "Just think... every day for four years Ms. E. woke up and walked down these stairs to go to school. Wow."

To Ms. E., this trip was again the highlight of the year. One of the commenters to the post, who was one of Ms. E.'s former teachers, told her that she was "one amazing teacher" (to whom she replied she "learned from the best!"). This acknowledgement, as well as her acknowledgement of all of the volunteers and contributors that helped make the trip a success, was again evidence that in order for her to be the teacher she sought to become, she needed the help of many others.

### *Responding to Comments*

She was counting down the days left in the school year, and the trip marked that she would only be teaching for two more weeks. While there were only two weeks left for her to teach, she posted to her blog on each of these days. There were several posts that stood out as particularly enlightening as to her continued insight into teaching, the plight of her students, her deepening commitment to the TFA organization and mission, and her reflections on her two year teaching experience. These posts would also find her most significant rebuttals to commenters to date as she seemed to hit a few nerves with a couple of her readers.

The first found Ms. E. being highly discouraged about one of her “invisible students” whom she (and each of his other teachers since his being in first grade) felt was desperately in need of special education services. The problem was that his mother would not allow him to receive the services the student needed. He was one of the students who had taken part in the “7+” program offered at her school, but she noted that despite the student “being taught by the most experienced teachers in the school (including the principal and the AP) he didn’t really improve.” Ms. E. wrote that the student was functionally illiterate, and he needed to be moved out of the general education environment to a smaller self-contained special education classroom where he could get the attention he needed.

Ms. E. felt that because of his mother, this student was “totally screwed.” She continued by writing that the student “is unlikely to ever graduate high school or even learn to read past a late elementary school level, and she [the mother] continues to obstruct any attempt to get him into a program that might actually work for him.” She mentioned some other issues she had witnessed where parents obstructed the best interests of their child’s education. She was infuriated with the situation:

I don’t really know where I’m going with this rant, but basically some people are not competent parents, and shouldn’t be allowed to completely screw over their kids’ futures because of their own issues. I know that if parents are making poor medical decisions for their children the hospital is allowed to take control of the child’s treatment, I don’t understand why the same isn’t true for schools. If Jehovah’s Witnesses can’t allow their kids to bleed to death because they don’t believe in blood transfusions, why can people without common sense allow their kids to be doomed to a life of illiteracy, poverty, and probably homelessness and/or prison?

Her questions would find that several commenters agreed with her and felt her post articulated what others had not yet had experienced themselves as teachers. One

commenter, who was another TFA corps member and a fan of Ms. E.'s blog (and who seemingly "let the cat out of the bag" regarding Ms. E.'s future after she left the classroom) commiserated with Ms. E. and offered her own examples of parents who refused to parent and allow teachers and the school to do what is best for their child.

Yet Ms. E.'s stance on special education and her question about parents also drew the ire of her "least favorite commenter" once again. His comment also directly lambasted Ms. E.'s imminent departure from the ranks of teaching at her school. He told Ms. E. that the mother was "right", not in denying her son services, but in distrusting the school. He felt her student was doubly "screwed" by being born poor and with a learning disability. And while he felt the mother was not helping, he questioned Ms. E.'s responsibility for the student and for the mistrust the mother had of the school. Of Ms. E. leaving, he wrote "In and out in two years, that helps builds trust? Yeah right. TFA didn't make poor people's schools unstable...but it helps keep them that way."

Ms. E. was quick to respond with a defense of TFA and herself as well as with a more detailed account of the student's plight. While she agreed with the commenter's claim that Special Education can be a "dumping ground" she did not believe mistrust was the issue with the mother. The student had an older brother who had also attended the school, excelled academically, and was now in college. The mother had trusted the school enough for this older brother to have been successful. Ms. E. felt it was a "classic case of any parent holding a younger sibling to unrealistically high expectations set by an older one."

In terms of TFA causing instability in low income urban schools, Ms. E. was at the ready with statistics to show that the TFA attrition rate was lower than that of

“regular” teachers during their first two years, that almost two-thirds stay in teaching after their commitment (with 44% staying in their placement school), and that those who do leave teaching typically stay in education in another capacity. She closed her response by stating that “TFA may be far from perfect, but the status quo is even further. At least TFA is taking steps to improve it.”

*On Leaving and Staying with TFA*

While Ms. E. may have found herself a statistic in that she would be leaving teaching after her two years, she would also become another TFA statistic because she would be remaining in education. As mentioned earlier, a commenter had “let the cat out of the bag” a few posts back about Ms. E.’s new job. She made the official post during her last week of teaching and she explained to her readers her decision by writing the following:

Even though I have never planned on a career in teaching, around this time last year I was planning on staying at my school for a third year so I could fully take advantage of everything (experience, curriculum, relationships with students and other teachers) I had spent my first year working towards. But when I started teaching again in the fall I wasn’t so sure if I would be up for another year, and then a few months ago I found out that in July I’ll be moving (to another city) for personal reasons. I knew that I didn’t want to start all over at a new school in a new city, but I also knew that I wanted to continue working towards TFA’s mission of educational equity for all children.

After consulting with her Program Director, she applied and was hired to be TFA’s Program Coordinator for an entire region of the country, which meant that she would be the “organizing/scheduling/logistics-ing person.” She thought it would be perfect for her because of her “quasi-OCD obsession with being meticulously planned out in all aspects of my life.” The job was also in the city to where she was moving.

She told her administration about her decision earlier in the year, and they told her they wanted to hire another TFA corps member to fill position, which made her feel “quite flattered.” While she had made the decision months ago, she held off publicly making the announcement “because I wanted to make sure that I remained focused on my teaching and on my students for the rest of the year.”

With the announcement made, she took a day off to go to her new region’s first day of induction. This gave her pause to reflect on her own induction experience, one which she had not blogged about in the past.

I have to say that I was kind of nervous about attending Induction again, given that I was completely overwhelmed and stressed out when I went through it as an incoming CM two years ago. But I am so glad I went, because this time it was awesome! I know this all probably sounds really cheesy, but it was inspiring to meet all of the incoming 2010 CMs and see not only how excited they are about their upcoming mission, but also how well-prepared and committed they are compared to how I was feeling when I was in their shoes.

Ms. E. had indeed come a long way since her induction into the program and over her two years of teaching. Her final post on her last day of teaching found her sad about realizing she would not be seeing certain students again. She was also sad to be leaving the other teachers, especially her fellow TFA science teacher with whom she had worked so closely. She noted that this teacher was a “champion” and would be staying on to teach next year, beyond her two year commitment.

As she had closed the last year with the insight that “poverty sucks”, so did she begin her closing post this year, but with an addendum: “poverty sucks, but it’s not an excuse.” She noted:

There are amazing charter schools that are getting great results with the exact same demographic of kids that are at my school. There are amazing teachers within crappy schools who are achieving success with their students. And there

are even crappy schools that are being turned around by amazing organizations and succeeding with the exact same students they were failing not too long ago.

### *Anger at the System*

And while she may have felt there were pockets of success happening in education, she still had questions that drove her to want to continue to impact the public education forefront. She pondered:

Why is the girl who was caught having sex at school when we were in eighth grade together now raking it in as a Wall Street trader, while the girl caught having sex at the school where I work is now a pregnant eighth grader with a minuscule chance of graduating high school? Why is the kid who excelled at football and was a huge jerk to every student and teacher in my high school now in medical school, while the kid who plays basketball and is a huge jerk to everyone at the school where I work has been to juvie (sic) twice and is likely to end up in jail? Why did I get to go to (her alma mater) and have a world of opportunities opened for me, while (one of her students), who is definitely smarter than me, will be lucky if she makes it to community college?

She noted that when she began teaching she spent most of her time being angry at the students, but now her anger was geared towards the system itself. She was particularly angry at the adults who “have no excuse for letting generation after generation of poor kids get completely screwed over by the educational system that is supposed to be their ticket out of poverty.”

For the past two years, which she claimed were “the most difficult” of her life, Ms. E. had developed a teacher-self and a self as a TFA corps member that while similar, carried unique characteristics. During the course of her blogging, she would acknowledge things as being characteristically TFA and un-TFA. She had been bound by a commitment to become both a corps member and a teacher, and her decision changed her life forever.

Mead (1934) noted that our identification as a self can at times come “only in the completion of the act” (p. 203). He would also contend that individuals “accept certain responsibilities in advance. One makes contracts and promises, and one is bound by them...He must do certain things in order to remain a member of the community” (p. 203). Ms. E. lived up to the commitment she had made as her teacher-self to her school, albeit that self was in a constant state of growth and development during the course of her two years of teaching. It was also a self that was strongly influenced by both the TFA community and the larger community of her school.

