THE EXPERIENCE OF THE INEXPERIENCED: THE PILGRIMAGE OF ALTERNATE-CERTIFICATION TEACHERS IN HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The increasing prevalence of alternate-certification teachers in American schools – especially in high-need areas – has made their presence in the classroom a hot-button topic. While programs like Teach For America and The New Teacher Project continually recruit talented men and women to educate our country’s neediest students, important voices in education reform question why the least experienced educators are teaching in America’s highest-need schools. There are clear drawbacks: large numbers of these teachers fail to withstand the rigors of teaching in our country’s lowest-achieving schools, where the many social needs of the students present countless challenges in the classroom every day. There are benefits, however: a high percentage of these inexperienced teachers bring optimism and energy to classrooms where other, more experienced teachers are unwilling to go. Yet while they often excel, they do so for only a short-term basis, frequently departing the urban or high-poverty schools in which they have agreed to teach after a year or two.

This thesis will concentrate explicitly on the experiences of these teachers – the ups, the downs, the good, the bad and the ugly – with a distinct focus on the teachers’ lives, livelihoods and their respective journeys. In many ways, teachers who take jobs via non-traditional certification in America’s toughest schools embark on a modern-day pilgrimage, where their daily sights, sounds, successes and failures challenge them to the core. This paper will analyze the teachers’ experiences specifically in view of the
anthropological idea of liminality – which posits essentially that individuals on pilgrimages will be disoriented in the middle of their journeys, so to speak, and linger at a threshold of sorts that straddles their previous ways and a new set of ways. Liminality was originally articulated by Arnold van Gennep, a Frenchman whose 1909 work *Rites de Passage* introduced the concept of a liminal period in pilgrimage for the first time.

Six decades later, Victor Turner’s close studying of van Gennep resulted in an even more thorough examination of liminality. When discussing liminality, this paper will use ideas from Turner, who – in the late 1960’s until the 1980’s – examined and evolved the concept first created by van Gennep.

The ultimate intention in this study is to prove how liminality initiates new ways in these teachers – ways shaped by the extreme social circumstances that define poverty-stricken America – and how those ways are often a far cry from what previously defined the men and women who have bravely chosen to venture into the high-need classroom.
This thesis is dedicated to the teachers who care deeply about their students and do everything they can to help their students learn, mature, improve and be good people.

An enormous thanks to Dr. Frederick Ruf, who introduced me to the theory of liminality and whose tremendous patience and thoughtful feedback – during this project, and throughout my career at Georgetown – helped me grow as a thinker and a writer.

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Finally, a special thank you to my grandparents – Amy Garfield, Sol Garfield, Marie Hayes and Walker Hayes – who each taught me plenty in their own unique ways. They each had strong convictions, born partly through what they endured during the Great Depression – and they each had a distinct way of connecting with people that was authentic and straightforward. They were all principled people who would have excelled as teachers in the high-need school. Rest in Peace, Grandma, Papa, Grandma and Grandpa.
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INTRODUCTION

The three main objectives of this thesis are to show the experiences of alternate-certification teachers in high-need schools, to prove that their journeys in the classroom are pilgrimages and to provide a glimpse into the state of American education. Showing the experiences of the teachers whose daily task is to educate the country’s most troubled young men and women, to me, was imperative – and far more important than simply telling abstractly, with statistics, how effective Teach For America or The New Teacher Project has been in its attempts to close the prevailing achievement gap in America between high-poverty students and low-poverty students. People should be able to see, hear, smell and feel the classroom, the hallways, the students, the daily grind that define these schools. In showing that experience – and in analyzing it with the theories of Victor Turner, whose ideas on liminality reverberate strongly here – I will prove that teaching in the high-need school is, especially for those who stay for about two years, a modern-day, secular pilgrimage. And through it all, the systemic problems that plague urban education will come to the fore – perhaps shaping or reshaping thoughts for the country’s best course of action in education reform.

By examining so closely the experiences of seven specific teachers in high-need schools – who taught in different secondary settings over the last decade – it’s inevitable for me to spend time recounting my own teaching experience in northeast Washington, D.C., from 2009 to 2011. My full-time job was at Youth Services Center – a juvenile detention center that brought in young men and women from all over the city for an average of 23 days at a time. We tried our best to operate a traditional school inside an
altogether non-traditional setting, and for me, it was undoubtedly the greatest challenge of my life.

As a teacher, to set your expectations high – and to keep them high – seems important when you begin. It was my attitude that, no matter where I was teaching, all of my students should be learning as much as possible – and as much as any other student in America. So, for me at YSC, it looked like this: printing off one worksheet for each of my 40 students (about 13 in each of my three, 70-minute classes) every day. Never did all 40 get used. I kept the blank, untouched worksheets in a drawer at my desk that quickly reached capacity. After a two-month stretch where, most days, only 15 or so of those copies were used, I considered running fewer copies. (The frustrating truth coinciding with this story is that paper was limited at our school, and when each teacher exceeded his limit, he had to buy his own.) But I couldn’t bring myself to run fewer than 40 copies every day. What if, by chance, one day all the students were into the lesson and wanted to do the work? I had to have a worksheet for them. And even though it never happened, I kept running my 40 copies. (The convenient thing was that, after awhile because of all the turnover, all my students were new – so I could just recycle the old lessons, copies I had already made that were sitting idly in my drawer.)

There were days I left YSC with a smile on my face because a handful of my students had chosen to focus and had shown their brightness. So many of those boys and girls were incredibly bright. Incredibly bright. But the reality most days – the overwhelming, headache-inducing norm for me – was that I begged students to do work, I broke up fights, I struggled to keep up with the continually changing classroom rosters, and I let those perpetual frustrations affect my attitude. After a while, the begging
stopped and the fights lessened. I planned more lessons as the year progressed that commanded their attention – lessons they were invested in. We read Redskins stories from the Washington Post. We read scripts of movies they knew well, like Friday and Life. We read the book Push, by Sapphire – my real breakthrough moment in the classroom, in March of that first year, where all 11 of my students sat on the edges of their seats and listened. But the quality of my lesson honestly had minimal bearing on the type of day I would have. So much was beyond my control. And when the boys and girls were released from YSC, all was beyond our control. The saddest truth for many of those students is that they were safer when they were incarcerated than when they were released. Inside, they had three warm meals, a warm place to sleep, protection from harm – and they were forced to go to school. Outside, they had lures, dangers, little support. In my two years at YSC, three of my former students were murdered after being released from the facility. One, Prince, was a gregarious 16-year-old with a penchant for writing and an eagerness to read out loud every day. I can’t help but wonder what he would have contributed to the world had he grown up in some other part of the country. Looking back on my overall experience at YSC, it’s like a chunk in my life that I have crystallized and removed from my own personal timeline. It is unique. It was transformative. It was, without a doubt, the most memorable journey of my life. A true pilgrimage. And I’m grateful for it.

Three years later, I am lucky and happy to be teaching at a private grade school about 20 miles away from YSC, just outside of D.C. The differences between YSC and my new school, Mater Dei, are stark and seem to be endless. Here, I have seen progress in some students over the course of three school years – the most significant difference
between working in such a transient setting like YSC and the traditional school environment at Mater Dei. In as much, I have witnessed boys grow into young men – and I have played a part in their maturing, which is satisfying on a number of levels. A recent email from a parent, recapping her son’s high-school application process, revealed an answer that warmed my heart. On his application, he was asked to describe his favorite teacher and why. Andrew’s response: “I like Mr. Garfield because he challenges me, he is passionate about his students, and he is fair and stands up for his students like me when I was in a situation with another teacher. He worked in the D.C. public school system and there he learned how to inspire kids who are not as lucky as me. When he came to Mater Dei he played a big part in motivating me and explaining how I have a lot of opportunities ahead of me if I am committed to working hard.”

To see a student appreciative of my efforts is one thing, but to see a student cognizant of his place in the world – relishing challenges, grateful to have a family that’s able to send him to private school – at such a young age makes me smile. Andrew, 14, is the same age as many of the troubled young men and women I was charged with teaching in D.C. There are many qualities that make Andrew different from a young man like Prince. But in terms of inherent curiosity and sheer potential, they are no different. They are both absolutely capable.
CHAPTER 1
THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN AMERICA

Schoolteachers have an immense amount of power. A good teacher – one who not only educates but also enlightens, motivates and empowers – can be the sort of charismatic model a young person emulates long past his or her adolescence. A bad teacher – one whose indifference, impatience and ineptitude define them – has the power to breed apathy, bitterness, incompetence and disenchantment with learning in the young men and women he or she is charged with educating. Students with good teachers are lucky, and considering what the consensus among researchers tells us, that’s as important now as it has ever been: a teacher’s effectiveness has more of an influence on student achievement than any other factor, including the school a student attends or the size of class in which they’re enrolled.1

That does not mean the good teachers have altogether good experiences in the classroom – nor does it mean the bad teachers loathe teaching, are apathetic about their students’ learning or are bad people. Highly effective teachers can come to hate their jobs and their lifestyles – and they burn out all the time. The most ineffective teachers in the country can find ways to hang on to their jobs for decades. And they come from a large pool: there are roughly four million teachers in America, men and women who every day are supposed to be teaching the approximately 55 million boys and girls

enrolled in school. While it is difficult to draw sweeping conclusions about teachers and students from such a wide spectrum, certain truths define the American educational landscape, and they can be jolting.

For instance: students who grow up in poverty are 10 times less likely to graduate from college by age 24 than their peers who come from low-poverty areas. Numbers like these encapsulate what we in America call the achievement gap. And while the gap in education is not new, it is wide – despite small but serious strides in different parts of the country over the past twenty years to narrow it. Programs like Teach For America (TFA) and The New Teacher Project (TNTP) – which recruit some of the country’s brightest men and women to the classroom as teachers via alternate-certification options every year – have helped facilitate major changes in urban areas by providing high-need schools with potentially quality teachers. But first-year teachers in struggling schools encounter young men and women who, far beyond the statistics on a page saying they’re lagging behind, bring real troubles to the classroom – daily distractions that hinder their ability and their desire to learn. The social realities that swirl around a pregnant teenager from Washington, D.C., or a 15-year-old boy resisting gang influence in Los Angeles, are the priorities in their lives – not the algebra test on Tuesday or the morning review session in Mr. David’s science class. Good teachers’ efforts can divert a troubled young person’s attention from home or from the street to the classroom, sure, but those efforts – however profound – will only enact small change over time. The social realities of young

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people in high-poverty areas are too powerfully entrenched for school to become meaningful in many of their lives.

For that reason, among many others, the achievement gap exists and persists. It is the overriding point of emphasis for programs like TFA and TNTP, and it looks like this: En route to college – or to the point where certain students’ college dreams are derailed, if they were ever even formed – a giant chasm in test scores, graduation rates and mastery of curriculum standards shows how there is a stark difference in the learning taking place in certain areas and not taking place in others. The schools in America’s most affluent areas sit and shine on one side of that chasm. In the middle – safe, treading water – are the country’s average schools. On the opposite end – every year trying desperately to avoid drowning – lie what are called “high-need” schools. Several criteria define a school as high-need – a term more commonly used since the No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001. High-need schools have more unfilled, available teacher positions than most schools; they’re located in areas where at least 30 percent of students come from families with incomes below the poverty line; and they’re located where a high percentage of teachers teach out of their field of expertise, where there’s high teacher turnover and where many teachers are not certified or licensed to teach.4

There are almost 100,000 public schools in America.5 Close to 17,000 of those are high-need schools.6 From the 2013 Nation’s Report Card, compiled by the National

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Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), it’s clear that the poorest boys and girls in America – those enrolled at those high-need schools – know less than the average American young person. Among eighth graders, students eligible for free and reduced lunch scored 14 points lower on national reading tests than the average student – and 24 points lower than students not eligible for lunch programs.\(^7\) The scales for NAEP assessments – in both reading and math – range from zero to 500.\(^8\) The average reading score among eighth graders in Washington, D.C., eligible for such programs is 235 out of 500 – 33 points behind the national average.\(^9\)

Examined closely, the factors that lead to those statistics perpetuate the sort of stereotypes in our country that die far harder than the civil rights leaders of yesteryear would have hoped. It is a more obvious manifestation of the achievement gap: the one that exists between white students in America and students of color. White eighth graders read, on average, at a rate 20 points higher than Hispanic students and 26 points higher than black students.\(^10\) While this gap is less pronounced than it was 20 years ago – when Hispanic eighth-graders lagged 26 points behind and African American eighth-graders 30 points behind white students – it is still enough to make observers wonder whether every American is getting an equal opportunity to succeed. (Especially when less than 10 percent of white students are in high-poverty schools and close to 40 percent


of all black and Hispanic students are in high-poverty schools.\textsuperscript{11}) This can lead to uncomfortable conversations about race, where people often forget one simple truth: The gap exists not because certain students are black or Hispanic, but rather, because students in the country’s worst schools happen to be African American and Hispanic. And those schools are where programs like TFA and TNTP are focusing their efforts.

Amidst the narrowing of the achievement gap – slow, but sure – another gap has emerged. The United States is no longer the world’s educational superpower. Forty years ago, America’s public schools were the best in the world. (Since 1900, U.S. public schools have produced more than 100 Nobel laureates and 10 American presidents.\textsuperscript{12}) Even in the last 25 years, as America has seen four men occupy the Oval Office – only one of which, Bill Clinton, attended public high school\textsuperscript{13} – much has changed. Among 34 of the world’s developed countries, the United States ranks 17\textsuperscript{th} in reading and 26\textsuperscript{th} in math.\textsuperscript{14} This decline is captured well from the perspective of both student and educator in an episode of the television show “Friday Night Lights” when Tami Taylor, a school counselor, is doing her best to urge an apathetic student, Tim Riggins, to try harder in school. Tim becomes annoyed at Tami’s urging, wondering why his effort in the classroom matters to her. “What’s the big deal?” he asks. “Well, the big deal,” Tami


responds, “is that it’s part of my job to make sure that you don’t grow up stupid. It’s bad for the world.”

Perhaps that’s true, but it seems as though – because of what is happening in other countries – the world will be just fine. As far as America goes, who knows?

China currently leads the world in math, and 2012 scores indicate that a student in China is more than two years of schooling ahead of a student from Massachusetts – one of America’s highest-performing states. The ever-increasing distance between China and the U.S. in educational achievement affects more than Americans’ egos. By the year 2020, it is projected that 123 million Americans jobs will be classified as high-skill – and high-paying. But only 50 million Americans will be qualified for those jobs.

It can be inferred that many of the higher achievers from the developed countries ahead of the U.S. in education will move to America and build lives for themselves as a result of what they learned growing up in places, like China, where they had better schools.

As unsettling as that may be, the more pressing questions for Americans – the ones that must be addressed initially – surround the achievement gap. Jay Mathews, education columnist for the Washington Post, calls the state of education in our country’s high-need schools “the prime civil rights issue of this era.”

Bill Gates, who has made education one of his foremost philanthropic focuses, feels like the future of the American


economy hinges on closing the achievement gap at home and, in as much, narrowing the
gap in educational prowess between the U.S. and countries like China. “The only really
proven thing to make an economy work well,” Gates said, “is to have a well-educated
work force. People get panicked about the economic success of this country. Well,
there’s one thing that will determine that.”

