

Executive Summary

Strengthening the Transition from Pre-Service to In-Service Training for New Teachers

**Findings from a Study of
Teach For America's Handoff Program**

Shelley Rappaport
Andrea Shane
Kelly Granito
Lauren Scarola



SEPTEMBER 2020

FUNDERS

Funding for this report came from a Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The goal of the SEED initiative is to increase the number of highly effective educators by supporting the implementation of evidence-based preparation, development, and enhancement opportunities for educators. Teach For America (TFA) received a SEED grant to redesign its summer training and to facilitate corps members' transition from this pre-service training to the in-service training they would receive during the school year. MDRC conducted an independent evaluation of the implementation and the impacts of the guidance and materials TFA provided in an effort to strengthen this transition.

Dissemination of MDRC publications is supported by the following organizations and individuals that help finance MDRC's public policy outreach and expanding efforts to communicate the results and implications of our work to policymakers, practitioners, and others: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Arnold Ventures, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, Daniel and Corinne Goldman, The Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., The JPB Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

In addition, earnings from the MDRC Endowment help sustain our dissemination efforts. Contributors to the MDRC Endowment include Alcoa Foundation, The Ambrose Monell Foundation, Anheuser-Busch Foundation, Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Ford Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, The Grable Foundation, The Lizabeth and Frank Newman Charitable Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, Jan Nicholson, Paul H. O'Neill Charitable Foundation, John S. Reed, Sandler Foundation, and The Stupski Family Fund, as well as other individual contributors.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: www.mdrc.org.

Copyright © 2020 by MDRC®. All rights reserved.

Overview

Teach For America (TFA), founded in 1989, has grown to become one of the largest providers of educators in the country for high-needs, under-resourced schools. TFA recruits high-performing college graduates and professionals and prepares them for teaching during five to seven weeks of intensive pre-service training at one of its regional or national summer “institutes” before their first teaching job. During their first year in the classroom, the new teachers (called “corps members”) then receive ongoing in-service training from regional TFA teams. About 43 percent of TFA’s corps members receive their pre-service training at a national institute, followed by in-service training from a regional team. The rest of the corps members receive both their pre-service and in-service training regionally.

As TFA has grown, and in particular with its introduction of a redesigned national training model in 2016, the regional in-service training has not always aligned well with the pre-service training offered at the national institutes. In 2017, TFA was awarded a Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant from the U.S. Department of Education to create and implement what it called the “Handoff,” intended to strengthen the alignment between the national pre-service training and the regional in-service training. The project emphasized three aspects of the in-service training:

- Providing continued programming for new teachers (called “corps members”) focused on creating and maintaining a *productive learning environment*
- Deepening corps members’ knowledge, skills, and mindsets with regard to *diversity, equity, and inclusiveness*
- Tying these two ideas together to strengthen their practice as aspiring *culturally relevant practitioners*

MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, was chosen to be the independent evaluator of the Handoff, as part of TFA’s SEED grant. The study of the Handoff had two objectives: (1) to examine how it was implemented and how well it succeeded in aligning the in-service and pre-service training, and (2) to examine the effects of the Handoff on the short-term outcomes of the first cohort of corps members to participate in it.

This report explains that there was quite a bit of variation in the implementation of the Handoff among and within the TFA regions, and it suggests that receiving more training on diversity, equity, and inclusiveness and on maintaining a productive learning environment is associated with better practices by corps members in those areas.

Acknowledgments

This evaluation of Teach For America’s (TFA’s) Handoff program and the resulting report reflect the efforts of a great many people. Our first debt of gratitude is to the corps members and TFA leaders who took time out of their busy schedules to participate in focus groups and interviews and to complete logs during the study. The assistance and cooperation of these individuals were vital for enabling the study to move forward and for providing the rich and detailed information on which this report is based.

At TFA, Yael Ross, Amy Nasr, Saffiyah Madraswala, Reid Hickman, and Grant Van Eaton spent countless hours explaining the Handoff and connecting us with TFA leaders, coaches, and corps members across the study regions. They were also unfailing in their availability to answer questions and provide support. LaNiesha Cobb, Robin Greatrex, Reid Hickman, Bárbara Escudero, Saffiyah Madraswala, Anne Mahle, Amy Nasr, Yael Ross, and Becky Smerdon provided useful critical feedback during the report drafting process. Throughout the project, Shane Traister, Amirah Patterson, and Semra Malik answered our many questions about the surveys and the administrative data collected by TFA, and they provided several well-organized datasets that we used to describe the characteristics and outcomes of the corps members in this study.