While she may have struggled at times, especially in her first year, she ended her two year commitment with a renewed sense of awareness concerning the inequalities she witnessed during her experiences teaching. She would continue to maintain her Generalized Other role as a “TFAer”, yet it was even stronger by having developed a Generalized Other self as a teacher. Next, by her stepping outside of the classroom and beyond the constraints of the community of public education, she was seeking, as Mead (1934) noted, to “reform the order of things” (p. 168). Mead also stated that “we can insist on making the community standards better standards. We are not simply bound by the community” (p. 168).

She closed her final post by stating of her two years teaching that she “wouldn’t trade them for anything. My experience has put a human face on what is perhaps our nation’s greatest injustice, and now I can’t in good conscience walk away.” To her readers she set forth the challenge of “I hope you can’t either.”

CHAPTER 7  
FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This study sought to shed light on the identity development process of a selected group of beginning teachers by the narrative analysis of their blogs about their experiences in the alternative certification program known as Teach For America. The questions this study sought to answer were:

How do the stories in blog postings assist in the understanding of the identity development process of beginning teachers?

- a. What are the teacher identity-oriented stories told by the participants?
- b. What do these stories reveal about the identity development process of these Teach For America teachers?

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 were the stories of the participants which were taken from the blog postings during their two years as beginning teachers and corps members in the Teach For America program. Through the lens of Mead's (1934) social theory of identity and the role of the Generalized Other, the teachers' blog postings were analyzed by following Creswell's (2005) seven steps for conducting narrative research. Via the restorying of their original blog postings, new accounts were co-constructed by the researcher and the participants that detailed aspects of their identity development during their first two years as classroom teachers. The study also drew upon Sfard and Prusak's (2005) Narrative Theory of Identity which equates identity with stories and was also used

for identifying themes based upon the identification of actual and designated identity statements. Along with these initial themes, the research utilized the three-dimensional space approach of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) where personal experiences were examined as well as social interactions. In this chapter the findings of the study will be discussed in further detail to gain a better understanding in how the narrative analysis methodology utilized by this research found answers to the research questions. This chapter will also highlight the themes and revisit the literature reviewed for this study.

### The Identity-Oriented Stories

The first sub question this research sought to answer dealt with discovering the identity-oriented stories told by the participants of the study. In essence, the prior three chapters highlighted these stories. They tell the tales of three teachers who, straight out of college with degrees in areas besides education, found themselves in situations which they were ill-prepared to handle or could have even imagined, particularly in their first year. Each teacher had attended what could be considered highly selective and prestigious institutions of higher learning. Their stories note that joining Teach For America and becoming a teacher was, at least for two of the participants (Ms. A. and Mr. Z.), done on “a whim” and as a “why not?” decision. Because of this lack of interest in teaching as a profession before joining TFA, these teachers offered unique insight in their blogs about their identity development from a perspective that can be said to differ from more traditionally prepared teachers or from individuals who had considered teaching as a profession for a longer period of time. What follows are brief synopses of each participant’s story. A storyboard for each participant’s story can also be found in Appendix B to provide a roadmap of their identity development process.

*The Story of Ms. A.*

Ms. A.'s story was one of severe struggle, tribulation, and small triumphs as she entered into the realities of being a teacher "on a whim". As someone who was not accustomed to failing, she wrote many times about how she felt like a failure, especially when compared to the idealized version of a Teach For America corps member. For Ms. A., teaching was a battle as she endured sexual harassment and even physical assault. She sought to find serenity and balance in her life as she faced the difficulties in the rendering of her teacher-self. She felt that the inability of her students to take on the Generalized Other role of student impeded her from being able to fully assume her Generalized Other teacher-self. She used writing on her blog as therapy, yet at times became overwhelmed with the Sisyphean challenges she faced. She was accused by her students of being racist when she brought up the "achievement gap", and her administration called her into question for making these types of "controversial" statements. She had to deal with what she felt were "real" adult situations and at times felt like crawling back into her "kid world", yet she also came to a realization that she was at a place of privilege over her students when it came to the opportunities afforded to her because of her own family, educational, racial, and financial background.

Ms. A. persevered over the struggles of her first year and found the second to be much improved. As she became more confident in her teacher-self, she found that confidence brought with it a danger to the school's power structure because of her growing ideas and opinions regarding educational issues (which at times ran counter to those of her administration). She felt more closely aligned to her fellow Teach For America corps members as she sought to spark change in the status quo of the school.

She also clung to the mentality of teacher as “subject matter expert” (Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt, 2000, p. 756) mentality and finally reached a point of deciding to leave the school where she taught and TFA in order save her “teacher-soul.” She ended her second year by taking on a new teaching position at what she called a “fancy private school” where she felt there would be more like-minded colleagues and students who would have a stronger desire to learn.

*The Story of Mr. Z.*

Mr. Z.’s story is one of seeking to become a teacher via a “why not?” decision because of his desire to impact social change. His first year was also one of struggle and chaos, yet his hard work over the year would cause his fellow teachers to name him their Teacher of the Year. He struggled with his teacher identity and considered it as having to put up “a front” while he likened teaching to “babysitting.” He also struggled with what he considered to be “un-TFA” feelings which showcased the dichotomy of his teacher-self and his “TFA corps member”-self. He recognized the importance of engaging parents in their child’s education, and questioned school district decisions such as the firing of his principal over accountability issues. He began to take on more leadership roles within his school while even in his first year, but his tendency to overwork led him to the brink of burnout. After the midpoint of his first year he recognized he had hit bottom and there was no place to go “but up.” His posts began to diminish, and while they still found him to be all-consumed with teaching, he began to question if his efforts were enough to ensure his students would be successful on their End of the Course Test (which he sought to be a key indicator of “significant gains”).

Over his two years teaching, Mr. Z.'s Asian American identity at times became an issue with the students he taught, yet he recognized that his background had afforded him with experiences that enhanced his education. He came to the realization that the experiences his own students lacked were the key to their coming to a deeper understanding of content and which could enable them to "truly learn." While his second year saw many improvements over his first, he as well referred to his struggle as Sisyphean in nature. He became more independent in how he measured success, focusing more on "significant impact" than "significant gains." He posted less and less as his second year waned, and he made the decision to leave teaching after the school year was over to enter medical school. However, his Generalized Other self as a teacher followed him to medical school as he continued to question if leaving the "chaotic life" of being a teacher was the correct choice for his life.

*The Story of Ms. E.*

Ms. E.'s story is one of working to instill in her students a conception of her identity as a teacher tied to her identity as a scientist. A neuroscience major in college hired to teach middle school science, Ms. E. wore a lab coat almost every day of her first years as a teacher. She focused on procedures for her students to follow, but consistently found classroom management a weak point. She sought, and received support from her administrators, co-workers, and parents of her students. She even sought the advice from her students on several occasions on what she could do to help them be more successful as students. She faced disillusionment that had her question if becoming a teacher was the right decision, yet found inspiration by being able to visit a charter school from which she garnered ideas that she was able to implement successfully. In her first year, she also

recognized in her identity as a Teach For America corps member “un-TFA” feelings and became conflicted about her TFA identity.

She held on for teacher rebirth, and small triumphs began to happen later in her first year. As a white teacher in a school with predominantly Hispanic and African American students, she had to deal many times with racial issues between her students and with herself as their teacher. She sought to give her students a glimpse into what possibilities were available to them after high school by organizing weekend trips both years for her students to visit her college alma mater. She learned from her experiences teaching at the school that “poverty sucks” but after she finished her second year of teaching she clarified that she did not think poverty was an excuse. Events in her personal life would cause her to leave the school where she taught after her two years were over, yet she accepted a position with Teach For America in the city where she moved. She left teaching with anger at the systems that she felt continue to fail students from situations of poverty. When called to task by a commenter on her blog about her leaving teaching after two years and how TFA helps maintain instability in these poor urban schools, Ms. E. retorted that “TFA may be far from perfect, but the status quo is even further. At least TFA is taking steps to improve it.” She left teaching feeling that her continued role in Teach For America would have her still fighting what she would refer to as “our nation’s greatest injustice.”

### Identity Development Process

The restoried accounts of Ms. A., Mr. Z., and Ms. E. highlighted their journeys into teaching and their development of a teacher-self. Throughout their journeys, each faced struggles and pain, as well as triumphs and epiphanies. The stories that were

garnered from their blog postings provided a unique window into the individual lives and the identity development process of the participants. By their propensity to publicly blog about their experiences, as well as their willingness to take part in this research, these individuals have laid bare to the world what others would consider private and intimate details about themselves as teachers. At times vulnerable, these stories show an honesty and boldness that can rightly be called inspiring and enlightening.