Narrowing the Achievement Gap

Why does the achievement gap exist? And why is the divide so stark? While
these questions are tough to answer in any sort of simplified nutshell, they certainly bring
to the fore issues of longstanding poverty, socioeconomic difference, racial bias, social
backwardness and difficult-to-eradicate cultural truths that continue to inhibit certain
groups of America from excelling in the classroom. This divide – and these issues –
occupy a formidable place in the minds of education reformers, who are mired in the
logistics of navigating teachers’ unions, teachers’ contracts, teachers’ tenure and the like.
Sadly for the students who need change, the possible answers to the questions
surrounding the achievement gap are often sought around copious red tape and met with
strong resistance. Some say the gap exists because of societal realities – evident plainly
on the street corners, in the alleys and inside the homes of urban areas – that have,
unfortunately and, often, unfairly, added another label to Americans associated as poor or
needy; uneducated. Others believe the gap is a result of the schools themselves – and that
any finger pointing ought to be directed squarely at principals and teachers.

In the 2010 documentary Waiting for Superman, director David Guggenheim
hints at how the educational landscape has changed – or, at least, how the perception of

19 Waiting for ‘Superman,’ directed by Davis Guggenheim (Participant Media, 2010),
the achievement gap’s epicenter has evolved: “For generations,” the narrator says, “experts tended to blame failing schools on failing neighborhoods. But reformers have begun to believe the opposite – that the problems of failing neighborhoods might be blamed on failing schools.” This approach puts the onus on the employed men and women inside of the schools and, essentially, says to them: Your job is to maximize the time you have in the classroom and educate the boys and girls enrolled at your school – no matter what. While this no-excuse attitude is one way to keep expectations high and concentrate grand-scheme standards, the 180-degree turn of focus away from the realities of these schools’ surrounding neighborhoods is too severe. To focus on neighborhoods without at all acknowledging the failings of schools is perhaps obtuse, but then again, so is trying to box up what is going on inside the school walls without addressing the social realities of the streets just outside those walls. Regardless of the root cause of the failings, the truth is that students across America in high-need areas continue to lag far behind students in low-poverty schools. The achievement gap persists. In as much, the most productive discussions about education reform keep in mind both the realistic possibilities of what can occur every day at these needy schools and the goings on of the urban areas in which those schools lie. To believe otherwise is to be either ignorant or apathetic about what is really going on in these cities.

How can educators at schools like Locke High School in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles tell students to focus solely on a paragraph in their novels or on the history lecture du jour when, mere yards from the front entrance, the infamous Crips gang has one of its strongholds? The prevalence of the Crips – and the Bloods, located close to
Locke, as well – makes any commute to school a nerve-racking one. Wearing the wrong color – red or blue, the colors of the gangs – can result in death. Even students minding their own business on some Watts street corners are unsafe. That was the case for Deliesh, a 15-year-old sophomore at Locke who was waiting for a ride after school in 2005. She stood on a sidewalk “fifty steps or so from the school’s back gate” when “gunshots rang out. The young girl collapsed, a single bullet lodged in her brain.”

Intended for Deliesh or not, her assailant was caught later that night and eventually sentenced to 82 years in prison for second-degree murder. He was 18 and a high school dropout.

Locke has changed some since then; respected schools leader Steve Barr five years ago converted it to a charter school, bringing about some academic gains. But the dangers that lurk in and around similar schools can be seen in countless sad stories like Deliesh’s – and also in the dropout statistics. When Barr took over in 2008 and Locke was 40 years old, he estimated that about 60,000 young men and women had gone to school there, and “40,000 didn’t graduate,” he said. Deliesh’s age – 15 – is the typical point at which the motivation to attend school among troubled teenagers dwindles. At Locke, 1,200 freshmen typically enroll. But by the start of their sophomore years, only about 400 of those students remain at school.

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22 Ibid., 94.


While the national dropout rate is down – almost five percentage points since 1990 – there remains a gap in rates among different races and ethnicities. Close to 12 percent of Hispanic students in America drop out between 16 and 24 years old. Eight percent of African American students in the same age range drop out, while five percent of white students drop out. Is that mostly because there are more social distractions luring blacks and Hispanics out of the classroom in high-poverty areas, where more blacks and Hispanics reside than whites? Or could the gap exist because there are fewer good teachers where more blacks and Hispanics go to school, teachers who could empower those students, motivate them to excel and, effectively, keep them in the classroom? Again, there is no simple answer. It must be understood, though, that one of the biggest factors in narrowing the achievement gap has been, and will continue to be, teachers. Francisco Garcia Regalado, a Hispanic boy from the Bronx in New York City and one of the young students featured in Guggenheim’s film, had bad luck landing a good teacher in his first few years of school. The movie captures the frustration of Francisco’s mother, Maria, as she tries unsuccessfully to schedule a meeting with her son’s teacher – not even getting a return call for a request to discuss Francisco’s reading. “Francisco hasn’t been that fortunate with teachers,” Maria says in the film. “Maybe that attitude of him not liking school comes from that.”

The film tells the story of five students across the country with supportive families all seeking better schools for their sons and daughters. While it fails to


acknowledge the thousands upon thousands of students in high-poverty America whose families are either absent or simply apathetic about their academic paths, the film does capture the irritations that accompany families’ pursuit of first-class schools in high-need areas. Yes, these schools exist. And more of them are increasingly emerging, revealing successful blueprints for how administrators, teachers, and students in underachieving areas can – and should – function. But still, across America, the first-class urban schools are few and far between.

Michelle Rhee, one of the featured voices in the documentary, has been for years on the front lines of the charge to narrow the achievement gap. The chancellor of Washington, D.C.’s public schools from 2007 to 2010, Rhee effectively illustrated in the film how the facilitation of change in the country’s lowest-achieving district was frustrating. Adults in charge of teacher’s unions, she emphasized, were channeling their efforts toward protecting the livelihoods of other adults instead of improving the lives of children – the real goal, one would think, in education reform.27 A comment Rhee made in 2013 crystallizes the unfortunate result of the ineffective education system, and if it’s true, it’s almost unthinkable. “The children in school today,” she said, “will be the first generation of Americans to be less well-educated than their parents.”28

Rhee, now CEO of StudentsFirst – an organization trying to help improve education in America at a grassroots level – has focused many of her reform efforts on trying to ensure that high-quality teachers occupy the classrooms of high-need schools. Rhee spent some time on the front lines herself, teaching elementary school in downtown


Baltimore through Teach For America in the 1990’s before, in 1997, founding The New Teacher Project. Whether Rhee can have as much impact on schools outside of D.C. as she did in charge of the country’s worst-performing school district – where she oversaw great improvements in students’ test math and reading test scores across the District – remains to be seen. But through her relentless pursuit of what is right for students and by continually speaking her mind, Rhee has become a champion – albeit, a polarizing one – of education reform in America. Given her background in TFA and in beginning TNTP, Rhee is also among the foremost advocates of alternate-certification teachers teaching in high-need schools. The ever-growing prevalence of alternate-certification teachers, especially in urban areas, shows that their presence in the neediest classrooms will continue to determine, as directly as anyone’s, how quickly and permanently the gap is narrowed.

**What is Alternate Certification?**

The “alternate route” has been defined typically as any pathway into teaching other than the traditional, college- or university-based four-year teacher-preparation program.29 Alternately certified educators – also known as “early-entry” teachers – were unheard of thirty years ago. In 1985, only 275 teachers were prepared through alternate certification to enter the classroom. Today, there are more than 60,000 teachers across America certified alternatively – a trend that took off after 1995; there are almost 1,000 percent more early-entry teachers now than there were 20 years ago.30

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30 Ibid.
The channels through which men and women go to become certified vary, but Teach For America and The New Teacher Project have been two of the most prominent. Since 1990, when Wendy Kopp founded TFA, the organization has recruited and trained more than 40,000 teachers to head into high-need schools. Since 2000, when the Rhee-founded TNTP gained in popularity, it has sent off more than 32,000 teachers to the classroom. Certainly, there are other programs – many others. And many more than there were 30 years ago: In 1983, only eight states across the country had 12 authorized early-entry programs – period. By 2006, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had a total of 485 authorized alternative-certification programs. TFA and TNTP, however, continue to recruit and certify more than anyone else. In the case of TFA especially, it recruits some of the most high-achieving college graduates in the country – which is not to say those recruits are the most highly qualified teachers in the country. But they can become among the very best teachers in American schools.

Are TFA and TNTP teachers – and alternate-certification teachers, in general – the answer to closing the achievement gap? That has been the source of much debate for years. It is difficult to determine just how effective early-entry teachers are from year to year. For example, there is no authoritative source to provide comprehensive data on student achievement under the tutelage of alternate-certification teachers. Reading scores

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for eighth graders around the country – at certain types of schools, with certain
socioeconomic factors considered, of certain races – can be calculated easily on the
National Center for Education Statistics Web site. Even though the NCES’s interactive
database is impressively thorough – a few clicks of the mouse, and one can find almost any piece of data he or she might desire regarding education – there is no reading data for eighth graders who have been taught by alternate-certification teachers.

Older data reveals that many of the alternate-certification teachers in America work in high-need schools. Statistics from almost 10 years ago show that about 50 percent of early-entry teachers taught in urban schools, compared with close to 25 percent of regular-certification teachers. And Karen Hammerness and Michelle Reininger, in their article *Who Goes into Early-Entry Programs?*, show three major benefits to alternate-certification teachers’ being in the classroom. First, early-entry programs can recruit more academically successful people into the profession. Just because a brilliant young woman who majored in chemistry has not learned about pedagogy, classroom management or curriculum standards, does that mean she can’t effectively teach chemistry to teenagers? Second, it is clear than alternate-certification programs attract teachers with more varied ethnic and racial backgrounds. In as much as the high-need schools of America are home to more black and Hispanic students than the low-poverty schools, a higher number of black and Hispanic teachers in those schools can be important for the sake of students’ ability to relate to their teachers. Third, alternate-certification programs can also attract career-changers – men and women with expertise

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in subject areas like math and science, areas in which teachers are desperately needed across the country.\textsuperscript{35} What is more, there are significantly more males teaching via alternate-certification programs than there are males teaching through traditional routes: 30 percent of TFA members are male, while only seven percent of traditional undergraduate education majors are male.\textsuperscript{36} In urban schools, where troubled young men often lack serious male role models, an increased number of male teachers can only help the chances of a wayward young man finding a path worth following.

These may seem like clear and sensible benefits to early-entry programs, but in education reform, one side is rarely mentioned without criticism close on its heels. The negative feedback for programs like TFA and TNTP – which began in the mid-1990’s, heated up in the 2000’s and continues today – centers around the readiness of teachers whose experience teaching in the classroom can often be boiled down to a matter of a few weeks before their official first days as paid teachers in public school districts begin. Linda Darling-Hammond, a renowned professor at Columbia University’s Teacher College, has called TFA a “missionary program,” saying it benefits the teachers it temporarily helps employ more than it benefits students. (TFA teachers are compensated through their respective school districts, not through TFA.) It also sets two harmful precedents in education. First, it devalues teaching as a profession by recruiting men and women with no teaching background. There is certainly a learning curve in teaching, and to enter the country’s most struggling classrooms with no experience at all is in some


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 37-38.
ways like sending an innocent zoo-goer who appreciates the aesthetics of lions into the lions’ den to serve them dinner. Second, because of its transient nature – recruits often teach for just two years before leaving for what Darling-Hammond calls “real” jobs in law, medicine, or business – TFA furthers one of the critical problems in high-need schools: teacher retention.37

What so few critics of TFA offer, however, is a suggestion for whom should actually teach in high-need schools. If close to 75 percent of regular-certification teachers are not teaching in urban schools, then which teachers will do the job? While that answer may elude certain voices in education reform, the impressive pedigrees of those raising their hands, eager to enter the neediest classrooms, cannot be ignored. In 2011, TFA had to sift through close to 48,000 applications – from which it chose just more than 5,000 to join its 2011 corps of teachers. Eight percent of the University of Michigan’s senior class applied for the program that year. Sixteen percent of Princeton’s senior class applied. Eighteen percent of Harvard’s senior class applied.38

These applicants’ entering the classroom with degrees from some of the finest institutions in the world, obviously, does not equate to their being able to help some of the world’s most troubled young men and women learn. A 20-something who has spent four years in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and can speak intelligently for hours about 19th-century British literature cannot necessarily inspire a 16-year-old with reading difficulties to sit down and try tackling Great Expectations. In as much, Darling-Hammond’s point

37 Foote, Relentless Pursuit, 33.

about TFA devaluing the teaching profession is worth debating. And it’s likely the
debate about the merit of sending alternate-certification teachers into high-need schools
will rage on for the foreseeable future. But – as is the case with many discussions in the
vast bubble of education reform – it’s far too easy to get red in the face debating the merit
of any policy or approach without ever once mentioning the word “student.” While
emotions run high in education reform because no change or solution means continual
injustice for certain young men and women, those same young men and women often
take a backseat amidst the arguing. It is important to remember the most pressing
questions: Are students learning? Are they learning more than they ever have? And if
not, how can we help them learn more?

Rhee, above the many other frustrations she encountered while leading the D.C.
schools, said the tendency to make education reform about everything except the students
is why the district had long deserved the label of nation’s worst. “The District did not
become the way that it is by accident,” she said. “There’s a complete and utter lack of
accountability for the job we’re supposed to be doing – which is producing results for
kids. … There’s this unbelievable willingness to turn a blind eye to the injustices that are
happening to kids every single day in our schools in the name of harmony amongst
adults.”

Now, through StudentsFirst, Rhee tries to emphasize the same message as TFA,
TNTP and schools like KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program): Students, children, kids –
they’re our No. 1 priority, and everything we do needs to be channeled toward helping
them make school a priority in their lives and toward helping them succeed in the

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39 Waiting for ‘Superman,’ directed by Davis Guggenheim (Participant Media, 2010),
classroom and in life. KIPP, a public charter school founded by TFA alums Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin, began humbly in 1994 with one site in Houston. Today, there are 141 KIPP schools across the country serving close to 50,000 students. The KIPP schools follow a formula that has not only led to the continued growth of their foundation, but also to serious accomplishments for their students – 80 percent of whom are from low-income families, 95 percent of whom are black or Hispanic.

KIPP’s strategy rests on five tenets: seek out and employ quality teachers; build in more daily classroom time than is traditional; set world-class standards; maintain high expectations for students; and have real accountability for students and teachers. The results have been historic: “The 1,400 students at twenty-eight KIPP schools in 22 cities who have completed three years of KIPP’s four-year middle school program have gone on average from the 34th percentile at the beginning of fifth grade to the 58th percentile at the end of seventh grade in reading and from the 44th percentile to the 83rd percentile in math,” Jay Mathews says. “Gains that great for that many low-income children in one program have never happened before.”

Whether the KIPP model, or something resembling it, can be implemented in the public school classrooms occupied by TFA and TNTP teachers – and children of similar backgrounds to those inside the KIPP classrooms – is a question for reformers who will in all likelihood dwell on the contractual obligations more school hours would necessitate as opposed to the clear benefits of a longer school day. This frustrates many voices in


education who feel like stereotypes continue to be perpetuated in high-need areas because this kind of model cannot be put into work on a grander scale. “Twenty-five years ago,” said Jonathan Alter, former senior editor Education Weekly, “there was no proof that something else worked. Well, now we know what works: We know that it’s just a lie that disadvantaged kids can’t learn. We know that if you apply the right accountability standards, you can get fabulous results. So why would we do something else?”

To snap our fingers and wish that the KIPP model were adapted to our public schools system to facilitate historic progress across the country is, of course, idealistic – and it ignores one reality: Special, special people teach in the schools where the monumental improvement is taking place. Special humans – ones who have made teaching in high-need areas their life’s work – live all over the country. They wake up and go to the country’s toughest schools every day, making a difference. They have emotionally taxing daily charges, demanding hours and – oftentimes – stressful, unrealistic expectations placed on them. (All teachers in high-need schools who care about seeing their students achieve do.) In as much, their lives and livelihoods are not necessarily desirable, pleasant or sustainable. Which begs the question – how easy is it to retain the teachers who come in, demand certain standards, enforce high expectations, bust their ass, and get results? How difficult are their lives? Is it realistic at all to expect them to remain healthy, to remain sane, to remain teachers?