At MDRC, Matthew O’Brien led efforts to recruit corps members and contributed to the collection of qualitative data. Sara Staszak, Miki Bairstow Shih, Laura Wang, and Varun Sukheeja provided programmatic and analytical support. Laura Wang, Fernando Medina, Emma Alterman, and Melissa Gelin contributed in various ways to the qualitative research, including the collection and coding of data and their analysis. Jalen Alexander, Fernando Medina, and Linda Ouyang coordinated the production of the report, including maintaining the production schedule, preparing exhibits, and factchecking. Virginia Knox, William Corrin, Marie-Andree Somers, Alice Tufel, and Robert Ivry carefully reviewed earlier drafts of the report and offered helpful critical feedback throughout the writing process. Christopher Boland edited the report, and Carolyn Thomas prepared it for publication.

The Authors

Executive Summary

Founded in 1989, Teach For America (TFA) has grown to become one of the largest providers of educators for high-needs schools in the country. Since its inception, TFA has trained over 60,000 teachers, also known as corps members (CMs), who are placed in high-needs schools.¹ CMs commit to teach in under-resourced schools for at least two years. The majority of CMs have never taught and have no background in education before their service with TFA; however, they receive pre-service intensive training during the summer before beginning to teach, at what is familiarly known as an “institute,” which includes teaching summer school students. CMs also receive in-service training and professional development from TFA during their first two years of teaching.

The majority of CMs (57 percent) receive both their pre-service training and in-service training from their TFA regional teams. The remaining 43 percent receive pre-service training at a national institute (developed and run by the TFA national team) and their in-service training from their regional teams.² As TFA has grown over the years from 6 regions to more than 50, regional autonomy has increased and regional teams have offered more location-specific programming. As a result, aligning pre-service and in-service training for CMs who receive pre-service training at a national institute and in-service training from their regional TFA team has become increasingly complex.

In summer 2016, a redesigned pre-service training model was piloted at the national institute in Tulsa, which trained CMs from eight TFA regions. The goal of the new training was to better address the needs of low-income students by enhancing the rigor and relevance of the pre-service summer training. TFA’s traditional summer training was offered at the other five national institutes. MDRC — a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization — evaluated and reported on the redesigned national institute model as part of a Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant.³ The evaluation examined TFA’s efforts to implement its redesigned training model and its effect on CMs’ outcomes.

In 2017, TFA expanded its redesigned national institute model to all of its national institutes. An unintended consequence of the rapid scale-up of the redesign was that most of the regional staff who provided in-service training to CMs were former CMs themselves and had received the traditional summer training. They were thus less able than they had been in the past to

-
- 1 Teach For America, “The History of Teach For America” (2020), website: <https://www.teachforamerica.org/what-we-do/history>.
 - 2 These percentages are for CMs attending a national or regional institute in 2018.
 - 3 Shelley Rappaport, Marie-Andrée Somers, and Kelly Granito, *A Redesigned Training Program for New Teachers: Findings from a Study of Teach For America’s Summer Institutes* (New York: MDRC, 2019). The SEED grant program seeks to increase the number of highly effective educators by supporting the implementation of evidence-based preparation, development, and enhancement opportunities for educators. It is funded by the Office of Innovation and Improvement at the U.S. Department of Education.

rely on their own training experiences to guide CMs who received their pre-service training at a redesigned national institute. This incongruity, combined with regional teams' increased autonomy, contributed to some misalignment between the pre-service and in-service training.

In 2017, TFA won a second SEED grant to create and implement what it calls the “Handoff,” programming intended to strengthen the alignment between the redesigned pre-service summer training at the national institutes and the regional in-service training and professional development. SEED grants require that an independent evaluator study the funded programming. MDRC is playing that role for TFA for this grant. This report presents the results of that study. It covers some of the challenges that arose and potential innovations that became available when TFA implemented the Handoff. This report also presents the results from a follow-up evaluation that examined TFA’s efforts to implement its redesigned training model in its third year, in 2018.

Although this study began as a random assignment experiment,⁴ several challenges to using this design arose. There was not sufficient contrast between the original program regions and the control regions as some program and control regions were already implementing Handoff-like activities while other regions in both groups were not ready to strongly implement the Handoff activities. Therefore, the study team chose two different designs to explore the relationship between the training CMs received and study outcomes. The findings from this report are associative rather than causal.