The participants applied for and were selected to partake upon a path that few others would have the courage to undertake. While they admittedly may not have known what they had gotten themselves into, they did complete their commitment to the program which allowed them to partake of the journey. They however did not find within their newly developed teacher-selves the willingness to commit to the profession and continue to teach at their assigned schools beyond their TFA agreement. In terms of the problem of attrition this research addressed, these teachers would not serve to curtail the revolving door of urban school teachers exiting the profession after a few short years. Yet each conveyed an interest in continuing to work towards creating future educators that they hope will carry the mantle of what they consider to be educational change forward in their stead.

While their backgrounds may have held similarities and differences, so did their journeys. While the purpose of this research was not to provide generalizability, a component of narrative research is in the identification and discussion of emergent themes found in the stories of the participants. This next section will address the second sub question, what the stories reveal about the identity development process of the participants, and highlight those themes that emerged within and across the stories of the

three teachers. It will also provide the opportunity to revisit the literature reviewed for this study and discuss if and how this research fits within or adds to the literature relevant to the topic.

### Discussion of Themes

#### *First Year Struggles and Battles*

The most obvious theme to emerge across all three stories was the struggle each of these teachers faced during their first year. For these three teachers, their “institute” experience did not nearly prepare them for the realities they would face once they became the “official” teacher in their classrooms. As noted in the literature reviewed for the study, a goal of first year teachers is primarily to be able to make it to the second year (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Huling-Austin, 1990; Ingersoll, 2003; Murnane, et al., 1991). This was particularly true for the participants in this study. For Ms. A. her first year was a manner of survival. For much of her first year she thought of herself as a failure, in fact stating she had “never failed this badly at anything” in her life.

Classroom management was a huge concern, not only for Ms. A. but for the other participants as well. Mr. Z. noted that classroom management was not his “forte” and Ms. E. felt like a “frazzled babysitter.” Mr. Z. also made mention his first year that he felt like he was babysitting instead of teaching. Early on in his first year, classroom management broke down with one of Mr. Z.’s classes to the point where he kicked the entire class out of the classroom. Later he would admit to his principal that he just lost control and regretted his action. A reflection at the end of the year found Mr. Z. still posting about his classroom management and what he needed to improve upon for the next year. Ms. E. felt her classroom management issues were related to her newness and that students

recognized this aspect of her identity as a teacher. The students would behave for other teachers, just not for her. Even after Ms. E. learned some strategies during the year that would help her better manage her students, she thought the “bad habits” she had already developed impeded her from implementing the new systems.

For all three teachers, teaching oftentimes in their first year was described as a “battle.” Ms. A. also likened it to a “storm.” She especially became extremely battle fatigued during her first year. Stepping into the classroom (i.e. the “eye of the storm”) made her a different person emotionally from whom she had been prior to teaching. She even became physically sick during the year, as she wrote “I’m stressed, burnt out, my energy burnt up, and me a shriveled wasted smoldering mass.” Ms. A. was also the participant that endured sexual harassment and was physically assaulted by her students her first year. Later that year she would liken her struggle to that of Sisyphus (as did Mr. Z.), yet she could not gain satisfaction from the struggle itself. It led her to question her joining Teach For America and becoming a teacher. Exhaustion was also a key descriptor that each participant placed upon themselves that first year. Mr. Z. wrote of being on a cycle that he knew needed to stop. He was not taking care of himself physically or mentally and he questioned if this overachieving mentality was even in the best interest of his students.

All three participants exhibited significant signs of burnout at very early stages in their teaching experience. Byrne (1993) defined teacher burnout as “the inability to function effectively in one’s job as a consequence of prolonged and extensive job-related stress and is considered the final step in a progression of unsuccessful attempts to cope with negative stress conditions” (p. 197). While it could be argued that the participants in

my study had not taught long enough to have endured “prolonged and extensive job-related stress”, they on the other hand did exhibit many “unsuccessful attempts to cope with (the) negative stress conditions” of their jobs. This experience of burnout specifically in beginning teachers was studied by Ayalon (1989). His findings indicated there were several factors that contributed to burnout in the new teachers he studied. A major factor was related to the interactions between the novice teacher and others in the school, stating that “negative experience may lead to high level of emotional and physical exhaustion” (p. 5). Ayalon also found that the nature of the teaching job, including task and skill overload led to high levels of exhaustion and burnout. It is safe to say that for the participants in my study, these were key factors in their emotional and physical well-being, especially during their first year. Of surprise to Ayalon was that having a mentor teacher did not significantly impact burnout in the beginning teachers studied. This support system of mentoring and its impact on Ms. A., Mr. Z., and Ms. E. will now be addressed in the next theme noticed across the participants’ stories.

### *Help-Seeking and Support*

As noted in the literature review, Castro, Kelly and Shih (2010) investigated resilience strategies of beginning teachers. Their research found that “help-seeking” was a particular resilience strategy employed by the new teachers in their study. “Help-seeking” was indeed found to be a theme and employed by the participants in this study as well. Early on Ms. E. solicited the help of her readers and others in gaining resources for her students. She also deeply depended upon the help of a fellow TFA corps member who was also teaching science at her school as well as other such as a college friend who worked for Apple computers who spoke with her students about the importance of

education. Later Ms. E. would rely on not only financial assistance, but the volunteer assistance of former classmates, her co-workers, friends, and her former college to put together two successful college visits for her students to her alma mater. Ms. A. also sought help by bringing in the assistance of Air Force pilots and engineers to come to her class and “mentor students and give lectures about the importance of math and education.” Each participant also sought out the help of their students’ parents in keeping their children involved and engaged in the educational process.

In their study of a university-based alternative certification program, Carter and Keiler (2009) found that “mentorship, administration and leadership, and summer retreats do not adequately prepare and support new teachers.” At the end of his first year of teaching, Mr. Z. thought back to his summer Institute experience and came to the realization that it gave him “zero perspective” as to how his plans would turn out and because of this many of them “crashed and burned.” While Carter and Keiler’s (2009) findings may have been true in terms of the preparedness of the participants of this study to face the challenges of teaching after their summer institute experience, the same cannot be said for the support they received at their schools from mentors and their administrators. Both Ms. E. and Ms. A. wrote several posts about the support they received from their mentor teachers. Ms. E. gave extremely high praise about the support her administration and mentor teacher gave her. She even noted early in her first year that if it was not for this and the support of the other adults in her school, she would not “have lasted this long” Of her mentor teacher, Ms. A. wrote “without her support, guidance and encouragement I don’t know where I’d be.” Ms. A.’s administration was also supportive, yet during her second year when she was feeling much more confident in her teacher-self,

she did begin to recognize that her opinions were not appreciated by her administration if she was not toeing the party line. While he did not mention mentors specifically, Mr. Z. felt he had a supportive and positive principal. After he left teaching, he wrote that he was in a “supportive teaching environment”, the staff, parents and most of the students “appreciated” him. He also noted that “as much as the day to day was a struggle, by the end of my second year, I knew where to improve to make my third year smoother.” Yet, just as found by the Ayalon (1989) study, having supportive mentors teacher did not stop the participants from becoming physically and emotionally burned out.

#### *Decision to Leave Despite Improvement*

Even with the support the participants cited, each still left teaching at their schools after their two year commitment to TFA was over. While a study cited in the literature review (Cogshall, et al., 2010) suggested that beginning Generation Y teachers (which each participant is a member) go into teaching with intentions on remaining in the classroom for more than 10 years, this was not the case for the participants in this study. The only participant to remain a teacher after her commitment to TFA ended was Ms. A. While she left to teach at what she referred to as a “fancy private school”, she in fact left teaching altogether after two years teaching at the private school to attend graduate school and work for TFA.

What is definitely an intriguing finding in this study is that in spite of the struggles and battles these three teachers faced none quit during or after that first tumultuous year (while it did cross the minds of all three). It would not be their first year struggles that drove them away from the classroom. In fact, another theme that was found throughout each of the participants’ stories was that the second year was by far much

better than the first. Transformation for some came later in the first year than others, but it was still an important transition when it happened. To Ms. E. it was the lack of the “pit in her stomach” that she had for most of her first year. For Ms. A., it was the “balance” and “serenity” she was able to find from backing off of her teaching and focusing on the other aspects of her life. Mr. Z. felt his first year was an “observation year” and his students were his “guinea pigs” (an interesting analogy for a pre-med major who a year later would be attending medical school). It is important to also note that even though Mr. Z. felt this way about his first year, his administration and peers felt confident enough in his ability as a teacher to name him the school’s Teacher of the Year.