Special Humans Needed Here

“When you see a great teacher,” renowned educator Geoffrey Canada said, “you are seeing a work of art. A master. And it is as unbelievable, I think, as seeing a great

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athlete – or seeing a great musician.” This is true of all great teachers, sure – but especially of the educators in America’s worst schools, the ones who can every day get around and through and over all of the unsettling social realities beyond their control and teach their students in a highly effective way.

All teachers in high-need schools trying to educate the country’s most troubled boys and girls – teachers with traditional certification and those who have begun teaching via early-entry programs, at public and charter schools alike – face a harrowing challenge and gain a memorable experience. The challenge can often be the most trying of a teacher’s life. The experience can be painfully scarring, upliftingly fulfilling – and all things in between. Mine certainly was.

When I began teaching at a juvenile detention center in Washington, D.C., in 2009, I had visions of converting wayward teenagers into focused, upstanding, educated young men and women. My idealistic approach was almost derailed, and certainly shaken, on my very first day of teaching. A student welcomed me to the classroom with the coldest of stares, piercing my eyes with hers, saying “Fuck you” without even opening her mouth. When I placed a worksheet on her desk and offered a “Hello, what’s your name?” she quickly stood up, snatched the paper, held it a foot from my face, ripped it into 100 pieces, and sat back down, fuming as the shreds of white dropped to the floor. I had never been treated this way in my life by anyone – much less a 15-year-old girl. I wanted to show my resilience to the other 10 girls in the classroom – now giggling, pointing, awaiting my reaction – so I went back to my stack of papers, returned to the steaming student, and put another worksheet in front of her. If her first greeting was

angry, her second was apoplectic. “Who the fuck are you, nigga? Get the fuck out my face!” The words flew out with unchecked fury as she sprang out of her seat, and this time, she remained standing, demanding an answer. “You don’t want to participate today?” I whispered, my voice cracking. She widened her stare and held it for a moment. “Man, get the fuck out my face!” She then sat down, burying her head in her forearms, disappearing for the remainder of class. \(^{45}\)

In the grand scheme of all I experienced while teaching in D.C. for two years, this student’s lack of decorum reached the extreme. But witnessing similar outbursts that approached comparable volume – and were fueled by an initially unidentifiable source of anger – quickly became a part of my routine at school. (In my first few months of teaching, I provoked some of these outbursts due to my unwavering insistence on students’ participating.) The students’ abrasive actions, their vulgar speech, their obsession with guns, their proclivity for confrontation and physical violence – all of this overwhelmed me in my first few months of “teaching,” if you can call it that. (I basically ran around the classroom and begged kids to fill out worksheets. I had no idea what I was doing.) What bothered me most, though, was that many of the children completely lacked any positive associations with school. Trying to convince them of the countless benefits of learning and of reaching milestones in education – a GED for many of these young men and women would have been a great triumph – was like trying to spit south into a southerly wind. When I walked into the classroom, they didn’t want to listen to a word I had to say, much less dig in, commit to a goal, work as hard as they could for a

while, and then, perhaps, master one of the many curriculum standards D.C. Public Schools expected them to.

To draw hard and fast conclusions about high-poverty students from my anecdotes at the juvenile detention center, however, is dangerous, because we were trying to execute a traditional school curriculum in a place that was altogether nontraditional. The reality, I discovered after finally developing a rapport with some of my students midway through my first year of teaching, is that they were all capable of learning. There were many hurdles to that learning, sure – some of which I cleared while working in D.C. – but those hurdles wore me down. They tested my character every day. They made me regret moving to D.C. and leaving my career as a journalist. They made me want to break down and weep in front of teenagers. And then, when least expected, the rare overcoming of the hurdles made me want to cry tears of joy. The triumphs I experienced while teaching in D.C. – few and far between – stay with me today as some of the most satisfying moments of my career. But the reality is that they usually came on the heels of weeks upon weeks of drudgery, disappointment and doubt. The ups and downs of my emotions – and the prevailing negative vibe I felt upon entering my school every day – ultimately drove me from the high-need classroom to another school.

I now work outside of D.C., in Bethesda, Maryland, at a private boys school where the students’ families pay thousands of dollars a year to ensure a top-notch educational experience for their sons. I feel guilt sometimes when I think back to my experience teaching in D.C. and my departure from my school. But the more powerful emotion I feel when reflecting on the D.C. schools is a respect and admiration for the teachers who have made a lifelong career of connecting with the boys and girls of the
city, teaching them every day and cementing themselves as role models in the students’ lives. They are special people.

This thesis will hone in on the experiences of those special humans – and of the people who have tried to do what they do and failed, or fled, or, simply, moved on – while trying to capture the essence of their lives as teachers. It will examine their lives in the classroom, their lives at home, and the fluctuating status of their temperaments throughout the course of their journeys. The daily sights and sounds and often traumatic memories that emanate from behind the desks and in the hallways of urban schools can have a profound effect on the dispositions of sane men and women. Those daily shocks can unsettle, disorient and even redefine a human. They can also make the sane go insane, turn the once-determined hopeless, convert optimists to cynics and whittle the strong to weak. Those brave enough to enter these classrooms intend to help mold the lives of the young. But, by deciding to teach in urban America, they can never anticipate how powerfully and permanently their own lives will be shaped. The experience of the teacher in the high-need school is a plight, a fight, a pilgrimage.
CHAPTER 2

ALTERNATE-CERTIFICATION PROGRAMS AND THEIR IMPACT

When Dr. Frank Wells finished his first year as principal of Locke High School in Los Angeles in 2005, he was miffed by the lack of loyalty he felt from Teach For America teachers at his school. They had signed up to teach at one of the country’s lowest-performing schools, and while they made up 20 percent of Wells’s staff, 12 TFA members had resigned by the end of the year. “They are not committed to the community,” Wells said at the time,\(^1\) knowing full well the initial TFA commitment is two years, but also knowing his students needed stability. Entering his second year, Wells intended on hiring fewer teachers through TFA and more with traditional certification. He couldn’t have transience be one of the defining characteristics of both his students and his teachers. Ultimately, though, as Donna Foote writes in her book *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach For America*, Wells “found the quality of the 13 new TFA candidates he hired to teach in 2006 much higher than that of those from other, more traditional credentialing programs, and he thought the passion they displayed for the mission could not be faked.”\(^2\) And by the end of his second year at Locke, Wells’s attitude about TFA had done a 180-degree turn. “Teach For America has literally saved this school,” he said. “If you took all the TFA teachers out of Locke, we would have 40 percent roving subs and mass chaos. We would not be able to survive.”\(^3\)


\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid., 40.
Now, after almost a quarter-century of existence, TFA has a commanding presence in high-need schools that appears to be strengthening. Every summer, the young men and women accepted by the organization – corps members, as TFA calls them – attend intense, five-week training institutes in different parts of the country. The institutes are rigorous introductions to teaching, where the corps members are not only learning about classroom management, curriculum and pedagogy but are also assuming their positions at the heads of classrooms for the first time. Critics of TFA point to this short training as inadequate preparation for teachers, evidence of their being rushed into schools. They also emphasize the likelihood of TFA corps members leaving the profession after their two-year commitments; the teachers’ leaving, obviously, eliminates the possibility of their becoming more effective with experience. And yet, struggling schools continue to hire class after class after class of TFA corps members – sometimes to replace the two-and-done departing TFA teachers, yes, but also with the fair expectation that they will facilitate major change. Effectiveness in the classroom is determined by many other factors beyond years of experience.

Multiple studies over the past 10 years show that TFA corps members have developed quickly into highly effective teachers – not merely young men and women willing to serve their county on the domestic front. One 2013 study headed by the U.S. Department of Education found that secondary students of TFA math teachers, on average, scored higher on end-of-year math assessments than students taught by teachers from traditional certification programs – and other alternate-certification programs. The

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4 Ibid., 42.

students of TFA teachers scored 0.07 standard deviations higher than their peers – equating to almost three months more of learning. Another study – this in 2012, from Harvard – examined the performance of TFA first-year teachers in Los Angeles and showed that they proved to be modestly more effective in promoting academic growth among third to ninth graders than other first-year teachers. And while the pedigree of TFA corps members does not correlate directly with their effectiveness as teachers, it certainly does not hurt: close to 80 percent of the organization’s participants attended what one study called a “competitive college.” Another factor helping TFA’s staying power: its championing of diversity. In 2013, 39 percent of its incoming teachers were people of color. A combination of these facts may be why 84 percent of principals said they would hire another TFA teacher if given the opportunity.

While TFA is not emblematic of all alternate-certification programs, or even the majority – only 46 percent of early-entry teachers teach in a large city – it is certainly the poster child for alternate-certification programs in high-need schools. The most comparable program is The New Teacher Project, the umbrella organization for teaching

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6 Ibid., xix.


10 Ibid., 1.

fellowships currently in twenty-five cities. Since its inception in 1997, TNTP, which also tries to find high-quality teachers to place in high-need schools, has had a presence in 200 districts.\textsuperscript{12} While TNTP maybe fails to match TFA’s cachet – closer to seventy percent of its recruits come to the organization from “selective colleges,”\textsuperscript{13} as opposed to TFA’s 80 percent – it is still very selective: TNTP accepts just 13 percent of applicants nationwide.\textsuperscript{14} Its impact in some of the country’s biggest cities – NYC Teaching Fellows, DC Teaching Fellows and Chicago Teaching Fellows have trained close to 20,000 teachers since 2000 – is significant.\textsuperscript{15} More than 80 percent of students in schools with a TNTP presence are black or Hispanic.\textsuperscript{16} And with a focus beyond simply recruiting and training talent – TNTP also prides itself in innovation, such as creating effective teacher evaluation practices and generating breakthrough ideas in education reform\textsuperscript{17} – the organization has received wide praise. “The findings suggest,” \textit{The New York Times} wrote in a 2008 editorial, “that high-quality programs … like The New


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., xxvii.


Teacher Project have a big role to play in the effort to improve teacher preparation nationally.\textsuperscript{18}

Data shows that teachers recruited through TNTP have been highly effective – or just as effective – as all other teachers. One study, headed by Louisiana State University and A&M College, determined that students taught by TNTP math teachers in Louisiana score on average five points higher than students of other teachers. The average student in Louisiana eligible for free or reduced-price lunch not taught by TNTP teachers, meanwhile, will fall behind other students by more than two points per year.\textsuperscript{19} A much broader examination of TNTP math teachers – conducted by the U.S. Department of Education – found that their students scored similarly on end-of-year math assessments to students of comparison teachers, deeming TNTP teachers to be neither more nor less effective than their traditionally-certified peers.\textsuperscript{20}

In Wisconsin’s largest city, Milwaukee, one organization shows how all alternate-certification programs are not alike – and certainly unlike TFA and TNTP. The Metropolitan Multicultural Teacher Education Program (MMTEP) has a much different recruiting focus than the elite programs, and perhaps as a result, its percentage of participants from a “competitive college” – eight percent – pales in comparison to the


rates of both TFA and TNTP. MMTEP, rather than targeting recent graduates from top universities, looks for applicants with classroom experience – admitting only those with at least one year as teacher’s assistants under their belts. Eighty percent of MMTEP teachers are people of color – 50 percent above the national average for all alternate-certification programs. But from TFA to TNTP to MMTEP and everything in between, the extent of what we know about alternate-certification programs is varied and limited.

We know that seventy percent of alternate-certification teachers enter the profession at age 30 or older. We know that almost 40 percent of them are male – a far cry from the seven percent of traditionally certified teachers whom are male. (Nationally, the teacher labor force is made up of mostly white females, Hammerness and Reininger write. “Three out of four elementary and secondary school teachers are women,” they say, “and eight out of 10 are white.”) We know that almost 50 percent of alternate-certification teachers are career-changers – coming to teaching from other, non-education occupations the year before entering their programs. (This reality means that many students with career-changers as teachers may gain real-world perspective that

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22 Ibid., 38.

23 Ibid., 36.


25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.


28 Ibid., 33.
teachers straight out of college can’t provide as easily. For instance, seven percent of alternate-certification teachers previously worked in sales and marketing, six percent in finance and accounting, and four percent in engineering.)\textsuperscript{29} We know that about the same number of early-entry teachers would not have entered the field of education had it not been for the alternate-route options they sought. We know that alternate-certification teachers value – above all other factors in determining their route to teaching – “being able to teach while getting certified” and “receiving a teacher’s salary and benefits.”\textsuperscript{30} But why don’t we know more?

It’s important to remember that less than two decades ago, there were fewer than 7,000 early-entry teachers in the country – total. Now there are close to 60,000.\textsuperscript{31} This rapid rate of growth makes the nature of research on alternate-certification programs “new,” Hammerness and Reininger write, and can make “studies conducted even a few years ago … seem out-of-date.”\textsuperscript{32} But because of the proliferation of alternate-certification teachers – and because programs like TFA and TNTP have been successful in some of America’s most troubled schools – Pam Grossman and Susanna Loeb believe the conversation has already shifted from whether early-entry programs are credible and effective to why more school districts haven’t adopted their practices. “While there may


not be one best way to prepare teachers,” they write, “all current forms of preparation could be substantially improved with better evidence of the characteristics of teacher education that have the greatest impact on novice teachers’ teaching ability and impact on student learning.”

This certainly implies programs like KIPP – the charter school begun by two TFA alums that has facilitated some of the nation’s most historic academic gains in high-need areas. But even amidst the most successful programs – TFA, TNTP and KIPP included – there is widespread teacher attrition. Numbers on a page that show student growth and scream success do not equate to happiness among the men and women who seriously sacrifice to help those students learn. The teachers’ lifestyles aren’t always sustainable. Their situations are often far from admirable. And, oftentimes, it’s not the troubled kids that fatigue them, but rather, the frustrating administrators for whom the teachers work.

So why don’t teachers in high-need schools stay – especially the good ones? The reasons include lifestyle and lack of energy and poor administrators. But, really, they’re countless. And they often hit hard from the very first day teachers enter the classroom.

“Some new teachers find it hard to imagine finishing the first year,” Foote says.

“Teaching in a low-income school right out of college is a shock to the system – like getting really old really quickly, if you ask some TFA recruits. You shed your old skin, the one you were so comfortable in. A new skin develops and a new person emerges, one who is completely different from the old person. When you’re 22, that takes some adjusting.”

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34 Foote, *Relentless Pursuit*, 42.
Not everyone can handle that adjustment. Nor can many teachers in high-need schools stomach the ineptitude and the leadership styles of their respective administrations. In 2012, TNTP released a study called “The Irreplaceables” – one manifestation of TNTP’s penchant for innovation – in which it concluded that many good teachers in high-need schools depart their schools not because of the sometimes troublesome students they’re charged with teaching, but rather as a result of the neglect and inattention they received from their school leaders. One teacher, Sarah, clearly had a good rapport with her students and had facilitated serious progress with them. Still, she was leaving her school. “I get strong results with students consistently, year after year after year,” she said. “These kids have learned so much and come so far. They’ve really stepped up to the plate. But if they go back to a bad teacher, what good did I do?”

Sarah, a highly effective teacher with more than thirty years of experience, resigned from her school by handing in her paperwork and receiving no word – none at all – from her principal. “If he would have said, ‘What’s it going to take for me to get you to stay?’ that’s all he had to do,” Sarah said. “Most people, if they had a really dynamic teacher, wouldn’t they say, ‘What’s it going to take?’”