Teach For America’s National Institute Training Model and Strategies for Implementing the Handoff

Given the increased autonomy of TFA regional teams and the redesign of the national institute training model, the TFA national team sought in 2018 to help CMs who received their pre-service training at a national institute better make the transition to their in-service training and professional development. The Handoff was designed to strengthen the alignment between the training and professional development offered by regional teams and the redesigned national institute model with respect to the following three key components:

- 1. Provide continued programming for CMs focused on creating and maintaining a productive learning environment (LE).** To create this kind of learning environment, CMs learn strategies for building relationships with students, giving directions that are student-centered and easy for students to understand, redirecting unengaged learners, creating positive expectations of students, recognizing and reinforcing positive student behaviors, building excitement, and so on.

4 Random assignment involves a lottery-like process that places individuals, or in this case TFA regions, into either a program group, which is offered the services being tested, or into a comparison group, which is not offered those services.

2. **Deepen CMs’ knowledge and skills and strengthen their mindsets with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusiveness (DEI).** DEI is learning centered on understanding one’s own identity and power in society, increasing social consciousness and attending to inclusiveness as teachers and leaders, and recognizing that educational equity requires thinking and acting both inside and outside of the classroom.
3. **Tie these two components together to orient CMs to becoming culturally relevant practitioners.** Culturally relevant pedagogy, or CRP, supports academic achievement by setting high expectations for students and providing ample opportunities for them to succeed; embraces cultural competence, including a curriculum that builds on students’ prior knowledge and cultural experience; and encourages sociopolitical consciousness by fostering students’ critical consciousness — that is, developing in students the knowledge and skills to critically engage with their learning and the world.⁵

Implementing the Handoff

The Handoff was rolled out in the TFA regions in March 2018, when members of the national team met with regional leaders and program team members implementing the Handoff. The objective of the meeting was to discuss and improve understanding of the redesigned national institute training model and to identify the components (namely, productive learning environment and diversity, equity, and inclusiveness) on which the Handoff would focus in the 2018-2019 school year. Following the meeting, the national team held a series of calls with regional leaders through the end of 2018 to support the Handoff’s implementation. It also offered regional teams the following to support implementation:

- **March institute overview session.** This two-day training program taught regional teams about the redesigned national institute model and its expected outcomes for CMs in order to help them better align their regional in-service training during the school year with what CMs learn at national institute. It also gave regional teams an opportunity to give input on the components of the national institute model they believed should be a part of the Handoff. They discussed several major components of the national institute model (including public practice, learning environment; diversity, equity, and inclusiveness; and culturally relevant pedagogy) and collectively decided that the Handoff would focus on learning environment and diversity, equity, and inclusiveness.⁶
- **Institute site visits.** Although it is not uncommon for regional team members to visit national institutes, representatives of select regional teams participating in the study were invited to visit the national institute serving their region in 2018 to give them a better understanding of the redesigned training model with an emphasis on the components of the institute that

5 Gloria Ladson-Billings, “What We Can Learn from Multicultural Education Research,” *Educational Leadership* 51, 8 (1994): 22-26.

6 Public practice is an important component of the national institute model’s approach. It involves CMs rehearsing segments of their lesson in front of their trainers and peers and could also include sharing videos of their teaching to be used for group reflection.

could be addressed in the Handoff. These representatives were given specific guidance on how to observe activities associated with the components of the Handoff to better prepare them to align their regional school year programming with the national institute training.

- **Materials and guides.**

- *First 8 Weeks of School (F8W) Sessions.* In partnership with regional teams, the national team developed two learning experiences on productive learning environment for regional teams to use with CMs during the first eight weeks of school to help them make the transition from the national institute in the summer to the regional in-service training in the fall.⁷ These lessons build on what CMs learned about LE at the national institute and help them apply these skills to their classrooms and more easily anticipate how their regional context might influence their plans for promoting a productive learning environment. At the end of July 2018, the national team provided representatives of regional teams one to three hours of training to help them deliver the two lessons on learning environment for CMs.⁸
- *DEI Design Book — Kickoff 2018.* The national team developed this manual for regional teams, which included DEI objectives, ideas for supporting CMs in reaching those objectives, the anticipated DEI outcomes, and a required debriefing exercise in which regional teams were expected to meet with CMs to reflect on their DEI-related experiences and learning at the national institute.⁹
- *DEI Outcomes.* The national team developed this guide for regional teams, which contained specific DEI goals for CMs and examples of how CMs can be expected to reach those goals incrementally throughout the year.

- **Ongoing DEI Design Support and DEI Facilitation Training.** Representatives of regional teams were offered the opportunity to consult with the national team to create a set of DEI goals for CMs to achieve and develop DEI learning experiences. They also received DEI facilitation training on how to foster conversations with CMs around DEI.