The argument can be made that in their second year each participant was more satisfied with teaching than they were their first year. If job satisfaction is a key indicator for teacher retention (Hatch, 1999; Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Stobart, Sammons, & Kington, 2006; Cha, 2008), why did these teacher leave teaching at their schools after their second year? For Mr. Z., while he considered teaching a third year, his two-year deferral to medical school was always in the back of his mind. He ended up deciding to leave the classroom for medical school and it was a tough decision to make, one he continued to question as to if it was the right decision. Ms. E. also had made mention of teaching a third year, yet noted she never “planned on a career in teaching.” Once classroom management issues were getting better in the second half of her first year, she did mention that she finally understood “why people stay with this job, and why it’s worth working so hard to get better at it.” She mentioned she would be moving after her second year for “personal reasons” and would not be considering seeking a teaching position in her new city (she stated she did not want to “start all over at a new school in a

new city”). As a neuroscience major, Ms. E. may not have ever planned on a career in teaching, but her experiences teaching in an urban, high needs school via her joining Teach For America led her to apply for and be hired to work for the TFA organization after she left teaching.

While Ms. A. was the only participant to continue to teach (albeit at another school), she did give some insight into what lead her to consider teaching in a different environment. She felt that in a new school she would “actually get to teach math as it was meant to be taught to students who love learning and I know that is my favorite part of my job and that my teacher-soul might burn out and die here before ever reaching enlightenment.” While she felt she was gaining “teacher enlightenment” at a faster pace at her TFA placement school, Ms. A. recognized within herself the need for change in order for her to be able to maintain her “teacher-soul.” Her mention of a “teacher-soul” is an ideal segue into the next large theme that was evident across all of the participant stories, that of their teacher and TFA corps member identity.

#### *Teacher vs. TFA Corps Member Identities*

McCann and Johannessen (2004) noted that “before entering teaching, novice teachers have assumed many roles, son/daughter, student, employee, but the role of teacher is a new one” (p. 139). What made the participants in this research ideal for studying is that each of them had only considered becoming a teacher in their last year of college (which is the norm for the majority of TFA corps members). For Ms. A. the decision to teach was “on a whim” and for Mr. Z. it was a “why not?” decision. In as such, their identity (aka “role”) as a teacher had not begun to be formed throughout their college experience as would a more traditionally prepared teacher. Therefore, their

narratives chronicle their identity process from an extremely early point in its development.

Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2002) found that “being a teacher is a matter of the teacher being seen as a teacher by himself or herself and by others; it is a matter of arguing and then redefining an identity that is socially legitimated” (p. 113). The concept of differing roles and a socially legitimated self are both akin to Mead’s (1934) Generalized Other concept and Social Theory of Identity through which the participants’ stories were analyzed in the restorying process of this study. Also recall from the literature review that the “major difficulty that beginning teachers face is the challenge to define for themselves their *teacher persona*” (McCann and Johannessen, 2004, p. 139). This challenge to define this “teacher persona” was indeed found in the participants of this study as well. This persona, or even more so their Teach For America corps member persona, was challenged due to the conflicts that arose between the two identities (aka “roles”) the participants held as a TFA corps member and that of a teacher.

Holding these similar, yet different identities at the same time is not unique, as Aboulafia (1986) pointed out. What served to provide evidence of these different and at times competing roles was in how each participant made references to situations which found them experiencing “un-TFA” feelings. For example, when Ms. E. found out that she would be losing some of her most challenging students she wrote “I know this is very un-TFA of me, but I am *so happy!*” Mr. Z. made a very similar comment about his feelings when certain students were absent from his class, stating that a part of him felt “better when kids don’t show up to class because it means I can focus more of my attention on the now small group of kids who are in the class (very un-TFA of me...I

know...but I can't help it)." For Ms. A., not exhibiting idealized TFA behavior was a resilience strategy (Castro, et al., 2010). In fact, it was actually more of a survival mechanism, stating that "this is not TFA, but to kind of give up, to put myself first, and to shrug internally when they go crazy has been necessary to maintain sanity."

It is clear from these comments that the participants held concepts as to what TFA behavior should and should not be. In other words, their TFA identity was being challenged by the taking on of attitudes that as a teacher were different from the idealized Generalized Other Teach For America corps member. Mr. Z. realized he could not live up to this idealized TFA self and even cautioned a future corps member against trying to live up to the expectations to be the "best". He wrote that he cautioned this person by telling him the people TFA highlights are the "ultimate goal and vision" for them all, but that "not everyone can be the best."

Many of these "un-TFA" comments stemmed from student behavior that was disruptive and unacceptable. Student behavior was indeed a key factor in the identity development process of all three participants. In order for the participants to view themselves as teachers, they were in need of their students to also view and respect them as teachers. They had to have their teacher-self accepted by the students. For Ms. A., she felt she did not have the "skill or the time" required to take on the attitude and role Teach For America was telling her she should. She noted that "thinking that I should be controlling all of these factors and failing makes me miserable and crazy." As noted throughout this study, for Mead (1934) the self is a "social self, it is a self that is realized in its relationship to others. It must be recognized by others to have the very values which we want to have belong to it" (p. 204). The "others" in many cases were the students who

were not recognizing their teachers as having the values which the teachers wanted ascribed to their identity.

The teachers also needed to be able to recognize in their students the Generalized Other attitudes and values that they as teachers felt their students should convey. When the students were engaged and involved in the classroom that was when the participants felt like “actual teachers.” Ms. E. described a successful day by stating that “the best part of the day was that it made me feel like an actual teacher, not just a crazy lady who screams at twelve-year-olds all day.” This statement is not only revealing about how the attitudes students held towards learning impacted Ms. E.’s perception of herself as a teacher, it again brought forth the theme that was earlier noted regarding the unpreparedness of the participants to teach in their first year.

#### *Focus on Test Scores*

The participants also noted aspects in their teaching that they considered to be “very TFA.” A theme that arose in this regard was related to how they perceived themselves in relation to how well their students performed on tests. For example, Ms. A. described the elation she found when her students did well on a test over logarithms. Ms. E. would post a similar comment related to the TFA 80% mastery rate on a unit test. Mr. Z. was also holding his students to the TFA goal of an 80% mastery rate, but his students were not fairing so well. Their poor results made him feel ineffective, and he wrote “I’m still giving it my best shot. I know I’m not an effective teacher right now, and that is so, so frustrating.” Each of the participants placed a great deal of weight on the performance of their students on tests, especially high stakes tests. This theme of tying ones identity and judging ones effectiveness as a beginning teacher with test scores was not one that

was addressed in the literature reviewed for this study and one that warranted further research.

Returning to the literature I discovered three case studies (Assaf, 2008; Rex & Nelson, 2004; Upadhyay, 2009) that investigated the concept of teacher identity with the current focus on high-stakes testing that is prevalent in public k12 education. Upadhyay (2009) found that while the teacher he studied complied with what her administrators required in her teaching, she did not sacrifice her personal values or beliefs. The teacher in this study was not a beginning teacher (having taught at the school for six years at the time of the study), thus her ability to retain and negotiate teaching practices via the taking of “measured risks” (Upadhyay, 2009, p. 583) is bolder than what the participants in my research would have been willing do their first year. The participants in my study did, however, show more of a propensity to take such risks as they became more stable in their selves as teachers during their second year. The second case study (Assaf, 2008) highlighted that the pressures of high stakes testing can cause even veteran teachers to turn their backs on who they believed themselves to be as teachers. The teacher in this case study felt at odds between her own professional beliefs and experiences and with complying with testing policies. It indicates that the realities of this testing culture are such that new teachers like the participants in my study (Ms. A., Mr. Z., and Ms. E) must contend with and accept as part of their initial teacher identity development. The third study’s (Rex & Nelson, 2004) findings were similar to those of Upadhyay and showed that the teachers “relegated competing pressures of subject matter standards and test preparation to a secondary position when confronted by the ethical and professional

challenges of doing what they thought was best for their students” (Rex & Nelson, 2004, p. 1289).

Another study by Crocco and Costigan (2006), while not focused on identity, sought to determine the effects of high-stakes testing on teachers in the state of New York. Their findings assert that there is an emotional toll on teachers because of state mandated testing. Crocco and Costigan suggest that, among other things, the focus of high stakes testing is causing good teachers to leave the profession because of the stress put upon them by the mandates of high-stakes testing. It begs the question if a contributor to the burnout found in the participants in my study was impart due to the stress these tests placed upon them?