Sarah’s frustrations are certainly not unique; they’re not even uncommon. Close to thirty percent of the highly effective teachers – referred to as “Irreplaceables” in TNTP’s study – leave their schools in the first two years they’re there, and almost 50 percent of the Irreplaceables leave their schools within five years. The study examined

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36 Ibid., 1.
90,000 teachers in urban school districts – not simply TNTP teachers, but teachers with all types of certifications. The study found that teachers who tend to facilitate three months more growth in their students than the average teacher and close to six months more than low performing teachers – the Irreplaceables – made up about twenty percent of all teachers but had a much lower likelihood of being replaced upon departure by another teacher of similar quality. In fact, low-performing schools were found to have less than a 10 percent chance of replacing top teachers with another high-quality teacher, another Irreplaceable. Average schools have a one in six chance of finding a comparable teacher after letting go an Irreplaceable. The most alarming datum, perhaps, amidst all of these sad attrition statistics is that more than 75 percent of Irreplaceables leaving their schools said they would have, like Sarah, stayed if their main issue for leaving merely would have been addressed. “This situation would be unfathomable in almost any other profession where individual performance matters,” the study says. “Imagine if star quarterbacks routinely left pro football teams and those teams made no effort to convince them to stay, only to backfill their places with less capable players, leading to prolonged losing streaks. Fans would be enraged, and the coach and general manager would almost certainly be shown the door. Yet a similar scene plays out every year in schools across the country, where the stakes for students and their families are much higher than points on a scoreboard.”

37 Ibid., 14.
38 Ibid., 2.
39 Ibid., 4.
40 Ibid., 13.
41 Ibid., 13.
That rationale from TNTP puts the big picture in great perspective. In almost any situation, the best strategy for success is putting the best people available in the best position possible. But, as TNTP found, “The primary retention strategy in most schools is not having a strategy at all. . . . District administrators generally do not prioritize or hold principals accountable for smarter retention decisions.”\textsuperscript{42}

It’s far from a complete picture simply to paint administrators in a poor light and say they’re the reason for attrition among teachers in high-need schools. Alternate-certification teachers arrive in the field of education from a plethora of other fields, yes, but also often with the expectation that they will only teach for two years – that’s all – in their lives. Some teachers who commit to programs like TFA expect, on the front end, to remain in education for just two years but change their minds along the way. Many don’t even make it to two years. But alternate-certification teachers tend to stay at their schools for a similar duration as their traditionally certified peers. One would think there exists a distinct correlation between the short time it takes to get certified and the investment one has in his or her position. The reality is that while about 82 percent of alternate-certification teachers remain in their position after one year of teaching, only about 85 percent of traditional-certification teachers remain.\textsuperscript{43} The small difference suggests that, in the grand scheme of things, a teacher’s certification has but a minor influence – if any at all – on their decision, at the end of a school year, to stay or go.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 14.

What about a teacher’s motivation to work relentlessly toward narrowing the achievement gap? It’s the hope of programs like TFA that every one of its recruits will buy in to the goal and pursue it every day as determinedly as they can. In as much, the program has gained a reputation for being messianic. “Recruits worked long hours, were expected to lead disciplined lives governed by a set of values that included humility and respect, and believed passionately in their mission,” Foote writes. “Phillip [Gedeon] was a true disciple. He considered it a privilege to be a member.”

Having joined TFA in 2005, Phillip moved to Los Angeles from Connecticut and was assigned to teach at Locke High School. He was nervous but squarely focused on facilitating progress in his classroom: “I have these kids for 170 days,” he thought. “There’s a lot to accomplish. This is make-or-break time.”

Closing the achievement gap was not Shoshana Gitlin’s top priority. She came to Washington, D.C., in 2009 from Pennsylvania eager simply to teach for the first time – a profession toward which her high school biology teacher had unknowingly driven her. Joining D.C. Teaching Fellows – TNTP’s D.C.-based program – Shoshana was excited and, she thought, ready to teach. But she had no grand aspirations of saving every one of her students. Eli Savit had come to New York City in 2005 from Michigan, gearing up to teach eighth grade U.S. history – with the achievement gap as his overarching focus. “Not narrowing it – closing it,” Eli said. After a five-week training institute in Philadelphia before Day No. 1 in his own Bronx classroom, Eli “didn’t feel unprepared,” he said. “But I don’t think that you’re ever going to be fully prepared to start teaching – unless you’ve done it.”

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44 Foote, Relentless Pursuit, 7.

What Phillip, Shoshana and Eli experienced during their first years of teaching – in the classrooms and the hallways and the nooks and the crannies of their schools – permeated their lives. While each had begun teaching right after graduating – from Connecticut College, Penn State University and Kalamazoo (Michigan) College, respectively – each had entered the field for slightly different reasons. That is the reality for all of the teachers who will be discussed in this thesis. There can be no doubt, however, that by choosing to teach where Phillip, Shoshana, Eli and the other teachers examined in this project taught, they all embarked on a journey that detached them from what they had known, from what had been normal to them, from “an earlier fixed point in the social structure.”

They were, suddenly, pilgrims. Some of them came out on the other side of their detachment transformed, influenced significantly by all they had seen, by those they had taught, by the effect of their new daily charges. Others reacted to the detachment in a less pronounced way – changed a bit, sure, but with their sense of self, their confidence and their view of the world well in tact upon completion of the pilgrimage. For all, though, the pilgrimage of teaching in high-need schools necessitated, facilitated and accelerated an important transition – one that, for some, continues today.


CHAPTER 3
TEACHING AS PILGRIMAGE: THE THEORY OF LIMINALITY EXPLAINED

The workday of a schoolteacher is, at a basic level, a release from mundane structure.¹ There is the morning – pre-workday. There is school. And then there is the evening – post-workday. Whatever occurs in the morning and the evening, it’s safe to say, occurs within the rough confines of a routine. It may involve the brushing of teeth, the cooking of meals, interacting with family. But in that middle of the day – the school realm – any idea of routine is an intention, not a surety. It will have few – or maybe none – of the attributes of the morning or the evening realms.²

To boil down a teacher’s life to one school day and put it under a microscope is, essentially, to examine a micro-pilgrimage. The teacher crosses a threshold in the morning by, first, leaving home and, second, by entering her classroom. She then, over the next seven hours or so, encounters – and engages with – the countless and unpredictable stimuli that occur as a result of interacting with young people. (Perhaps she will have to break up a fight between boys, or reprimand a student for cheating, or soothe a crying girl, or sing and dance in front of her students to drive home a concept. The persona attached to the teacher facing these stimuli – be it stern, or timid, or confident, or funny – may be predominant and vary little. But on one given day – on a given micro-pilgrimage – that persona is ambiguous. Teachers don’t know what any one school day will bring. Students may be present or absent. Lessons may elicit yawns or

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² Ibid., 249.
laughs. Routines may march on as scheduled, or they may deviate severely. What sticks with a teacher one day – especially in a high-need school, where the details of students’ lives are more dynamite than they are minutiae – can never be anticipated.) Then, when those seven hours or so of the school day expire, the teacher returns home, ending the micro-pilgrimage. A teacher’s school day, like a pilgrimage, takes them from point A to point B and back to point A again – from morning, to school, to evening. A teacher’s career, then – to extend the metaphor – takes them on a memorable journey with unanticipated effects that shape the person she is. Undoubtedly, that journey is a pilgrimage.

Projecting pilgrimage onto a secular idea like teaching may seem unorthodox or ill-fitting given that pilgrimage, historically, has been an important component of the world’s major religions – and predominantly associated with religion in general. But, as we will see in this chapter, the connections between teaching and pilgrimage are many, and they are substantial. Pilgrimage is a journey that signifies the passage from one state or status to another. It can also help enable that transition – not just within a given religion, but within a society or hierarchy. French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, one of the first modern thinkers to examine transition and ritual seriously, delves into the intricacies of transition by focusing on rites de passage (rites of transition) in his early twentieth-century work. In doing so, van Gennep shows that transition is marked by both a clear beginning and a clear end – and by a far more ambiguous middle: the liminal period. These three phases of the rites de passage – separation, limen (or margin), and aggregation – apply practically to the idea of pilgrimage and help explain the disorientation that can occur on a pilgrimage. Separation “comprises symbolic behavior

\[3\] Ibid., 2.
signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or both.” The limen, meanwhile, is the realm of ambiguity, with “few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.” Aggregation – also called reincorporation – is where the transition, or passage, is “consummated. The ritual subject … is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type.”

Amidst the three phases, the pronounced disorientation takes place, specifically, during the limen.

While van Gennep introduces the idea of liminality in 1908, he never explicitly discusses pilgrimage, and it isn’t until about sixty years later that liminality is explored thoroughly – by British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner. Through a series of writings that span more than a decade, Turner shows how liminality can be a vehicle for discussing more than simply an individual’s religious threshold. Liminality applies to “all phases of decisive cultural change,” Turner says – pilgrimage, notably – and in as much, it is a fitting theory for discussing the transition undergone by those entering high-need schools to teach for the first time.

The subjects of the pilgrimage, the pilgrims – in this instance, the early-entry teachers – often begin their journeys by separating from a certain norm. Most alternate-certification teachers come to high-need schools either directly from undergraduate

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institutions or from other professions; consequently, their foray into the classroom marks a detachment from whatever previous daily norms they knew. The subsequent days, weeks, months, years – however long they decide to teach – usually bear little resemblance to a teacher’s previous or future states. All that ensues in that new realm following Day One of teaching – until the final day – exists within the limen, or the margin. All that ensues is therefore liminal, and here, the pilgrim’s condition is ambiguous – a key attribute of liminality, Turner says, because pilgrims “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.”

The pilgrim in this case cannot entirely avoid classification: he or she is a first-year teacher, and surely they’re male or female. Perhaps they teach math, or history, or English. And maybe they’re stern. Or timid. Or confident. Or funny. But any associative titles, labels or descriptions of pilgrims in the midst of their experiences at high-need schools are indeterminate; not until their run as a teacher in their respective school ends can the pilgrim realize a stable state, with customary norms. On and after that last day of teaching in a high-need school, a teacher leaves the limen and enters the aggregation phase, consummating their passage. Only then, after the liminal period, can a teacher be deemed successful, or effective, or veteran – or whatever characteristic fits. Former pilgrim, certainly, would apply to all.

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7 Turner, Ritual Process, 95.

8 Ibid., 94-95.
While Turner, who died in 1983, discussed pilgrimage mostly in a religious context, we can infer that he would have considered new alternate-certification teachers in struggling schools to be pilgrims. Turner focused most of his early career on ritual processes, spending a significant amount of time in Zambia following the Ndembu tribe. He devoted much of the last decade of his life to examining pilgrimage more pointedly, partnering with his wife, Edith, to travel the globe. They studied pilgrimage centers – like the Basilica of Guadalupe, north of Mexico City, and St. Patrick’s Purgatory, on Station Island in Ireland – where hordes of pilgrims flock daily, and voluntarily, to visit their religious shrines. Those pilgrims enter a liminal phase upon beginning their journeys – probably unwittingly, given the obscurity of liminality as an idea – a state which, as Turner liked to say, is “betwixt and between” normality. Edith Turner, now a lecturer at the University of Virginia, thought that the concept of liminality was odd. “Vic … spread his attention to liminality,” she said. “He focused on Christianity and those truly sacred and particularized times that arise in change or in rites of passage, where there is little of the normal idea of time and space.”

Turner himself thought that, by studying pilgrimage for such a long time, his attention had been directed toward “the dynamics of ideological change and persistence” – two qualities absolutely vital for teaching, and surviving, in high-need schools.

Turner’s early assertions on liminality relate to rituals – and the transitions occurring therein. In this case, the subjects are not pilgrims, but rather, “neophytes” –

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people who have just started learning or doing something\textsuperscript{11} – or “liminars,” people in the midst of a liminal period. Turner emphasizes the idea of the threshold in ritual and how, once it is crossed, liminars “have no status, property, insignia … indicating rank or role.”\textsuperscript{12} Often, that is because the liminars are homologous – say, from one tribe, like the Ndembu. But not all neophytes come from the same place or believe the same things.

To effectuate that notion, new teachers’ pasts matter little – if at all – once they set foot in the classroom. What matters most is how they interact with their students – what they can make their students do, and what they can make their students learn. Their college degree, their upbringing, their socioeconomic status – even, at the end of the day, their number of years in teaching – all matter less than whatever situation lies directly in front of them and how they engage with it. Whether they can change. Whether they can persist. These qualities matter. (That is not to say a teacher with 20 years of experience is unlikely to have a greater effect on a class than a teacher with 20 days of experience. It’s just unfair and untrue to say the senior teachers, or those with tenure, are universally better-equipped to engage with high-need students than the green teachers.) Teachers in high-need schools, after all, share a common bond – a “communitas” – because of their shared charge: to help close the achievement gap. And some are more cut out for meeting that challenge than others. In time, the identity of the highly effective teachers becomes clear. But during that initial foray into the classroom, the communitas is more pronounced than any notion of individual status or rank. Regarding pilgrims after they pass the threshold, Turner says, “It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to

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\item \textsuperscript{12} Turner, \textit{Ritual Process}, 95.
\end{itemize}
a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable
them to cope with their new station in life. Among themselves, neophytes tend to
develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism.”

**Classroom to classroom communitas**

Not unlike soldiers shoulder-to-shoulder in the trenches during war or college
basketball players on a close-knit team making a deep NCAA tournament run, alternate-
certification teachers in high-need schools develop a strong reliance on one another –
during their first years, especially – to survive and, eventually, thrive in their respective
school districts. The closeness, the reliance and the camaraderie alive among peers in
war or in team sports or in teaching cannot be specifically designed or structured. While
chemistry and togetherness may be the hope of a commander, or a coach, or a principal,
the idea of communitas is more of an organic phenomenon that cannot be conjured.

Turner sees communitas – or “antistructure,” as he also calls it – as an ideal in society.
He defines communitas as:

A relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion,
between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all
kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances. It is a liminal phenomenon which
combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship.
The distinction between structure and communitas is not the same as that between
secular and sacred; communitas is an essential and generic human bond. The
bonds of communitas are undifferentiated, egalitarian, direct, extant,
nonrational, existential … spontaneous, immediate, concrete, not abstract. It is
part of ‘serious life.’ It does not merge identities; it liberates them from
conformity if society is to continue to operate in an orderly fashion. … It is richly
charged with affects, mainly pleasurable. It has something magical about it.
Those who experience communitas have a feeling of endless power.14

13 Ibid.

To the neophyte preparing to endure an arduous ritual, or to the pilgrim hoping to maximize his experience away from home, communitas is both helpful and, perhaps, necessary. To the first-year teacher working, say, in Chicago through TNTP, communitas among peers in her Chicago cohort results from the shared experiences of the members. There is solace for the teacher in knowing that everyone else in the cohort has undertaken the same challenge and is facing similar obstacles each day. And there is strength in the sharing of their daily tumults and triumphs. They may feel on an island initially, but by the time the threshold is crossed, Turner says, the neophyte is more aware of his place among others. “The decision to go on pilgrimage takes place within the individual but brings him into fellowship with like-minded souls, both on the way and at the shrine.”