- **Handoff Retreat.** In October 2018, the national team invited representatives of regional teams to a day-and-a-half-long retreat in which participants assessed the Handoff’s implementation thus far, proposed adjustments, planned for the Handoff’s continued implementation, and nurtured supportive relationships across regions.

The regional staff members who were expected to implement the Handoff’s activities included the regional director, who oversees CM programming and training, as well as instructors and

7 Regional teams gave input throughout the design of these sessions, including on how many sessions there should be and what the sessions should accomplish.

8 There was some variation across regions regarding whether or not the same regional representatives attended different handoff activities.

9 The national team provided regional teams with an outline to use during the CM debrief exercise.

coaches. Most of the guidance and training that the national team provided was designed for the regional directors whose responsibility was to prepare the instructors and coaches to implement the Handoff's activities. Instructors provided professional development to CMs. Coaches worked one-on-one with CMs, helping them plan their lessons with the Handoff components in mind as well as observing and offering critical feedback on their teaching in the classroom.

Evaluation Design

The evaluation of the redesigned training had two objectives: (1) to examine how the Handoff was implemented and how well it succeeded in aligning the in-service and pre-service training, and (2) to examine the effects of the Handoff on the short-term outcomes of the first cohort of CMs to participate in it.

To assess whether the Handoff led to improved outcomes for CMs, the study team undertook an experimental evaluation of the initiative in which 10 regional teams participated. Each of the 10 regional teams was randomly assigned either to a program group (comprising five regions), which would implement the Handoff, or to a control group (comprising five regions), which would continue with their business-as-usual training models. It proved challenging, however, to rigorously evaluate the impact of TFA's Handoff activities over the school year. The regional teams' use of the Handoff's strategies varied substantially, with some regional teams in the control group independently implementing Handoff-like strategies and some regional teams in the program group not implementing any such strategies. Moreover, some regional teams in both the program and control groups had already been offering robust DEI programming and, to some extent, LE programming before the introduction of the Handoff. That is to say, early findings revealed very little difference between the two research groups with respect to the Handoff-related in-service training and professional development that CMs received. The resulting lack of contrast between the groups compromised the value of the experimental evaluation in assessing the Handoff's effects on CM outcomes.¹⁰

The study team collected several types of data to evaluate the implementation and outcomes for this study. In summer 2018, the study team visited two of the national institute sites to understand the components of the redesigned training model that the Handoff would carry over. During the visits, the study team observed the training CMs received and the CMs' summer school teaching. The team conducted focus groups with CMs, trainers (or lead instructors), and coaches. To learn about CMs' experience teaching in the classroom, the study team sent open-ended logs to CMs who were in the study regions and in their first year of teaching with TFA and had volunteered to participate in the data collection activities, which they completed and returned to the team, every month during their first year of teaching. The questions in the log captured

¹⁰ Although implementation of the Handoff was inconsistent, the results from the experimental impact study are included in Appendix Tables A.2 through A.6. As expected, there were no discernible differences in outcomes for CMs in the program and comparison regions.

the CMs' use of the strategies that were a focus of the Handoff. In late fall 2018, the study team conducted site visits to all 10 study regions to conduct interviews with regional coaches and to observe professional development focused on learning environment and diversity, equity, and inclusiveness. Finally, the study team conducted follow-up phone or in-person interviews with a sample of CMs at the end of their first year of teaching, as well as interviews with the regional director and members of regional teams overseeing training relative to learning environment and diversity, equity, and inclusiveness. To measure outcomes for CMs, the study team leveraged TFA's administrative records, teacher surveys that TFA administered regularly, a survey on culturally relevant pedagogy, and biweekly closed-ended teacher instructional logs that the study team administered during CMs' first year of teaching.

Since the study team observed very little difference between the two research groups with respect to the Handoff-related in-service training that CMs received, an experimental study was no longer an appropriate study design. However, the observed variation in the implementation of the Handoff among and within the 10 participating regions made it possible to explore more nuanced questions about the association between DEI- and LE-focused professional development and CMs' outcomes. The study team examined this association using two different analytical approaches. The first approach included a set of CM-level correlational analyses that assessed whether CMs who received more DEI- or LE-focused professional development had better outcomes in three domains: CMs' self-perceptions of their cultural awareness; their practices related to DEI, LE, and their development toward becoming culturally relevant practitioners; and their retention in TFA. These analyses leveraged the fact that professional development varied *within regions*, meaning that CMs in the same region received different types and amounts of professional development.

In contrast, the second analytical approach included a set of region-level analyses that leveraged the variation in professional development *among regions*. Using this approach, the study team explored whether CMs in regions whose TFA teams provided more professional development on average had better outcomes than CMs in regions whose TFA teams provided less professional development on average.