Returning to the Rex and Nelson (2004) study, one teacher in the study is of particular interest. Not only did this teacher feel the pressures of test preparation, he believed that being a white teacher in a black-dominant school culture was a challenge. While not a beginning teacher at the time of the study (he was in his third year at the school and had taught before), this teacher felt his racial identity made it hard for his students to trust him, and he felt “shut out when students tell him he can’t possibly understand them because he is the wrong color” (p. 1307). This is similar to the next theme found across the stories of Ms. A., Mr. Z., and Ms. E.

#### *Racial and Ethnic Issues*

Another theme was related to racial and ethnic issues that arose for each participant. It should be noted that these teachers taught in environments where they were each in the racial minority. For Mr. Z. the issues he faced were related to prejudiced attitudes about his Asian American heritage. Even while at Institute training he posted

about an incident that occurred on his first day with students. He admitted that while he “expected to face these encounters over these two years, I really wasn’t expecting it to be on day negative 1 of teaching.” While he may have expected this type of behavior, throughout his first year he posted several times about prejudicial comments concerning his ethnicity. It did not only come from the students either. One incident he wrote about was a conversation between himself and a visitor to the school who was a member of an accrediting team.

As put forth by Ng, Lee, and Pak (2007), Asian Americans in k12 and higher education “are cast outside the peripheries of normalcy.” They cite that only 1% to 1.2% of all k12 teachers across the country are Asian American. Having such “invisibility” in the teaching profession fosters a “Black/White framework of society” (p. 108). Ng, Lee, and Pak also note that “perceptions of Asian Americans as foreigners and the model minority curtail genuine progress (p. 109). While Mr. Z. may have felt uncomfortable with the varied situations that occurred where his racial and ethnic identity gave rise to prejudicial comments and actions, the other two participants were accused by their students and even the students’ parents of being racist.

Ms. A. and Ms. E. were both white teachers teaching in predominantly African American and Hispanic schools. Ms. E. felt her students had a misconception of race and what should be considered racist behavior. Of her own race and ethnicity, one student told her “don’t lie, Ms. E., you’re not Jewish. You’re white!” She stated several times that she believed her students felt that “racism is when a white person does something mean” or that the students “don’t like.” Incidents where she had to discipline students occurred and at many times the students’ reaction consisted of accusing their teacher of

being a racist and being called a racist was something that frustrated Ms. E. the most. She reported an incident where she had given a student a low daily discipline grade and the student “flipped out” and yelled ‘This is why I hate white teachers! This is why I hate white teachers!’”

For Ms. A. charges of racism occurred when she brought up the “achievement gap” with one of her classes. The students misconstrued her remarks and went home and told their parents that Ms. A. had said Hispanic and black students were stupid. The parents in turn called the school and accused Ms. A. of being racist. She wrote of the account with her principal over the incident stating that he himself did not feel she was racist but he “got the impression, however, that I thought the high school was ‘ghetto’.”

Lawrence and Tatum (2011) contend that the majority of White k12 teachers in the United States “have had little exposure to a type of education in which the impact of race on classroom practice” has been examined (p. 1). With the limited preparatory experience offered by the Teach For America Institute, the same could be said of Ms. E. and Ms. A. (and Mr. Z. as well). Lawrence and Tatum’s work with teacher education students is guided by Helms’ (1995) White racial identity development model “which characterize a White individual’s pattern of responding to racial situations in his or her environment” (Lawrence & Tatum, 2011, p. 2). The authors believe that the “ideology of White racial superiority is so deeply embedded in our culture, the process of “unlearning racism” is a journey we need to continue throughout our lives (p. 3). Their work with pre-service, beginning, and veteran teachers has led them to assert that White teachers benefit from anti-racist courses built upon pedagogical and psychological

theories, which is not noted in the blog postings of Ms. E. or Ms. A. as something they took part in.

Sheets (2000) would argue that there is “no data to substantiate a causal relationship between White racial identity development and teacher competency in culturally diverse classrooms or in segregated classrooms” (p. 16). Sheets’ fear is that scholars such as Lawrence and Tatum “may be reducing critical cultural and human development constructs, present in the complex learning-teaching process, to a White teacher identity issue. Dee’s study (2005) produced findings that showed students taught by teachers of the same race do better academically than those taught by a different race, thus indicating that there should be continued efforts to recruit underrepresented teachers. However, Dee noted that improving the effectiveness of all teachers should be a goal, but that policies should take into consideration “the underlying structural mechanisms that make these student-teacher interactions relevant in the first place” (p. 164).

All three participants in this research were from backgrounds that by the standards of the students they taught would be considered privileged. Just as they were not as prepared by the Teach For America institute to face the challenges related to classroom management, organization, and student behavior, their postings suggest that they were also not prepared to handle racially sensitive issues and how their students perceived them racially.

### *Blogging Benefits*

At the end of her first year, Ms. A. made a remarkable comment about the affordances Teach For America corps members have over their students.

My students often ask why I became a teacher if I had such amazing grades and had the opportunity to go to Ivy League Law Schools. I tell them it’s because I

care but the truth is that most of us will move on to something bigger and better than our one tiny, overcrowded, hot dirty classroom. I think most of us will take the stories with us and it will change what we do, but we can move back easily into the rich, white world where most of us came from.

Ms. A. did indeed move back into the “rich, white world” from whence she came, but the stories she mentioned did not solely remain with her. By blogging about her experiences, the stories she and the other participants shared via their blogs opened up a window into their worlds for countless others to read.

The act of blogging was not new to any of the participants as each had blogged before starting their Teach For Us blog. Surprisingly, each had similar reasons for blogging and found similar benefits. While studies in the literature review (Luehmann, 2008; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008) found that blogging enhanced professional learning and identity development, the participants in this study found blogging primarily to be a beneficial means of reflection and expression that helped them deal with their struggles in the classroom. The practice of blogging alone, however, was not shown to have had a large impact on their identity development process.

Ms. A. wrote that she blogged because she would “get overwhelmed with teaching and expressing those frustrations seemed healthy.” She noted that “reaching out to the world made the difficulties easier to deal with. I would get encouragement from strangers which meant a lot. Someone knew what I was going through.” Mr. Z. stated that blogging was a “cathartic-like process to be able to express my opinions” He also described how blogging helped him through his first year and because things were better during his second year, he did not blog as much (which he later regretted). Ms. E. stated blogging helped her “blow off steam at the end of the day, which I guess was good for my overall mental health and therefore ability to come in to work each day.” She also

reflected on the public nature of blogging and the cautions one should take when publishing private information in a public arena. Her advice to other bloggers is that they should “be careful about what they write (no student or colleague real names or pictures, no crazy rants...) because you never know who is reading, and once you put something on the Internet it is basically a matter of public record forever.”

Ms. E.’s comments are reflective of what Ray & Hocutt (2006) recommend in their study of teacher-bloggers. In fact, each of the bloggers took care to anonymize themselves, their students, and their schools via the use of pseudonyms. Mr. Z. had learned the hard way about posting too much personal information. He wrote that in high school he kept a blog that was pretty much an open diary and it got him into trouble with friends. Even with the use of pseudonyms, Ms. A. had a student discover her blog and so she decided to password protect several of her posts. Placing their personal stories for the world to view may have been “cathartic” and a stress reliever, yet as Ms. A. noted, it was not without risk and was itself at times a stress inducer. Ms. E., because of the social nature of the blog that allowed for comments, had to deal with a commenter who on multiple occasions felt the need to engage her in debates about the Teach For America organization and on her own teaching practices. Of this commenter, and of the others who would leave comments on her blog, she wrote

...I would get really upset about it and then feel stupid because I don't actually know him. I also never understood why he bothered with me and my blog if he was never going to change his mind about anything. But most comments were positive, and I tried to thank people for their support and encouragement, because it really did mean a lot to me.

Each blogger received many supportive and encouraging comments from readers of their blogs over their two years of postings. Due to the nature of the “Teach For Us” site, the

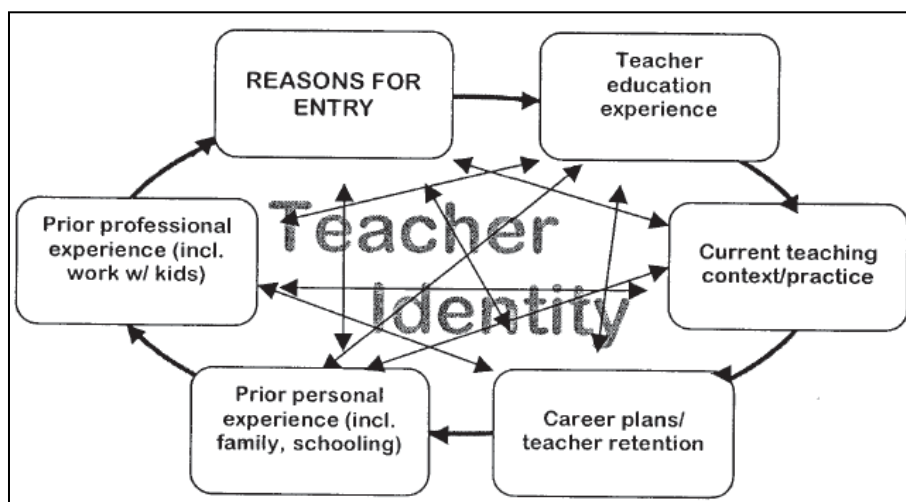
participants also received comments from future or current TFA corps members who claimed to be inspired by their postings.