What initially brings teachers together upon entering the high-need classroom is a sort of leveling. Regardless of gender, age, race, birthplace – or any other distinguishing factor – first-year alternative-certification teachers are homologous for their given school district at that specific time. No teacher has more experience there than any other, and that shared newness makes the teachers equals – or level neophytes. While this is not identical to Ndembu boys readying for their circumcision rites – there is a stricter homology here, among boys from the same tribe, than among teachers entering the same district together – it is nonetheless similar. Turner, who studies the Ndembu closely, finds that the night before the ritual, circumcisers sing to the neophytes’ mothers. One line in their song stands out as emblematic of the communitas shared by the boys: “Even

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15 Ibid., 30.
if your child is a chief’s son, tomorrow he will be like a slave.”

This idea of leveling parallels a Western religious tradition discussed by Turner – the initiation of the monks of St. Benedict – where, for the monks to devote themselves entirely to God, they must adhere to a strict set of rules designed to make them all equal. The monastery is instructed that, to prepare the men properly, there should be “no distinction of persons” in the monastery; no one should “be loved more than another;” and that anyone of noble birth ought not to be “raised above him who was formerly a slave.” These sacred rituals and principles encapsulate communitas just as the secular practice of teaching embraces it. No matter the pedigree, no matter the upbringing, a teacher entering a high-need school in Classroom 204 is in store, more or less, for the same experience as the teacher in Classroom 205. Whether the classroom welcome is raw and rude or whether it’s warm and seamless, well, that depends on the teacher.

**Obeying the Charge**

Teachers who can relish transition, embrace equality, show humility, exude unselfishness and remain determined in the face of hardship will have an easier time making that welcome warm and seamless than those preoccupied with state and status and sagacity and position. This is not a subjective list specially contoured to prove a certain point. No, these are some of Turner’s “properties of liminality.” The former traits exemplify what is liminal, while the latter are binary opposites, embodying what Turner calls a “status system.” In addressing these properties, Turner strongly equates the sacred and the secular, stating that “many of these movements cut right across tribal

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17 Ibid., 108.

18 Ibid., 106.
and national divisions during their initial momentum.”\textsuperscript{19} He says that there exists a homology between the liminal periods in certain phases of history and the liminal periods in important societal rituals. As long as there is a passing “from one cultural state to another,” then both movements are “essentially phenomena of transition.”\textsuperscript{20} (Turner lists 26 properties of liminality – all of which certainly do \textit{not} apply to teaching – ranging from “anonymity” to “disregard for personal appearance” to “suspension of kinship rights and obligations.”)\textsuperscript{21}

Defining the teacher’s passing from state to state to state – and pinpointing his arrival at that third, final state of the pilgrimage – can be difficult, particularly after focusing on the leveling that occurs past the initial threshold. This brings us back to van Gennep’s \textit{rites de passage} – and the idea that aggregation follows liminality. Imagine, say, a twenty-two-year-old who becomes a TFA corps member one month after graduating from Harvard. She teaches for two years in an area with high-need schools, like New York City. Then she returns to Cambridge to begin law school. In this example, there is a clear separation (entering TFA), a clear limen (teaching) and a clear aggregation (leaving New York). It can certainly be said, in this scenario, that returning to the culture of Cambridge is a re-aggregation. But for many teachers – whose paths are less rigid, whose durations in the classroom are longer and, perhaps, whose aggregation phase has not yet arrived – the liminal effect of being in the high-need classroom is impossible, or not yet possible, to determine and analyze. The liminality is, rather, ongoing – and therefore, as Turner says, not just a characteristic of transition, “but also

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 112.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 111-112.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 106.
potentiality, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be.’”

Turner has a way of, in spots, broadening liminality and rendering it a phenomenon other than sacred, more than religious. He can make it seem universal.

One of Turner’s properties of liminality – “total obedience to the prophet or leader” – seems so compartmentally religious that it doesn’t initially connect to teaching. To call the teacher the leader, in this case, is to confuse the point. Since the teacher is the subject of the pilgrimage, then he or she is the one obeying – not being obeyed. Given the inherent responsibilities of a teacher and his role in the classroom vis-à-vis his students, this property becomes even more muddled. But in a theoretical interchange of the roles of teacher and student, this property of obedience shows the liminal characteristics of a teacher’s daily charge. The teacher’s job – especially at the outset of her career – is neither to obey a prophet nor to be the prophet. Instead, it is to do all she can to plan good lessons every day; to strive to learn new teaching methods and get better; to provide thorough, honest and timely feedback for her students; and to be a rock for them: consistent, present, empathetic and, if possible, charismatic. In other words, the teacher’s job is to respect the profession by respecting his students – and by doing all he can to not only educate them, but also to empower, motivate, enlighten and love them. That is “total obedience to the prophet or leader,” as Turner would say, with the “prophet” in this event being the overarching charge: to close the achievement gap. This requires an incredible amount of humility and patience. To be obedient to the charge is to be humbly obedient to the students’ desire and need to learn – in the sense

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23 Turner, Ritual Process, 111.

24 Ibid.
that there is no room for a teacher to rest on the laurels of his seniority or her authority. Really, there is no authority. In many classrooms, there is only earned respect. And the teachers who bust their asses to earn that respect – who do their jobs as laid out above – are, elementally, being totally obedient to the kids. They are respecting the kids, not as prophets and leaders, per se – but perhaps as future prophets and future leaders. These teachers know that, without respect – for their students, for their charge – then there will be no progress. In a way, that respect is their own obedience to the big picture.

There is irony here: We may expect to see the teacher-student relationship as a classic example of the leader-follower, or even the superior-inferior, or tutor-pupil, or educated-uneducated – however we want to slice it – where the obligation rests more on the shoulders of the student to meet the demands of the teacher. In that context, we are reminded of what Turner deems the opposite of liminality: societal status. For status in society to be defined, there must be structure – the opposite of communitas. Although Turner acknowledges several definitions of social structure, he says that most definitions “contain the notion of an arrangement of positions or statuses, involving the institutionalization and perdurance of groups and relationships.”

Communitas, meanwhile, happens where the distinctions are more blurred – where the students learn from the teachers, sure, but the teachers also learn from the students. Where respect – not the teacher, necessarily – reigns in the classroom. Where teachers, instead, “fall in the interstices of social structure” and “are on its margins” – two common characteristics of liminars. The reality, though, is that this idealistic relationship – this communitas in the classroom – is not honored everywhere. It’s resisted in places where students lack

\[25\text{ Ibid., 126.}\]
\[26\text{ Ibid., 125.}\]
positive associations with school, where they have been embarrassed or felt inferior in the classroom previously, where they have not felt safe in expressing their frustrations or exploring their shortcomings. Those kinds of students often harbor a grudge against teachers, and some students show that grudge in a hostile way.

School as a Shrine: Can ‘Miracles’ Occur in the Classroom?

Most alternate-certification teachers in high-need schools encounter hostility, in some form or another, in the early stages of their first years. And while it is perhaps saccharine to envision the teacher swooping in and altogether assuaging that hostility in a group of students – somehow saving them from their would-be wayward paths – the idea that such a phenomenon, or one approaching it, could be occurring in high-need schools aligns with one of Turner’s thoughts regarding pilgrimage.

All sites of pilgrimage have this in common: they are believed to be places where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again. Even where the time of miraculous healings is reluctantly conceded to be past, believers firmly hold that faith is strengthened and salvation better secured by personal exposure to the beneficent unseen presence of the Blessed Virgin or the local saint, mediated through a cherished image or painting. Miracles or the revivification of faith are everywhere regarded as rewards for undertaking long, not infrequently perilous, journeys and for having temporarily given up not only the cares but also the rewards of ordinary life.”

One of Turner’s more overtly religious ruminations, this still relates to teaching when the notion of universality is kept in mind. No one school is a shrine, just as no one school district is a pilgrimage center. High-need schools in general, though – all of them – can be seen as the collective center for this idea of the teaching pilgrimage, each classroom a potential shrine for another “miracle,” the possible site of widespread learning, or quelled hostility, or contagious positivity.

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Turner’s trip through time – “where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again” – brings to mind the model of alternate-certification programs like TFA, which recruit young men and women every single year to come in and close the achievement gap. The continuity necessary for TFA to provide school districts with high-quality candidates every year – candidates the program hopes will become highly effective teachers – depends on a perpetual willingness among young Americans to enter the high-need classroom. And even if these pilgrimages last two years at a time, like the TFA commitment, a steady stream of these “long, perilous journeys” could, as Turner says, revive the faith – and facilitate continual “miracles.”

While the idea of pilgrimage sites housing past, present and future “miracles” – perhaps historic breakthroughs for students, in this case – sounds significant, it’s important to keep in mind that the teachers in this metaphor are the pilgrims, not the students. In as much, the “miracles” or transformations or profound changes ought to occur within the teacher. That is one of the selling points of programs like TFA in recruitment: that teaching in a struggling school will do wonders for the individual. On TFA’s Web site, under the program’s mission statement, a former corps member – Alejandro Gac-Artigas, who taught in the Philadelphia area in 2009 – speaks to the effect teaching has had on him. “My experience in the classroom has been transformative not just for my students but also for me as a person and as a professional.”

Whether TFA is wise to emphasize the effect of the experience on the teacher, rather than the intended effect on thousands of students, is debatable. Certainly, though, the program must recruit widely and effectively to secure quality teachers every year – and this is just one tactic.

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for doing so. Again, though, it can feel saccharine and misguided to say a teacher’s entering a high-need school is his attempt to transform his own life. But is teaching in a needy school a modern-day *rite de passage* for a young person finishing college and entering the professional realm?

**The Purpose of Pilgrimage**

Considering that more college students today graduate in six years than in four, it’s safe to infer that many plunging toward the middle of their third decades on Earth are indecisive in some capacity or another. Pilgrimage can help quell that indecisiveness. That’s not to say teaching is the only form of pilgrimage befitting a recent grad. It could be an adventure like a backpacking trip overseas; or a more pointed religious journey, like Birthright; or a road trip across the United States to take in the domestic wonders. Or, it could be a commitment to teaching in a high-need school. After all, as Turner says, “an individual pilgrimage often originates in a vow.”

To begin teaching directly upon finishing college would be an abrupt initiation to the professional world – a social environment starkly different from the previous one. College is defined by classrooms and learning, sure, but also by a lack of responsibility, late-night food runs, dancing in dank basements and beer pong. The professional world is defined by, well, not that. The average graduate trying to bridge the gap between worlds may hit a wall. The pilgrim trying to bridge the gap, Turner says, may face an easier transition. “There is undoubtedly an initiatory quality in pilgrimage. A pilgrim is

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an initiand, entering into a new, deeper level of existence than he has known in his accustomed milieu.”\(^{32}\)

Following this train of thought, it seems as though the would-be teacher who purposefully chooses TFA or TNTP or any other alternate-certification program would be wisely approaching the threshold of adulthood – wary of what lies ahead in their new environment, but cognizant of the inherent aiding nature of the pilgrimage. The pilgrim, Turner says, “may not consciously grasp more than a fraction of the message … [but he becomes] … increasingly capable.”\(^{33}\) The idea that pilgrimages facilitate growth puts into perspective the self-transformation recruiting angle of TFA’s. Through Turner, we can make clearer sense of that – particularly for the teachers who handle the adversity well, who realize that every liminal experience along the way will help alter them, shape them.

For many pilgrims the journey itself is something of a penance. Not only may the way be long, it is also hazardous, beset by robbers, thieves, and confidence men aplenty (as many pilgrim records attest), as well as by natural dangers and epidemics. But these fresh and unpredictable troubles represent, at the same time, a release from the ingrown ills of home. They are not one’s own fault.\(^{34}\)

To seek out an experience partially because it will benefit the individual is, again, not the same as prioritizing oneself and one’s best interest. The priority for teachers undertaking pilgrimages must be their students.

We will see myriad examples in the next few chapters of teachers interacting with their students – sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. Many of these interactions become indelible images because of the mutual emotion – on both sides of the teacher-

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 7.
student relationship – present in them. The interactions themselves, when viewed in the context of Turner, are not only liminal experiences – they also take on the life of the “ritual symbol.”

Turner focuses a lot on the significance of symbols amidst the pilgrimage. His definition of the ritual symbol:

the smallest unit of ritual behavior, whether associated with an object, activity, relationship, word, gesture, or spatial arrangement …. It is a factor influencing social action, associated with collective ends and means, whether explicitly formulated or not. A symbol is distinguished from a sign by both the multiplicity of its meanings and the nature of its signification. In symbols there is some kind of likeness (either metaphoric or metonymic) between the thing signified and its meaning …

Sacredly, these symbols can be religious “sacra” like shrines, curative waters and holy objects. While Turner says the effect of these symbols on the pilgrim “depends upon the zeal and pertinacity of his quest,” it is reasonable to imagine many pilgrims are struck by a moment on their journeys – perhaps many – that stands out as particularly powerful, or transformative, or memorable. “Pilgrimages are like cultural magnets,” Turner says, “attracting symbols of many kinds, both verbal and nonverbal. . .”

If we project the idea of strong symbols amidst a pilgrimage onto teaching in high-need schools, then those symbols are easily replaced by teacher-student interactions. In as much, those symbols can – secularly – represent the “natural dangers” and the “epidemics” Turner uses to discuss the “hazardous” way within the pilgrimage. The symbols of the pilgrimage in the high-need school may take the form of a lost-in-translation moment, or an indirect brush with gang violence, or finding out that a 14-year-

35 Ibid., 244-245.
36 Ibid., 8.
37 Ibid., 27.
old student is pregnant. And because symbols “originate in elevated feeling,” as Turner says, they certainly need not be negative interactions. The major breakthrough for a struggling boy, or that first hug from a previously distant girl, or the simple knowledge that a lesson has commanded the attention of the room and facilitated learning are each—in and of themselves—significant moments, or symbols. While these symbols are only hypothetical in the abstract—on the page, in this moment—these kinds of sacra are part of the daily fabric in high-need schools, and a teacher’s first encounter with them may leave a lasting impression in the same way a shrine, curative water or a holy object would. (The copious use of hypotheticals will cease after this chapter. In Chapters 4 and 5, anecdotal evidence will show the experiences of high-need teachers and, it is hoped, capture authentically the symbols and sacra common in struggling schools. Chapter 6 will analyze these teachers’ experiences more thoroughly and show the liminality present in each one.)

Turner’s mentioning of a pilgrim’s individual “zeal” and “pertinacity” acts as a reminder of the appropriate and—education reformers should hope—prevailing mindset with which a teacher should approach her students. Ideally, a teacher will be resolute to doing things the right way—and to tackling the challenge of closing the achievement gap charismatically. But the mindset is simpler than having pertinacity and zeal. The appropriate and prevailing mindset for a teacher is to be selfless and student-first; consequently, teachers who begin the journey for themselves instead of for their students get less out of the pilgrimage. This idea resonates in view of Turner’s further explanation of symbols:

Taken literally, symbols cease to mediate between the orders of being they are intended to conjoin. Symbol-vehicles which are viewed materialistically, in terms
of self-serving interests, become increasingly opaque. Where they should be lenses bringing into focus the doctrines of the faith, they become blinders hindering the understanding. They themselves are felt to possess the powers to which they only point, and which are not man’s to bestow.\textsuperscript{38}

In other words, for a pilgrim to see standing before the shrine as a point of personal pride and accomplishment – ahead of its being an aid for spiritual growth – is misguided. What is more, for a teacher to celebrate his student’s gang involvement – in some twisted way – as some sort of burgeoning to the barometer of his chops in the inner city, or of his toughness level, is base-headed. Symbols are meant to be appreciated and recognized by the pilgrims who utilize them, not trumpeted as medals.