While these analyses could not determine whether the Handoff itself improved CM outcomes, they were able to shed light on whether DEI- and LE-focused professional development, which TFA aimed to provide through the Handoff, has the potential to change CMs' perceptions and behaviors. Any effects on CM outcomes described in the findings of this report cannot be interpreted as causal — that is, the direct result of the Handoff's professional development; other unobserved factors, such as differences in teaching context among CMs, could have affected the association between the professional development and teacher outcomes. However, the findings may still be useful for developing hypotheses for further research and may inform the design of professional development programming focused on DEI and LE.

Key Findings

Implementation of the 2018 Redesigned National Institute Training

As indicated above, this report presents the results from a follow-up evaluation that examined TFA's efforts to implement its redesigned training model in its third year, the model on which the Handoff was based. The redesigned training that CMs received at the national institute in 2018 was clearer about what it means to create and maintain a productive learning environment and was more specific about the necessary strategies and routines needed to do so compared with the redesigned training provided to CMs at the national institute in 2016.

- CMs who received the redesigned national institute training in 2018 were more likely (1) to report being prepared to use and (2) to be observed using instructional strategies on which the redesigned national institute model focused, compared with CMs who attended the redesigned institute when it was piloted in 2016.

Implementation of the Handoff

The implementation findings suggest that adjusting the pace of implementation of a complex and long-term initiative such as the Handoff in a manner that meets each region's unique level of readiness might help all regional teams to plan and deliver effective, national institute-aligned training focused on DEI and LE throughout CMs' first year of teaching. The main findings suggest the following:

- Regional teams found it helpful to learn the LE and DEI terminology used at the national institutes as this made the transition from pre-service to in-service training smoother. However, regional teams needed more time to learn from and with the national team and each other about implementing the Handoff.
- Regional teams demonstrated varying levels of readiness to align their in-service training with key components from the redesigned national institute training model (pre-service training), and the short timeline (fewer than six months) for implementing the Handoff was a barrier to consistently doing it successfully, especially for regional staff who were newer to the concepts of LE and DEI.
- Regional staff members who had longer histories (generally at least two years) of incorporating DEI approaches on their own before the Handoff was rolled out felt better prepared to implement the Handoff's DEI training components, particularly with regard to hiring and training coaches and training CMs to be attuned to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusiveness most relevant in their local contexts.
- Across the 10 regions that participated in the study, regional directors — those who oversee CM programming and training — generally found the guidance on LE alignment particularly

useful. However, many of them struggled to implement it, among their staff members and in their CM training plans, since the national team provided it after they had developed their regional training plans, which is where the guidance could have been most easily incorporated. This may have had particularly strong implications for coaches' readiness to support CMs with the LE component, which in turn affected how CMs described LE in their reports on the training they received during the school year.

CM Outcomes

- The findings suggest that, for the CM-level analyses only, there is an association between DEI-focused professional development and some DEI-specific outcomes such as self-perceived cultural awareness and DEI instructional practices. There is also an association between DEI-focused professional development and rates of retention in TFA.
- There is an association between LE-focused professional development and CMs' more frequent use of LE instructional practices. This association is consistent between the CM- and region-level analyses. For the CM-level analyses only, there are also associations between LE-focused professional development and CMs' use of practices grounded in CRP and retention rates in TFA. For the region-level analysis, there was a difference between CMs' reported confidence in their ability to use CRP practices in regions where CMs received high amounts of LE-focused professional development and those where they received low amounts.

Conclusion

The findings from this study are consistent with what is known about the challenges of implementing new teacher training programs. TFA's Handoff — which aimed to guide and support regional teams as they provided CMs with national institute-aligned professional development focused on diversity, equity, and inclusiveness; a productive learning environment; and culturally relevant pedagogy throughout the school year — was ambitious in scope and introduced without the benefit of a pilot. The challenges that arose in rolling out the Handoff and the inconsistent associations between professional development and CM outcomes are not entirely surprising given that the Handoff's complexity and the attempt to implement it within a short timeframe and evaluate it quickly afterward. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that when regional teams, particularly those staff members who support CMs directly, are given adequate time to internalize the Handoff's concepts and practices and refine their approach to them, they may succeed in providing relevant support that is aligned TFA's redesigned national institute training.

ABOUT MDRC

MDRC IS A NONPROFIT, NONPARTISAN SOCIAL AND EDUCATION POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATION DEDICATED TO learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff members bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-prisoners, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.