### The Teacher Identity Process Models Revisited

I returned to the literature review to investigate how several of the models for researching the identity development for teachers may be ascribed to the participants in this research. Recall the Olsen (2008) model (see Figure 6) which highlighted “reasons for entry” into teaching as a doorway to study teacher identity. The participants of this research had no “teacher education experience”, “prior professional experience”, and no definite “career plans.” Their “reasons for entry” were also hard to determine solely from their blog postings, and while sometimes alluded to, their “prior personal experiences” were not primarily the focus of their stories. This left me entering into their identity development via their “current teaching context/practice (See Figure 7).

*Figure 6*

Teacher Identity as Dynamic, Holistic Interaction among Multiple Parts.



*Figure 6.* From “How reasons for entry into the profession illuminate teacher identity development” by B.Olsen, 2008, *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 35, p. 25.

Figure 7

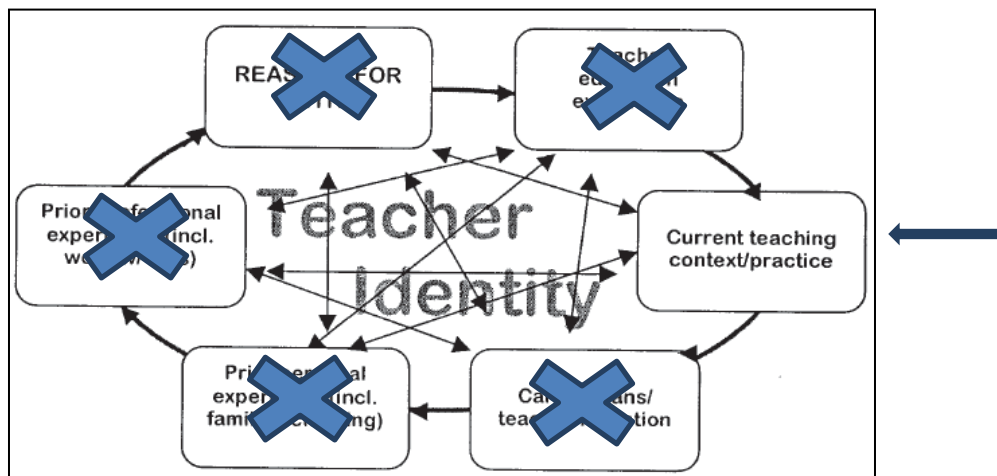


Figure 7. Author modified from Olsen (2008) showing entry into identity development process of participants via their current teaching context/practice.

This entry point allowed access into their identities via the stories in their blogs, since their stories primarily dealt with their current teaching practice. In future research, the “teacher education experience” entry point of the Olsen (2008) model could be substituted by their Institute experience (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

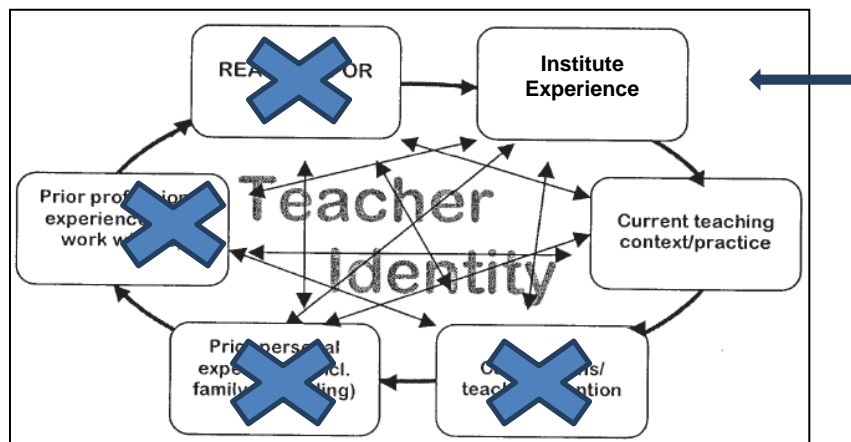


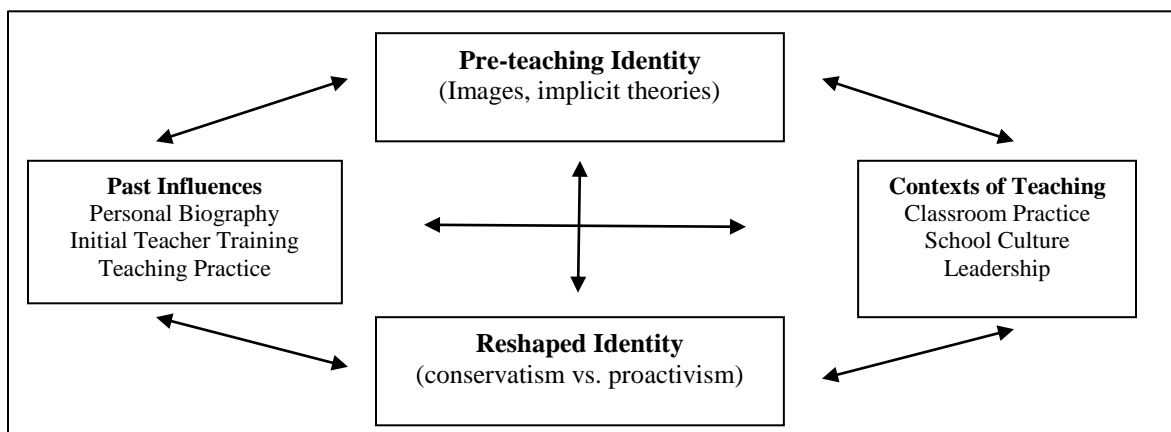
Figure 8. Author modified from Olsen (2008) showing possible entry into identity development process of participants via their Institute experience.

In fact, if the Institute experience was brought into the model and focused upon in future research, it could be further investigated as the likely incubator for the birth of their TFA identity which was impacted by their current teaching practices. For example, when the participants admit to “un-TFA” feelings, a greater understanding of how they came to hold these TFA feelings could be investigated via the blog postings they created during their Institute experience.

The Flores and Day (2006) model was also revisited (see Figure 9). This model was created from research which found that identities of new teachers have been “strongly personally embedded at the beginning of their teaching careers, but destabilized by the negative school contexts and cultures in which they worked” (p. 230). Flores and Day also found that the pre-service teacher education program experienced by the participants in their study had a “relatively weak impact upon the way in which new

*Figure 9*

Key Mediating Influences on the Formation of Teacher Identity.



*Figure 9.* From “Contexts Which Shape and Reshape New Teachers’ Identities: A Multi-Perspective Study” by M. A Flores & C. Day, 2006, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22, p. 230.

teachers approached teaching and viewed themselves as teachers” (p. 224). While the same could be said of the somewhat weak impact of the TFA Institute experience on Ms. A., Mr. Z. and Ms. E. in terms of how they approached teaching, the Institute experience did however greatly impact how they viewed themselves as who they were as TFA Corps Members and who they should become. Again, by substituting the “Initial Teacher Training” with the TFA Institute as well as the “Pre-teaching Identity” with that of the Idealized TFA Corps Member Identity, this model could be used to more closely depict the identity development process of the participants in my study (see Figure 10).