In the grand scheme of pilgrimage, it’s possible to imagine the pilgrim abusing her journey in many ways. Perhaps a lack of tact in a given situation strips the occasion of its solemnity. Or, maybe, a certain ritual demands specific steps that simply escape the uniformed or misinformed pilgrim. Generally, though, pilgrimage is an understanding practice that leaves room for mistakes. In some religions, Turner says, “pilgrimage provides a carefully structured, highly valued route to a liminal world where the idea is felt to be real, where the tainted social persona may be cleansed and renewed.”\textsuperscript{39} While that careful structure is not universal, the liminality present beyond the threshold of pilgrimage is. And it is through that liminality where pilgrims feel the understanding, the room for mistakes, the freedom to grow. It is an idea that “cannot be confined to the processual form of the traditional rites of passage in which [van Gennep] first identified it,” Turner says. “Nor can it be dismissed as an undesirable (and certainly uncomfortable) movement of variable duration.” No, liminality is the shapeless shaper,

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 30.
the invisible vehicle on which pilgrims ride. And, again, because of its application “to all phases of decisive cultural change,” it is a phenomenon that has shaped, is shaping and will continue to shape the experiences of alternate-certification teachers in high-need schools all across America.

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40 Ibid., 2.
If you’re a 22-year-old who has spent the last four years of your life studying education, you may just be more prepared for your first week as a schoolteacher than the 22-year-old who has spent the last four years of her life studying psychology, or the 24-year-old who has switched to teaching from journalism, or the 27-year-old who has entered the classroom after five years in banking. Pedagogy, lesson planning, differentiation of instruction, classroom management – you will probably know more about these important teaching concepts than they. But what about when, on that first day of school, your classroom is on lockdown – and a student declares that he has to pee? No one is allowed to leave your room. School policy. Students are refusing to sit, hovering near the door. The science experiment on fertilizer you’d hoped they’d be working on has flopped. They say it sucks. And Dante, who has been making farting noises, insists that if he’s not allowed to leave, then he will urinate in a water bucket. The other kids are egging him on and, sure enough, he lowers his pants and pees – right in the middle of the room. What would you do then?

“You guys need to leave. NOW! Dante, you need to stay.”¹ That was Rachelle Snyder’s response to the shenanigans in her classroom on her fifth day of teaching at Locke High School in Los Angeles in 2005. A recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Rachelle had studied psychology and played soccer in Philadelphia for

four years before moving across the country to begin her first job. Would a teacher with four years of classes pertaining specifically to teaching – with more than five days of experience in a classroom and, of course, with an education degree – have reacted any differently? Would he have been able to prevent Dante from peeing in the middle of his class?

While it’s possible that somewhere – in some corner of Earth – an education course on classroom management has addressed what to do in a situation where a student threatens to take out his genitals in front of his peers and micturate, it’s also doubtful. That is not to condemn those who have taken the traditional route to teaching. But it is offered to show how the high-need classroom is an odd, unpredictable and colorful place – one that, regardless of your readiness to teach, will continually throw different pitches your way. The fastballs, the curveballs, the knuckleballs – they’ll all come, and you’ll rarely be able to bank on any one pitch on any one day.

Chapters 4 and 5 will examine seven of the alternate-certification teachers charged with jumping on the fastballs, sitting back on the curveballs, fending off the knuckleballs. And all the while, it will outline those different pitches as clearly as possible. The teachers share much in common. They all came to teaching through either Teach For America or The New Teacher Project in the last decade. They all began teaching while in their 20’s. They all interacted with some of the country’s most troubled children on a daily basis. And they all taught in secondary high-need schools – middle or high schools – when they first began. But they, and their experiences, are not all the same. Six came to teaching straight from undergrad, while one made a career change at a young professional age. Four taught on the West coast, three on the East. They are

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\(^2\) Ibid., 3.
different races, born in different parts of the world, with different religious beliefs. And while all of them remain involved in education in some capacity, only one is still teaching in a secondary school classroom – and not the same classroom where her pilgrimage originated.

The experiences of the teaching pilgrims outlined in Chapters 4 and 5 – to be analyzed further in Chapter 6 – will exist largely in what van Gennep calls the limen. The beginnings (separation) and the ends (aggregation) of the teachers’ respective pilgrimages will be addressed as a way of framing each journey. But the focus here will be majorly on the teachers’ liminal periods – mostly in their first years of teaching. The West-coast pilgrims are four teachers, like Rachelle, from Locke – all who joined through TFA in 2005 and whose experiences are detailed in Donna Foote’s brilliant book, *Relentless Pursuit*. Two of the East-coast pilgrims came to TNTP in 2009 and taught at different schools around Washington, D.C. The other East-coast pilgrim taught in New York City at a middle school in the Bronx. Generally, the seven had smoother second years in the classroom than first years, where the transition was bumpiest. But the experience did not get better for all of them. And not all of them made it to Year Two.

For Rachelle, whose student Dante at least provided a memorable story early on in her new career – if not an incredible headache – the incident was the first of many in the 2005-2006 school year unlike anything she had encountered before entering teaching. Her teenagers grappled with gang-related violence, pregnancies and racial tension. While she had her struggles throughout the year teaching special education biology – including having to clean up the urine-filled bucket herself – Rachelle did everything she could to help her students. And by the end of the year, she had accomplished two major feats.
First, she helped her students demonstrate 80 percent mastery of their biology standards. Second, she got them out of Watts for a weekend – the first time many of her kids had left the crime-riddled Los Angeles neighborhood. Their field trip to Catalina Island included a touching moment around a campfire on its final night, where Rachelle admitted to her boys and girls how scared she had been at the start of the year. “I was afraid you would eat me alive,” she said. “I was so sacred, and sometimes I got frustrated and pissed off. But I love you all. You have made this the best year of my life.”

Not every teacher in Chapters 4 and 5 looks back on his or her own foray into teaching in the same light. The experience for all was at times trying, at other times arduous and often uncomfortable. The challenge for some was met. The charge for others was altered or abandoned. The commonalities among the seven teachers in Chapters 4 and 5 lie in the classrooms. In L.A., and in D.C., and in New York, there were good times and bad. Breakthroughs and setbacks. Triumphs and defeats. Scenes none of these new teachers had ever seen. Situations for which none of them could have ever been prepared. For all, teaching in the high-need school was a pilgrimage. An unforgettable time in their lives. A “perilous journey.”

To undertake it, the teachers needed no professional background in education. No prior experience. No particular pedigree at all. What they needed was a willingness to separate from what they knew, to detach and invite the unknown, to embrace the liminal.

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3 Ibid., 267-268.


He’s a lawyer now – and one of the country’s young elite, working for Williams & Connelly LLP, readying for a prestigious Supreme Court clerkship under retired justice Sandra Day O’Connor. But when Eli Savit was a senior at Kalamazoo College in Michigan – where he played four years of intercollegiate basketball for the Hornets and double majored in political science and philosophy – he knew that law school could wait. First, he wanted to do something “that he conceived of as service.”

So, with his acceptance to the University of Michigan Law School deferred, he took a job with TFA and moved to Harlem a few weeks after graduating from Kalamazoo. Over the next two years in New York, Eli’s passion for history and competitiveness helped him develop into a successful teacher of teenagers. He poured his energy into his students, creatively, cleverly facilitating change. And while his ambitious nature helped Eli maintain high expectations for himself and for his students, it also, ultimately, steered him back to Ann Arbor, Michigan – his hometown – after two years of teaching.

In the summer of 2005, TFA’s institute for its New York corps members was in Philadelphia, so Eli spent five weeks there before heading to Manhattan. While it was a far cry from what he would soon become his norm – Eli shared a small class at institute with three other new teachers and a master teacher rather than lead the room solo – it was also intense. The routine: a 6 a.m. wakeup call, morning teaching, afternoon classes, dinner, a workshop or two in the evening, and then planning for the next day. “Planning, honestly, probably took the most time, because it was the first time you were doing any of it on your own,” Eli said. “It could take four to five hours to plan a lesson.”

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Planning came to be one of Eli’s strengths as a teacher – but not in his first few months in the Bronx. He intended to begin the year by covering the Civil War but first wanted to conduct what he thought would be a refresher course on the Federalists’ structure of the Constitution. His eighth graders, however, were unprepared for that introduction, their baseline knowledge far behind what Eli, who is white, had anticipated.

A lot of them literally thought that MLK freed the slaves. I realized a lot of them did not know the name of the state they lived in. Some thought the name of the state was the Bronx. Some of them thought that they lived in a state called the United States. They just didn’t understand the basic distinction between state and country and city.7

Eli’s dilemma in his first few months of planning was twofold. To begin with, he didn’t know how to teach a history curriculum without first providing his students a basic foundation of social studies knowledge. Second, he was unsure of the best way to get that information across. “The stuff from my first few months of my first year was crap,” Eli said. It didn’t all fail. Aside from one class period, Eli’s classroom was often more controlled than others in the building. He was developing a rapport with some of his students. But that wasn’t good enough; the failures, however small, consumed him.

There was one day where a lesson flopped, kids were just talking over me, and I stood at the front of the classroom silent for 40 minutes saying, ‘I’m gonna wait, I’m gonna wait, I’m gonna wait,’ which somebody had told me would work, and it didn’t work. But I got so invested in it, and 20 minutes into it, what the hell am I going to do? I either surrender to the kids, or I keep waiting. So I waited. That didn’t work at all. But something like that, you can’t sleep thinking about it, because the worst thing is just losing control of the classroom and losing the kids’ respect. I would think about it all the time. I tried to stick to some sort of mental-health routine, try to work out every day, but the way that I work is if there’s a problem, I can’t do anything until I fix the problem. If I had a bad day like that, I’d go home and plan and try to strategize, try to find something that would work

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.
better, and I wouldn’t let myself do anything else until I felt like I had a plan for the next day. I was stressed, and I really wanted to do a good job.  

The class that haunted Eli early that first year took advantage of the school’s lack of a centralized discipline system. The students knew, if Eli gave them a detention, that they could walk out of his room and suffer no consequence. The principal did nothing. So they talked over Eli. And he wrestled with the best course of response. One day, Eli’s TFA mentor suggested that Eli – 6-feet-4, 220 pounds – simply stand in front of the exit. What could the kids do? They weren’t going to assault their teacher. Eli thought it was a good idea. So, the next day, after his students talked over him during class, he stood in front of the door before lunch and enforced a detention. Their reaction resembled a riot. Screaming into the hall, the students shouted, “Ohhhh, we’re imprisoned in here! You can’t keep us here! Help us, help us, Mr. Savit’s not letting us out!” The mentor’s idea had worked. Until Carlos walked by. Carlos – “the kid who gave me the most headaches in my two years,” Eli said – was about six-feet, 210 pounds. He had happened to cut Eli’s class that day. He also had happened to walk by the classroom as Eli stood in front of the door. “Save us, Carlos, save us!” the students yelled. Carlos stopped and, seeing an opportunity to be a hero, put his back against the hallway wall opposite the classroom door. Running at full speed, he then slammed his shoulder into the door – and kept doing it repeatedly. After several tries, the door broke down, Eli fell to the floor, and several of the kids ran out. He tried to salvage the detention by keeping the remaining students for the duration of lunch. “They were like, ‘That doesn’t make any sense. Because we didn’t leave, we have detention?’ And of

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8 Ibid.
course, I was like, ‘Yeah, you guys are right.’”\(^9\) When Eli showed the principal what had happened, all he said was, “Huh.” Carlos went unpunished. “That,” Eli said, “was probably the low point of my teaching career – just laying on the floor with the door broken. Complete disintegration of authority.”\(^10\)

While Carlos remained a nemesis of sorts, he was the minority. Eli found a way to connect with many of the students at CIS 339 – 60 percent of whom were Hispanic, 40 percent black. And that included the most dangerous. Raul, who Eli was told was a legitimate gang leader, also held a roster spot in that troublesome class. He showed up only one or two days a week but made his presence felt when he was there. Before the year, the school’s gang-intelligence officer – CIS 339 sat on the border of the Bloods’ territory and DDP’s territory, two of the city’s most formidable gangs – had told Eli not to mess with Raul. “If he gets up and wants to leave the classroom, do not chase after him, let him go,” he said. “This kid is not blowing smoke. He could wreak havoc on the school if he wanted to.” But Raul had changed in his eighth grade year. He was polite to Eli and the other teachers. “Something had changed, and he’d realized I think that there was nothing to be gained by fighting teachers,” Eli said. Still, Raul’s actions sometimes surprised Eli. One day, 15 minutes after class had started, Raul walked in to see Eli struggling to control the room – the students talking over him despite his pleas for them to calm down. Raul turned to Eli and said, “Mr. Savit, do you mind if I say something really quick?” Eli, figuring it couldn’t hurt, said yes. “And he just jumps up on my desk and he’s like, ‘Yo! All y’all shut the fuck up! Mr. Savit’s trying to teach!” And the class

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\(^9\) Ibid.

\(^10\) Ibid.
gets dead silent, he gets down off the chair and goes, ‘I’m sorry I had to cuss, Mr. Savit.’ And it was a great lesson from that point forward.”

While he appreciated Raul’s speaking up for him that day – and came to like the young man – Eli couldn’t bring himself to pass him. Even as Raul made the effort to make up his work, his only coming to a fifth of the classes made failing the reality. But he left a strong impression on his teacher.

He’d say, ‘Why am I failing? I was really into this war stuff.’ ‘But you didn’t hand in any of your work, Raul.’ He’d come in after school sometimes on his own schedule, and we’d do work together. He was at like a first-grade reading level, so I’d have to help him out a lot. One time I asked him about it. I said, ‘I know you’re involved in gangs.’ He said, ‘Look, you call them gangs … but I’m doing it because I’ve got two younger brothers, I’m basically raising them, we have to look out for each other. This is the only way I know how to make money to provide for them. My mom’s not there.’ I have no idea of whether he was telling the truth. He seemed completely sincere. I wanted to believe him. I don’t think that at heart he was a malicious kid, but then you hear some stories about the stuff that his gang did … it was hard to square. I really wonder what he is doing now. The likelihood is that he’s in jail. In a different world, this kid would be a politician. He knew the right answers. He’d figured out how to make allies. He’d figured it out that it’s better to have the teachers on your side than have them constantly haranguing you.

Eli’s ability to get through to certain boys and girls – and his determination to plug away at planning – led to a breakthrough in March. He found a lesson model that quickly became a daily routine – and engaged the students as consistently as anything he had tried all year. Because his students read, on average, at a fourth-grade level, their history textbook – written at an eighth-grade level – proved less than ideal. Eli jettisoned the book entirely, instead making his own materials based largely on primary source documents. Six-page packets with a thought-provoking warm-up, a section for guided notes and a pertinent document – like a map, or a campaign poster, or an editorial from

\[\text{11 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{12 Ibid.}\]
the period being discussed – became tidy assignments for Eli’s 43-minute periods. The warm-ups, in particular, piqued his students’ interests – and often occupied the entire period, when Eli allowed, because of the substantive debates they triggered.

I’d say something like, ‘The U.S. has a right to protect any country in its backyard’ or ‘We have a moral obligation to intervene to stop atrocities abroad,’ and there would be a poll to get them going. They would answer ‘1’ if they strongly agreed and ‘5’ if they strongly disagreed. They didn’t really need any particular content knowledge to answer the questions; it was just sort of a gut reaction. I’d have the kids circle them and then signal with their fingers what they put down, but they had to explain it. Kids have real strong intuitions about this – especially with the foreign policy stuff. The Iraq war was in the background, and a lot of them had family members that served.13

Eli’s ability to engage his students became his best tool for managing behavior. While some first-year teachers rack their brains to find methods for redirecting students and keeping them focused – many develop incentive systems to coax or, essentially, bribe students into staying on task – Eli channeled his energy into each lesson. And he proved incredibly adept at keeping his boys and girls engaged.

Early in his second year, as Eli taught about Andrew Johnson’s impeachment in the Reconstruction unit, it occurred to him that this would be a convenient time to also discuss Bill Clinton’s impeachment. He knew exactly how to rope in his students for that lesson.

I was like, ‘You know there was one other teacher who got impeached, but I can’t teach you about that. There’s, like, sex and stuff in it. I just can’t, it’s not appropriate.’ I told them, ‘No, I can’t teach you guys about that,’ and they were like, ‘NO, NO, YOU HAVE TO!’ And I was like, ‘No, I can’t – you don’t understand. I’ll get fired, probably. It’s inappropriate.’ ‘NO, NO, YOU’VE GOT TO, YOU’VE GOT TO!’ Mr. Savit, another president got impeached, you’ve got to teach us!’ So I was like, ‘Fine, tomorrow we’ll do a special lesson, but here’s the thing: I’m going to talk really softly the entire time, because I don’t want the principal coming by and hearing me lecture about, like, a blowjob.’ And they were like ‘OHhhh, OHhh MY God! REALLY?!!?’ So I was like, ‘Here’s what we’re going to do: one of you is going to stand lookout, and you

13 Ibid.
guys have to holler and tell me if the principal is coming, and if he is, I’m going to have a fake lesson, and I’m going to just start talking about Reconstruction again – like today – and they’re going to think that’s what I’m talking about. And as soon as the principal leaves, then we’re going to go back to the other guy who got impeached.’ The next day, they had a lookout, and it was dead silent. Every single one of my classes, dead silent the entire day. The principal knew about it, obviously, and I said, ‘You should come by a couple times during the day; the kids are going to warn me about it when you’re coming.’

Lessons like these – where every student cared – Eli felt were imperative for reaching his overarching goal of closing the achievement gap. But with his students lagging so far behind America’s average eighth grader at the start of the year, it was a steep uphill climb.

Eli’s fixation on the goal meant high expectations for his boys and girls. “I wanted to get my kids as good or better than every other kid at a wealthier school with better advantages in the state New York,” he said. Eli felt fortunate that he was able to teach history, a more inherently interesting and engaging subject, he felt, than, say, math. “The math teachers that make that subject interesting, they’re geniuses,” Eli said. “To me, it was great just being able to teach history because the story is in and of itself is so engaging and so interesting. Once kids realize that, it makes your job really easy.” The subject matter brought out the inquisition in his students, and strong opinions followed.

My favorite times during the day were having to cut debates short because the kids kept going back and forth, cutting in to my lecture time. These kids have just such great intuitions and make such great arguments. When they see how their intuitions apply in the real world, it’s really great to see.

While Eli continually tried to meet the students at their level – scaffolding and always tactfully crafting his six-page packets – he also hoped that their inability to break down a complex primary source document was temporary. “My goal,” Eli said, “was always to

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
get them to a point where they could analyze that type of document by the end of the year.”

Students like Ivan loved Eli’s approach. One of the boys with high literacy skills, Ivan loved history. Because of Ivan’s level of engagement in class, his passion for the material and his thoughtful questions, Eli quickly took an interest in him. That led to Eli’s giving Ivan some tough love when he found out the boy was failing math. The two maintained their relationship via email after Eli left teaching; Ivan, as a high schooler, even became a blogger for the Web site of a charity Eli founded. Just as the material of his class ultimately quelled the misbehavior, Eli also attributes the historical stories themselves as the key to Ivan’s success.

He wasn’t like an angel or an all-around superstar, he just happened to get really engaged by the subject I was teaching. And there’s not a lot of kids that I would say my class was life-changing for, but I would say that it actually probably was for him. He really got engaged that year in that subject matter. But for him, that was his interest.¹⁶

Toward the end of his second year of teaching, Eli’s principal offered him the chance to be an instructional coach the following school year. This would have meant more pay and more clout in the school but less contact with the kids. Eli considered it but was turned off by the notion that his reward for teaching students well would be to teach students less. In as much, he honed in on one of the biggest challenges in education, period.

I don’t know how you square that circle. I don’t know how you keep ambitious young teachers in the classroom while still satisfying their desire to move up the ladder. I think more pay would do it. I think it’s got to start with money, but on a deeper level, society needs to recognize what teachers do and respect it more. If you say, ‘I’m a respected lawyer, I’ve been doing this for 30 years,’ that has some cachet – even though you’re basically doing the same thing as you were doing 30 years ago. It doesn’t in the same way if you say, ‘I’m a teacher.’ It’s

¹⁶ Ibid.
like, well, if you’re really good, wouldn’t you be a principal by now? And that’s ridiculous. A part of me really wishes that I had not been so vain as to let that influence my thinking, but it did.\textsuperscript{17}

While Eli paused before leaving CIS 339, it would have been harder for this ambitious then-24-year-old to abandon his dream of law school at Michigan. He left New York in the summer of 2007 knowing that he could have evolved as a teacher and, someday, somehow, carved out a position in the world of education that would accommodate his dual desire to interact with children and help lead a school or a district.

Eli remains involved in education through The Inspired Teaching School – a charter elementary in Northwest Washington, D.C. – where he is a board member. There are days he misses teaching, especially being around his students. Almost 10 years after leaving the classroom, Eli has a tough time assessing how teaching changed him. He acknowledges that it has helped him as a lawyer – especially in his ability to take complex content, boil it down to its essence, and write about it clearly. But he bristles at the notion that his experience in New York transformed his life. “I don’t like to engage in that exercise,” he said. “It’s not about the teachers. I’m sure it changed me. You just have a different appreciation of what actually is going on on the ground in schools. But teaching for me was about the students.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{SHOSHANA GITLIN: H.D. Woodson High School, Northeast D.C., ninth grade environmental science, 2009-2011}

During her final semester at Penn State University in 2009, Shoshana Gitlin took a trip from State College down to Washington, D.C. to observe a biology class at Anacostia High School. She had been accepted to the D.C. Teaching Fellows – a

\textsuperscript{17} Ib\textsuperscript{id}.

\textsuperscript{18} Ib\textsuperscript{id}.
regional program under the umbrella of The New Teacher Project – and wanted to shadow a teacher before beginning her own summer school teaching two months later.

When Shoshana walked through the doors of the Southeast Washington school that spring day, what she saw resembled a shopping mall more than a place of learning. There were kids running in and out of classrooms, up and down stairways – everywhere. Security guards occupied the front hall, but their concerns lay more with the students – not with the diminutive white girl who looked like she was probably a teacher. They waved her in, past the metal detectors, and as she self-navigated her way up the stairs toward what she thought was the correct classroom, Shoshana saw a student being arrested down the hallway. She hadn’t had to go far for a glimpse at why Anacostia was one of America’s lowest-achieving schools.

But then she opened the door to the biology classroom. Walking in, she saw 10 students quietly taking notes as the teacher explained the day’s material. The students each had folders open in front of them. They completed worksheets throughout the duration of class. And when it was over, they took their homework, closed it up in their folders, and exited the classroom sanctuary for the hallway zoo. Shoshana was impressed. She hadn’t known what to expect coming in. While the hallway scene struck her as wildly chaotic, she rationalized it, thinking, “They can’t control everything, but they had their classrooms down.”

And the teacher’s ability to engage the students stayed with the 22-year-old, especially because the teacher, like she, was small, white and female. Said Shoshana: “That made me think, ‘It can’t be that bad. I can do this, too.’

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Unfortunately, my experience was so much worse than [hers].”

Shoshana’s experience is, technically, still going. She continues to teach in D.C. five years later. Now at her third school – Capitol City Public Charter School in Northwest Washington – the New York City-born woman who grew up in Pennsylvania isn’t sure whether D.C. will be home for much longer. She is considering leaving teaching altogether – or perhaps seeking a school with higher morale, with more positivity floating around the hallways and classrooms than the schools at which she has taught in D.C. It boggles her mind that she has remained in the District for five years.

If you went in to H.D. [Woodson] that first year and said, ‘Look at all the teachers here, who’s going to be here [in D.C.] in five years,’ no one would have said me. I guarantee it. ‘She’s had the roughest time, she’s had all these things stolen from her, she’s the least buddy-buddy with the kids outside of the classroom.’ I guarantee no one would’ve been like, ‘She’s going to stay around.’ But I don’t know … I was just kind of able to persist with it.

From H.D. Woodson to New Beginnings Vocational School to Capitol City Charter, Shoshana has taught hundreds of the District’s troubled young men and women over the past half-decade, and she understands their culture well.

Young people in D.C. seem to encounter death far more frequently than young people in lower-poverty areas around the country. It affected Shoshana early in her first year of teaching when a boy, on the day of skipping her class, was shot in the head and killed. That death rattled her and her students in the moment, but the broader idea of death casts a perpetual pall over her classroom. Death notices and funeral slips stream in frequently – of parents and other family members. Pregnancy among teenagers, too, is a part of the D.C. fabric. “Since I’ve taught, maybe fifteen girls, 17, maybe 20 girls have

[^20]: Ibid.
[^21]: Ibid.
had kids,” Shoshana said. “A lot of kids.” The death and the young people bringing other young people into the world are connected – and caused, perhaps, as a result of the systemic poverty that affects families in certain pockets of D.C. It bothers Shoshana, but it does not drive her to be some Superwoman teacher. She rejects the notion that her job title requires her to save young men and women. She has rejected it from the day she began thinking about teaching, and it’s the main reason she decided not to apply for TFA, whose philosophy, she thought, was “too much.”

If you think about cyclical poverty – being poor, growing up poor, having a baby poor, your mom being poor, your grandmother being poor – your ninth-grade algebra teacher, he’s going to pick you out of that? What? That seems ridiculous. … You can teach them some skills to help themselves, but you’re going to raise them out of the poor?²²

Shoshana came to D.C. in 2009 to teach. The chaotic hallways of Anacostia had not deterred her. In fact, she was back there two months after her first visit, conducting her own student teaching as a part of the D.C. Teaching Fellows’ six-week summer training program. Teachers joined a cooperating teacher for three hours in the morning before attending a pedagogy class for three hours in the afternoon. On one of Shoshana’s first mornings at Anacostia, a female special education student much bigger than she – “severely special ed,” Shoshana said – refused to do her work. Shoshana urged her to focus, to which the girl, Trish, responded, “Fuck that!” before throwing her papers across the room. The cooperating teacher reacted immediately – and calmly. “OK, Trish,” Shoshana remembers her saying. “I think you need to go to the back and have a moment. Calm down, and come join us again when you’re ready.” Flustered, Shoshana wasn’t sure what had happened. She was surprised at how smoothly the teacher had handled the flare-up – and how, after several minutes, Trish had returned to the group. “When those

²² Ibid.
incidents first happened, they would bother me,” Shoshana said. “That whole summer, I remember telling people about it. ‘Oh my god, these kids, they need so much help.’ But I’ve had 1,000 more of those stories.”

The summer at Ana – as it’s called in D.C. – gave way to her first full-time job at H.D. Woodson, a mostly all-black school where she taught ninth grade environmental science. She felt confident and energized after a productive summer learning how to instruct high schoolers for the first time – and picking up plenty from her cooperating teacher. At first, Shoshana tried to mimic her. But she soon realized that the planning onus for her classes was entirely her own, and it didn’t come easy – especially planning for classes of roughly 25 to 40 students each. “I’d spend all night researching things and try them out the next day, and they would all fall flat,” she said.

Shoshana tried to get into a routine. Usually, it looked like this: a 5:30 a.m. wakeup, a 6:45 arrival at school, photocopying before her first class, teaching a lesson, having it not go well, tailoring the lesson during her prep period, teaching more lessons, getting data together for her instructional coach, attending team meetings, making phone calls to parents, leaving school around 6 p.m., going home, eating very little, lesson planning some more, going to bed – and then repeating it all the next day. “My whole first year was just a blur,” she said. “I was super skinny … I must have lost 10 pounds. I was not sleeping well. I used all my sick days – all 10. By the end of the year, I was breaking down. I couldn’t handle it anymore.”

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23 Ibid.
While Year One may have been blurry, there were still moments that stood out—vividly—for Shoshana. During one lesson that went awry, an assistant principal came by to observe her.

It was just totally chaotic in the room when [she] came in to observe me. … We were 15 minutes into the class, and we hadn’t started anything. And kids were leaving the classroom, right in front of her to leave school early—just cutting school. So I think by the time it was like 30 minutes in, I only had like 15 kids, and the rest of the lesson was, like, OK. I scrambled to get them to sit down and take some notes. … In the write-up, she was like, ‘You had students cutting your class,’ and I was like, ‘You’re an administrator, and they left in front of you. What does that say about you?’

Retelling the story, Shoshana got heated. It was clear the administration had not supported her how she would have liked. In this moment, she had been more miffed by the assistant principal’s lack of action than by her students’ action of leaving her classroom. She was getting used to the students’ lack of investment. “I wanted to engage them,” Shoshana said, “but I always felt like I was selling and begging them.”

It wasn’t like that every day. Occasionally, she would have 42 kids in her room—far too many to fit—taking notes in unison, many standing in the back of the room scribbling on clipboards she had given them. “Some of those days were really powerful for me,” Shoshana said. “But other days, it was like just like a madhouse: no one in their seats, kids throwing shit. It depended on the day, but I always kept the same routine. So whatever affected the kids, to me, there didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason for it.”

That first year, Shoshana was often upset. She called her dad frequently to talk about her day. Early on, she thought that careful preparation throughout the weekend could perhaps help her week go more smoothly. But that attitude changed as the year marched on and she heard things like, “Yeah, I’m not afraid to hit women … I punched a

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24 Ibid.
teacher at my last school,” from a new student. “I have never interacted with so many emotionally disturbed, truant, and hostile kids,” Shoshana said. And that wasn’t to categorize all D.C. youth – or even all D.C. high schoolers. “That was something I didn’t experience much at Ana, where most of the kids were apathetic. At H.D., they were aggressive and hostile. The bad kids were like no human I’ve ever interacted with in terms of how angry they got, how quickly they got angry, and how little rationality they had.” Feeling “overburdened” by it all, Shoshana before long would ignore her planning and grading on the weekends. “I’d just go out on Saturday night and try to do work all day Sunday,” she said. “We would party so hard on the weekends … and drink to an oblivion that I never did in college. I’m not a huge drinker, but I remember drinking so hard that first year.”

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It was an especially tough winter. When she returned from Spring Break, Shoshana seemed re-energized temporarily. Her roommate, Ruth Ann, was a Teaching Fellow at another school. The two first-year teachers agreed that, for the rest of the year, they would not call out. No more “mental-health” days. “We fed off each other,” Shoshana said. “And we did it. Now that seems like such a hilarious goal: I’m going to go to work every day.” But the hostility of her students, the unpredictability of her getting through a day smoothly, the lack of support from her administrators – it all continued to weigh on her. While Shoshana accomplished her goal of going to school every day that spring, she still needed a thrust to propel her to the end of the year. “In April … I had given a test, and I hadn’t graded it for three weeks,” she said. “One of my friends came down and visited me, and I was like, ‘You gotta help me.’ He was a teacher

25 Ibid.
at the time. I had 70 tests and could not do it. He was like, ‘Oh, I’ll show you how to format tests to make it easier to grade,’ which was nice.”

The thought, “I want to quit,” crossed Shoshana’s mind many times that first year, but she could never do it. She had bonded with two other teachers at H.D. – Katie (English) and Becca (math) – and she felt committed to the Teaching Fellows. “I was on a path, and I was on a career,” Shoshana said. “I had a paycheck. I had an apartment. There were all these things I had that I liked. And I had come there to do something, and I didn’t feel like I was bad at it. Regardless of what was happening, I just needed some time.”