Figure 10

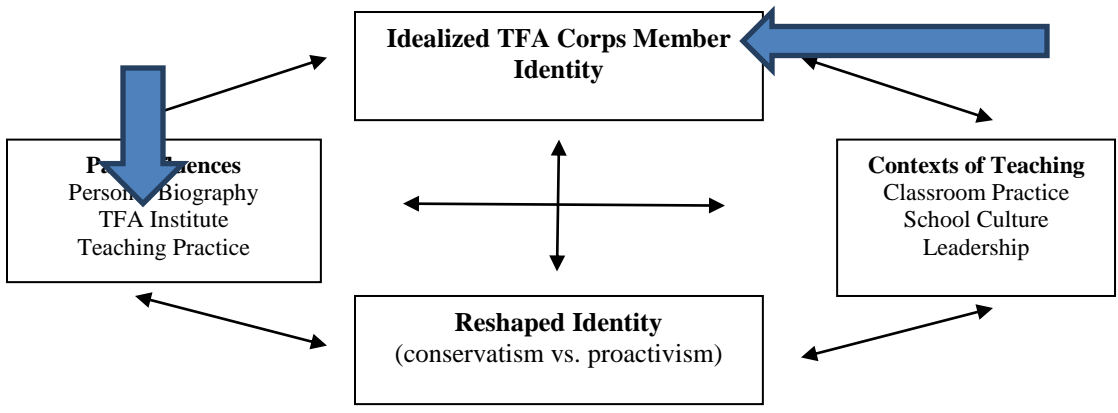


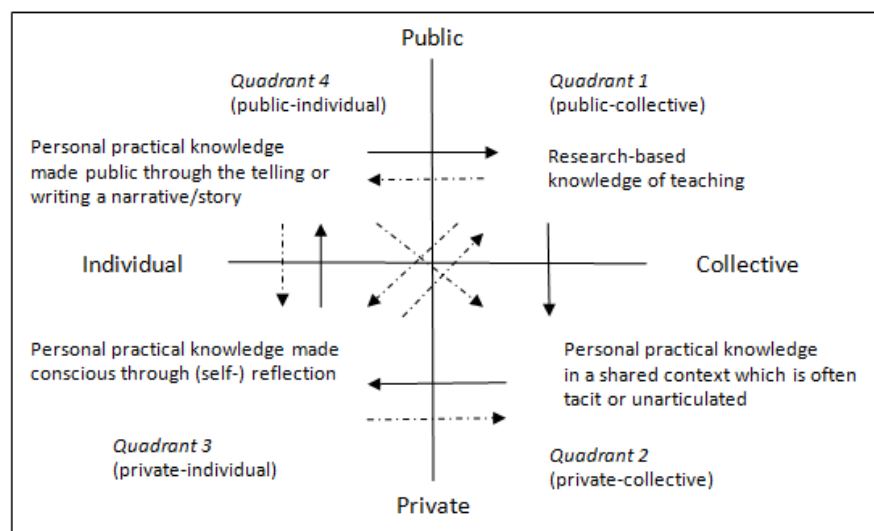
Figure 10. Author modified from Flores & Day (2006) showing depiction of identity development process of Teach For America participants of this study.



The third model revisited was that of Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2002) which highlights the ongoing process of teacher identity development by the passage through four quadrants (see Figure 11). With respect to the participants in my study, their stories indicate that they entered teaching with an extremely limited research-based knowledge of teaching (see Figure 12). Ms. A. and Ms. E. were required to take Masters level courses in education and may have, through these courses, been exposed to research that helped to shape their professional practices and subsequently their identities as teachers (although both did not speak highly of the courses or the Masters programs in which they were involved). It could be argued that this research-based knowledge was essentially non-existent in that it was not present in their postings when they began teaching.

*Figure 11*

Representation of Professional Identity Formation from a Teacher's Knowledge Perspective.



*Figure 11.* From “Reconsidering Research on Teachers’ Professional Identity” by D. Beijaard, P.C. Meijer, & N. Verloop, 2002, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, p. 124.

Figure 12

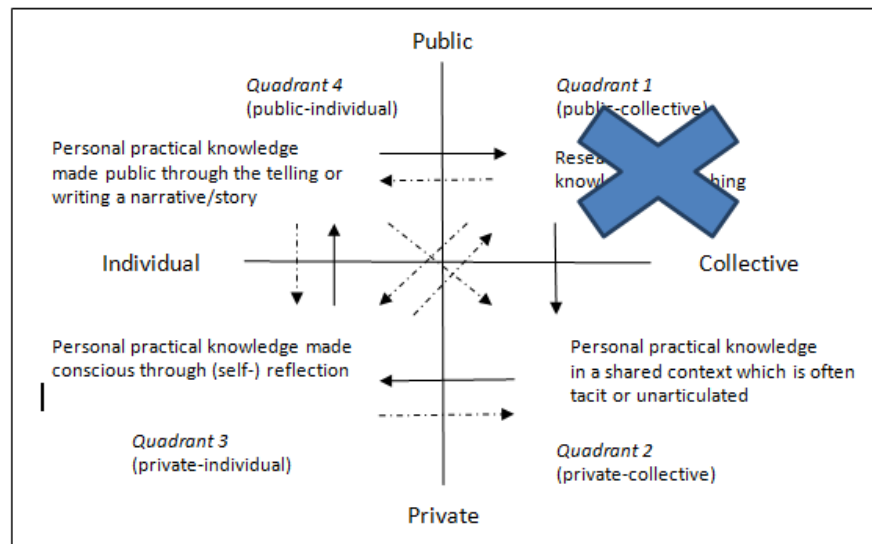


Figure 12. Author modified from Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop (2002), showing participants' lack of a research-based knowledge of teaching.

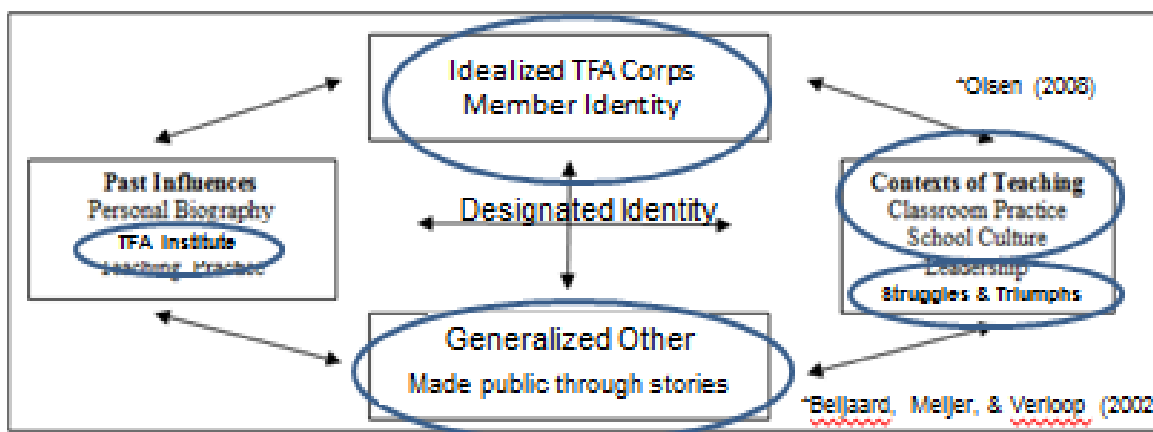
### A Revised Model

As shown, the models relied upon in the literature reviewed for this research proved to be insufficient in fully being able to reflect studying the identity development process of the participants in this research. This in part could be due to the models being built upon studies involving more traditionally prepared teachers. In light of this, the Flores and Day (2006) model has been revised which also includes aspects of the Olsen (2008) and the Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2002) models. This revised model emphasizes the participants' Idealized TFA Corps Member Identity in place of Flores and Day's "Pre-Teaching Identity". The participant's Designated Identity serves as the bridge between the four quadrants of the model. The participant's Generalized Other Identity replaces the Flores and Day "Reshaped Identity" and is made public from the telling of stories, as in the Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop (2002) model. The "TFA Institute"

experience is included in the “Past Experiences” quadrant and the participant’s “Struggles and Triumphs” are included as a part of their “Contexts of Teaching.” While this revised model is not meant to imply generalizability to a larger population, it is offered as a means of representation of the identity development process of these specific individuals, individuals who partook upon the non-traditional path of Teach For America in their quest to become a teacher.

*Figure 13*

A Revised Model



*Figure 13. Revised From “Contexts Which Shape and Reshape New Teachers’ Identities: A Multi-Perspective Study” by M. A Flores & C. Day, 2006, Teaching and Teacher Education, 22, p. 230 Including aspects of the Olsen (2008) and the Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2002) models.*

### Study Contributions

The overarching question for this study was “how do the stories in blog postings assist in the understanding of the identity development process of beginning teachers?” For the three participants in this study, the stories they provided in their postings over their first two years as classroom teachers provided their readers and this research with a unique window into their daily lives. From their first days in the classroom to their departure from the schools they were assigned, these teachers chronicled events that shaped who they would become as teachers. Their postings were filled with former, actual, and designated identity statements told as first-person, self-told stories. Each of the participants’ blogs focused primarily on stories related to their teaching and their membership in the Teach For America program.

None of the participants had considered going into teaching prior to joining TFA. Because of this, and the reverse chronological nature of blogging, their postings on the “Teach For Us” site chronicled over time their identity development process from a unique perspective. Just as interviews, oral histories, anecdotes, personal and reflective journals, biographies, autobiographies, critical events, and case studies have been used to hear and understand the voices and lives of teachers (Butt, et al., 1992; Cole & Knowles, 2000; Cortazzi, 1993; Knowles, 1992; Nelson, 1992; Webster & Mertova, 2007), the blogs of the participants in this study offered these teachers a means to reflect upon and share their experiences. From admissions of failure, second thoughts about joining TFA, and major issues with classroom management, to learning from their students, small triumphs, and the decision to leave TFA; the participants provided stories in an honest

and upfront manner which gave their readers insight into the experiences, thoughts, and feelings that shaped who they were becoming as teachers.

While the participants did not impact the attrition problem facing American public education, the study does provide some interesting contributions to the areas of research on teacher identity development, factors related to retention, and the role that Web 2.0 technologies such as blogging can play in conducting research on beginning teachers. Each of the participants felt unprepared to begin to teach independently after having only attended the Teach For America summer Institute training. It took each of the teachers almost their entire first year to become acclimated to the teaching environment and to manage control of the classrooms. Given that they left teaching after their second year (which was a much more productive year for each of these teachers) it could be said that the Teach For America program only provided what could be considered an effective teacher for one of the two years that these teachers committed to teach. The results from this study should be able to provide programs such as Teach For America with support for additional research needed to help make their programs more effective in supporting beginning teachers and keeping effective teachers in the classroom for longer periods of time.

This study highlighted the importance of the social group on the identity development process of beginning teachers. With that said, the study found that the teachers felt they received the support needed once they began teaching, but due to their inexperience they still faced challenges and struggles. Two of the participants felt that they would have benefited from being able to observe more experienced teachers, and that these types of experiences would have been much more effective in helping them

evolve into better teachers than their mandatory Master's degree program had been. The study also highlighted the importance of maintaining student behavior and the ability to manage a classroom as key factors that impeded the development of a teacher identity for the participants.

This study proved that a Web 2.0 technology like blogging can provide researchers with personal insights and perspectives on the issues impacting beginning teachers that were not as easily accessible prior to the availability of this still relatively new innovation. The research also found that the participants benefited from the act of blogging in helping them deal with the challenges they faced, yet that blogging itself can be challenging in light of the public nature of the forum.

#### Future Research

As the participants in this study did not impact the attrition problem facing America's schools, it would be interesting to study Teach For America corps members who do decide to teach beyond their contractual two year period. The participants indicated that there were other TFA teachers in their cohort groups who would continue teaching in their assigned schools. It would be of interest to try to understand what conditions impacted these "stayers". Since this study found that the struggles of the first year greatly diminished for the participants as compared to the second year, it would also be interesting to study if the third year and beyond continued this trend.

Another interesting follow-up study could involve following the teaching career of Ms. A. as she journeyed from a high needs, urban district to what she called a "fancy private school." In our email correspondence Ms. A. indicated that things did not get better for her as a teacher after she left, they in fact worsened. While the challenges she

faced at the private school were different from the types of challenges she faced in her TFA assignment, she did implicate that the identity she developed as an urban high school teacher who had been influenced by what she called “drinking the TFA koolaid” impacted her career at this private school. She in fact continued to blog about the two years at the private school, her decision to leave the classroom, to return to work for Teach For America, and to work towards a Ph.D. in math education.

Since this study only drew from participants in Teach For America blogging on the Teach For Us blog site, it would also be of interest to study other beginning teacher-bloggers who take part in other alternative certification programs, as well as beginning teachers in traditional programs, and their identity development process of their first two years in the classroom. It would also be of interest to expand the population and study teachers in non-urban high needs settings, including Teach For America participants and other programs as well.

As implicated in the findings of this research, yet not in the literature initially reviewed, these teachers placed a great deal of weight in terms of their students’ performance on high stakes tests. This in turn impacted their perspective on their effectiveness and identity as a teacher. It would be of interest to further investigate this phenomenon to determine how this focus on testing is impacting the identity development of other beginning teachers who have taken part in traditional and other alternative certification programs. Also of interest would be a further investigation in the role of race in the identity development process of beginning teachers teaching in urban, high needs schools.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the identity development process of a purposively selected group of participants blogging about their experiences becoming teachers in the Teach For America program. Via the narrative analysis of their blogs, the study answered the following questions:

How do the stories in blog postings assist in the understanding of the identity development process of beginning teachers?

- a. What are the teacher identity-oriented stories told by the participants?
- b. What do these stories reveal about the identity development process of these Teach For America teachers?

By following Creswell's (2005) seven steps for conducting narrative research, the restoried accounts of the three participants in this study highlighted the stories from which their identity development was analyzed through lenses of Sfard and Prusak's (2005) narrative theory of identity and Mead's (1934) social theory of identity and the role of the "Generalized Other." While this research is not meant to offer generalizability to a larger group, the individual stories of the participants provide a window into the unique accounts of these beginning teachers who blogged about their experiences.

Several themes were found within and across the stories, including the struggles the teachers faced their first year, the transformation into a much more experienced and "in control" teacher during their second year, the conflicts between their Teach For America corps member identity and their teacher identity, the impact of high stakes testing and racial issues on their identity development, and the cathartic nature of blogging for each of the participants. Contributions of the study include additional

insights into the areas of research on teacher identity development, and the role that Web 2.0 technologies such as blogging can play in conducting research on beginning teachers. Areas for future research were identified which included researching TFA teachers who decide to stay teaching in their assigned schools after their commitment is over, further analysis of one of the participants journey into teaching after leaving Teach For America, studying the identity development process of beginning teachers in traditional and non-TFA alternative preparation programs, as well as investigating the roles that high stakes testing and racial factors play in the identity development process of beginning teachers.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Coding Example

First day! | Sept 2, 2008

185 posts year one

### First day!

Today was my first day of teaching. Yesterday I was just a little bit freaked out that this event would somehow result in my death, so since I am still alive I guess I can't complain. It definitely could have been worse, but it was still pretty rough. The first class I had went pretty well, but in retrospect I realize that it's because their (very experienced, very in-control) homeroom teacher was in the back of the room the whole time and they were behaving for her benefit, not mine. The other three classes never did anything \*bad\* in the sense of fighting, yelling, or being disrespectful – they just were very excited to catch up with each other about their summers, and saw no reason to pay attention to the person in the front of the room trying to get their attention. I saw them all behave for other teachers so I know they're capable of it, I think it's just very obvious that I'm new and nervous. Also, one of them asked me, "Are you our teacher? Because you look 15, and I thought teachers had to be at least 18."

About the only thing I got done with them today were these "All About You" student surveys. I got some interesting responses to a few of the questions:

*What language(s) do you speak at home?*

- Normal.

*How do you feel about science? Why?*

- Weird because you see things in animals.
- I feel that science is people saying big words.

*What would you like to learn about this year in science class?*

- About your bodys.
- Molocules.
- To open a frogs body.
- How to do xsperaments.
- I will like to learn how to be creative.
- How to make your lungs healthy.
- I would really like to learn about nothing important in science this year.
- How to make energy. [I would like to know that too!]
- Ectoplasm.
- What happen with energy if it doesn't work.
- Well I don't know.
- Everything possible in the world.

*What do you want to be when you grow up? Why?*

- A vet because I love animals and would try to my power to help them be on earth.

*If you could have dinner with anybody, dead or alive, who would it be? Why?*

- With my future rich self because my favorite person is myself.
- My mom because she is da one that goint to make my food.
- It would be my wife in a couple of years. [How cute is that?!]
- The first person named Elizabeth. How they got their

**Interaction** - First class went pretty well, but realized it was probably because the students' home room teacher (whom she describes as very experienced and very in-control) was in the back of the room and the class was behaving for her and not MsEm.

**Continuity** - She has the students complete an "All About You" survey. She gives examples of what she considers to be "funny answers" to some of the questions she asked about the students' feelings about science (from the "about this blog" section of the site, it states she is a middle school science teacher). She also asks them in the survey what they would like to "learn about this year in science" and gives several humorous examples (misspellings included) of the students responses.

**Situation** - first day of teaching in the classroom of her assigned school. She states it "could have been worse, but it was still pretty rough". She believes the students are very excited to be back and to catch up with each other from their summer break.

**Identity Statements**

- Calls herself "new and nervous" and that is obvious to the students who "behave for other teachers"
- The "homeroom teacher" is experienced and in control (as opposed to MsEm/)
- Describes what could be considered "bad" student behavior - fighting, yelling, or being disrespectful
- She states that students believe she is too young to be their teacher
- Has students complete a survey in which she states it was "nice" to read that "a lot" of the students could see

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## Appendix B

### Participant Storyboards