By the time the school year ended, Shoshana was already looking forward to Year Two. She spent a chunk of her summer planning with Katie and Becca how they could be more efficient, more prepared, and more in sync when August rolled around. They would all be back in the classroom, but they wanted the memories of their first years to be erased by success. This took shape in the form of identical classrooms. Since they all taught freshmen, they anticipated an advantage in having as much continuity as possible among their three rooms. So they painted and decorated the rooms nicely, put motivational posters all over the walls, passed out the same binders to the students, implemented the same incentive systems and warm-up routines. “We even put the pencil in the same spot on their desks,” Shoshana said. “We had the same hall passes. … We had the most structure you could have inside this unstructured environment.”
Reflecting on it now, Shoshana knows she was never a bad teacher. But the start of her second year had been incredibly reassuring because of how much confidence she lacked in the thick of her first year.

I thought I was horrible teacher. I was disorganized. I didn’t know how to grade, I didn’t know what to grade. I didn’t know what I was doing. But that second year, I knew what I was teaching, and I knew how to teach it. … We made a school within a school that second year, and it worked really well for two months. And then, it just, like, didn’t really matter.26

To hear Shoshana describe the turnaround in the autumn of Year Two – followed abruptly by the disintegration of her newly-imposed structure as winter arrived – is a bit like hearing a basketball coach outline his team’s monster first half and then analyze their blowing of a 25-point lead. She and her fellow teachers had worked hard to right the ship, and seeing students buy in to the system – listening, coming to class consistently, learning! – had buoyed Shoshana’s confidence significantly. But as November arrived, discipline problems became a distraction. The administration, which had been helpful in the beginning of the year, as the year had progressed delegated more of the power to the teachers, and at that point, “things went downhill,” Shoshana said. Around that same time, a slew of poor test scores came in from her students, and the promising fall months – which had seen Shoshana planning, grading, traveling and exercising more, while drinking less – gave way to another tough winter. She described it as a “constant state of distress” – something her boyfriend at the time could not handle. They broke up. On top of all that, a string of unfavorable teaching evaluation scores through D.C. Public Schools’ observation system, IMPACT, had Shoshana fearing termination. “That was

26 Ibid.
probably the lowest point I’ve ever had post-college,”\textsuperscript{27} she said. In February, she quit her job.

Within a month, she had been hired at the aptly-titled New Beginnings, where she had smaller classes, more control, and less stress. The alternative school was disorganized, with a high-percentage of special education students – and formerly incarcerated students. Still, with about 10 students per class, it was a far cry from H.D.

“By the time we finished at the end of the year, those kids were really reading a lot better, asking way better questions,” Shoshana said. “I had a lot of kids say a lot more, ‘I really like the way you teach.’ I had a lot more positive interactions.”

Teaching at New Beginnings gave Shoshana the opportunity to juxtapose environments. In doing so, she had a revelation about one of the most frustrating facets of teaching in the high-need school: the transient nature of the students. One boy, Donald, came to school every day. He was very bright. He had a processing disorder, so it took him a while to grasp every concept, “but once he got it, he got it,” Shoshana said.

“There wasn’t anything I taught him that he couldn’t do.” Then there was Thomas, who came to school about once a week. Sometimes, he would have a vague clue of what was going on, but most of the time, Shoshana would have to sit beside him and, one-on-one, help catch him up.

If Thomas didn’t know what was going on, he’d be upset. So I’d come over and help him while giving Donald independent work so he could move ahead, because he’s this bright student, comes every day. … But like a Thomas, he’d get very upset, so I would have to like sit with him and catch him up. And he might not even come to school the next day. … I feel like Donald’s reward for all his hard work … was he got to do independent work. He didn’t want that. He wanted me to teach a lesson. Now, at New Beginnings, that was with six kids in the classroom. When I had a class of 42, like I did at H.D., you can just imagine what

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
that was like. ‘Fifteen of you weren’t here yesterday. Fifteen of you haven’t been here in a month. And now you’re in my classroom and want me to teach you.’

The longer she teaches, the more Shoshana realizes that boys like Donald and Thomas – when they’re younger, around ninth grade – show frustration in the form of hostility and anger when they experience a lack of success in the classroom. But as students like them get older, and that lack of success piles up, the anger gives way to a sort of learned helplessness.

Their frustration – I understand it more only because after working for so long, it’s frustrating to constantly fail and to constantly be told what to do without having the supports to do it. … It’s hard to constantly fail … and in later grades, they just get apathetic, because they learn to not get angry any more. Instead of getting angry, they just don’t care. … And I think it’s the same way with the teachers. Honestly. At this point, I can sort of relate more to the kids now. Year after year of failure, what do you do? You lower your expectations for your life. Look at the kids: they lower their expectations for their life, they stop getting angry, they stop caring, they stop coming to school. Look at the teachers. They lower their expectations for the kids, they stop getting angry, they stop coming to school as much. It’s crazy how you can see the pattern of it.

Now in her second year at Capitol City Charter, Shoshana feels like she’s in a better place than New Beginnings and a far better place than H.D. But she’s still in a high-need school, and while she has seen a fair amount of success stories – some students moving on to college, others getting jobs after high school – Shoshana feels in many ways like she’s working for a failing company. ‘It’s like, how many years do you want to pour into the failing company before you’d like to be somewhere where it’s a little sunnier?’ she said.

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28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.
While Shoshana feels like her teaching experience has helped become tougher in the classroom and more carefree out of it, the negativity she encounters on a daily basis, she says, is why this may be her final year in D.C.

It’s constant. Constant phone calls. ‘Jocelyn wasn’t here this week. Jocelyn’s failing her classes.’ If you only have to do it for one or two students, it wouldn’t be so bad, but when it’s the majority, it’s really draining. I don’t know if I have it in me to keep making those phone calls. I would really like to be surrounded by more positivity, you know? It’s hard. I’m working with these youth that really need positivity, and that’s powerful. But what about me? … When you work with inner-city youth, you form a community with it, then I have to go through all this loss and despair with them … and it’s like, man, do I want that life for myself? Where I’m constantly around fighting and pregnancies and them getting robbed – how many years can you do that? They want to get out of it. I want to get out of it.  

BARLOW FLORES: Whittier Education Campus, Northwest D.C., seventh and eighth grade English, 2009-2010

Barlow Flores has had a number of jobs since graduating from the University of California-Irvine a decade ago. For one year, he was a teacher – and a good one. More than 90 percent of Barlow’s middle school students in the 2009-2010 school year at Whittier Education Campus in Northwest Washington matriculated. Most of them improved their reading levels and their standardized test scores under his guidance.

Having grown up in a low-income area with working-class parents, Barlow – raised in Los Angeles and of El Salvadoran descent – had wanted to connect with youth of a similar background. And he did.

In hindsight, Barlow says his decision to leave his business analyst job at Fannie Mae in 2009 and join D.C. Teaching Fellows was wise. But he wasn’t sure, at the time, that working with youth was a calling – or even the right move at all. “I really was just hoping to learn a lot – to get in there and see what it was like,” Barlow said. “I wanted to

30 Ibid.
connect with and reach a population that I have an affinity to. I knew it was going to be hard. But I was pretty confident in my ability to connect.”  

He got his chance beginning in June of 2009, teaching tenth grade English alongside a veteran cooperating teacher at Cardozo Senior High School. Over six weeks, eight of Barlow’s 13 students passed; the five who did not simply didn’t show up most days. When he started at Whittier in August, he tried to implement the same structure he had followed in the summer. He began by introducing his students to the rules of the classroom and establishing a clear routine. “The students had a do-now, the standard, objective and agenda were all posted, so they knew exactly what was going to happen every day,” Barlow said. “I gave them homework every day. They had folders, color-coded for each section. Once they got used to that in the first couple weeks, it was a smooth year.” In the type of school where the idea of giving students homework is a hot-button topic – some teachers in urban America don’t believe in encouraging work outside of school because of the many social distractions, especially in the home – Barlow estimated that 80 percent of his students did their homework. “The ones that didn’t learned pretty quick: if they didn’t do it, their grade would suffer,” he said.

Barlow’s successful start at Whittier gave him momentum that he was able to sustain throughout most of the year – but not without a lull or two. To keep himself motivated, he made a point of talking through his day each night with his wife, Rachael – also a teacher. He tried to build in social events to his calendar to have things to look forward to, like playing pickup basketball frequently.

Stuff like that – blowing off some steam after work – I think that makes a difference. I know that, however this day goes, I have this to look forward to.

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It all becomes part of maintaining that work-life balance. The job is stressful and hard enough. Without an outlet, you might let that frustration build up, and it will show. And the kids pick up on it real fast.32

Barlow also, as the year wore on, tried to avoid monotony at school. During free periods, instead of always grading and planning, he would try and go chat up a colleague, or leave school to grab a quick bite to eat. He attributes his careful monitoring of his own sanity as a reason he was able to maintain consistency in front of his students.

I definitely had my moments of frustration, and the kids saw it. I definitely got angry at them. … I think they also knew, when that happened, that that was an outlier. They knew that wasn’t normal. It would take a lot for me to lose it, personally. I tried to keep an even keel and not give the kids an edge. I didn’t want them to know how I was feeling.33

While Barlow had four separate classes in two different grades – which made for two separate preparations every day – he also had the benefit of single-gender classes. This setup, he thought, allowed for more focus in the classroom – with the female group, especially. “The girls were very on point,” he said. “I rarely had issues with the girls section.” The boys were harder to engage as the year wore on.

They were kind of feeling themselves a little bit. They were about to be high schoolers … definitely in a phase where they wanted to be cool and get girls, and they couldn’t wait to go to Coolidge [High School] across the street. That was the allure. Some of them had friends or family members that were gang or crew affiliated. That was definitely present for some of the boys, too.34

Two boys, in particular, gave Barlow headaches that year. “I can see their faces now,” he said.

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
Seventh graders, these students showed Barlow glimpses of brilliance early in the school year, but as the weeks passed by, it was clear that their work ethic fell far short of their intelligence.

They were just clowns most of the time. But they were really smart, and they just didn’t do what they were supposed to do. They had so much to offer. You try to work with them and get them motivated. But they never do. That was frustrating, because they never really changed. … We would talk about [the achievement gap]. We talked about how this was not the end of the road … some of them got it, and some of them didn’t. And for these two in particular I just feel like they didn’t get it. That was frustrating.\textsuperscript{35}

The frustrating moments, though, rarely rattled Barlow. His confidence remained high. He found ways to keep his energy up. But by springtime – despite his successes – Barlow wanted to apply for other jobs. “I think I’d had enough to know that [teaching] wouldn’t be for me in the long term,” he said. He knew, though, that he wanted to remain connected to young people in a leadership role, which led him to Upward Bound and the Latin American Youth Center in Northwest D.C. In less than four years, Barlow has become program director of the Center, where he helps keep Hispanic students all over the District on a straight and narrow course – steering as many as he can toward college. “I’m happy with the decision I made,” Barlow said, “because I’ve still been able to impact students since I left the classroom, which was really comforting.”

Barlow’s departure from Whittier resembles the path a lot of ambitious teachers take. Although they want to continue influencing young people, their drive to be successful professionals – and, usually, to make more money – means they must stop teaching. There’s nothing wrong with the decision – especially for an educator like Barlow with a family. He and Rachael have young twins at home. But it is equal parts understandable, ironic and sad that educators’ rewards for teaching well push them out of

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
the classroom. As Eli Savit said, “I don’t know how you square that circle.” For Barlow, whose job keeps him in close contact with D.C. Public Schools, one year in the high-need classroom ultimately made his voice in the field of education more legitimate – and made him more appreciative of teachers everywhere. “It’s such a selfless job,” he said. “You have to give so much of yourself, and you have to give it every day.”

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CHAPTER 5
TO LIVE AND LEARN IN L.A.

Growing up in La Jolla, California, the only thought that crossed Rachelle Snyder’s mind as she dressed herself in the mornings for high school was whether or not boys would like her outfit. One hundred miles north, in the Watts neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles, the prevailing thought on the minds of teenagers getting ready for school in the mornings was whether their outfits would get them killed. Two different worlds, to be sure. Rachelle went to college at the University of Pennsylvania, where the advantages of her privileged life in La Jolla became clear to her. She realized how carefree her adolescence had been – and she wanted to have an impact on the teenage years of those with fewer privileges. In as much, she applied for Teach For America. And in the summer of 2005 after getting accepted, she was whisked from the world of privilege to a world of poverty – at Locke High School in Watts, in the backyard of two notorious gangs: the Bloods and the Crips, infamously violent entities with strong sensitivities about the colors red and blue.

Rachelle’s story is chronicled poignantly by Donna Foote in her book Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach For America. The stories of Phillip Gedeon, Taylor Rifkin and Hrag Hamalian are also told in Foote’s book. This thesis uses several anecdotes from their first years of teaching – all of them were at Locke together in 2005 – for the sake of showing the experience of being a teacher in a high-need school, which Foote does so wonderfully. Her beautiful descriptions of a not-so-beautiful place can be found in any given nook and cranny of the book.
One, in particular, captures the setting encountered every day by Rachelle, Phillip, Taylor and Hrag:

It wasn’t unusual to find weapons stashed on campus by gangbanging dropouts. In the spring of 2006 … somebody found a rusty old nine-millimeter Browning tucked under a backpack on the field where the football players were working out. It looked like a piece of junk; the problem was, it was loaded.¹

**RACHELLE SNYDER: Locke High School, South Central L.A., special education biology, 2005-2008**

Rachelle taught special education biology at Locke, and many of her students – she felt – had been incorrectly designated. Often a symptom in high-need schools, where the transient nature of students leads to inaccurate evaluations of their aptitudes and learning levels, special education teachers see plenty of students who should be in regular education classrooms. Rachelle thought that’s where Eduardo belonged. A big Latino boy who was clearly bright but did little work, Eduardo frustrated Rachelle. One day, he was particularly restless and distracting. She tried to bribe him – “If you sit down, I’ll play the radio,”² she said – but he still refused to work. Rachelle persisted, continuing to ask why he wasn’t working, and he eventually opened up to her. Three days earlier, he said, he had been jumped en route to school by a group from the Bloods gang because he was wearing a blue T-shirt – the color of the rival Crips gang. “He was still upset by the incident – and obviously frustrated. He didn’t give a fuck about his schoolwork, he said.” In that moment, Rachelle asked him calmly, “Do you feel safe now?” Eduardo replied by

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² Ibid., 116.
saying he wanted to “get out of the ghetto.” ³ She pressed, trying to convince that he could accomplish that wish by applying himself by working hard – which could begin with him, perhaps, copying the day’s notes. Through her urging, Eduardo insisted on drumming on the desk, beating louder and louder. Rachelle didn’t want to drive him away, of course. She saw potential in Eduardo. But she couldn’t allow him to continue rapping on the desk. “Please stop. I’m gonna go nuts, man. … Do you want to go to the office?”⁴ Their exchange resulted in nothing that day. He eventually slipped out the door, and he didn’t come back to Rachelle’s class for weeks.

Rachelle didn’t let run-ins like the one with Eduardo derail her focus throughout the year. She did all she could to throw herself into the culture of Locke. She coached the JV soccer team. She took on an extra class midway through the year. She orchestrated an elaborate trip for her students to Catalina Island at the end of the school year. Throughout the year, though, teaching special education challenged Rachelle – especially her fourth period.

Every night Rachelle went home to the apartment … and spent at least an hour and a half puzzling over what to teach the next day. Even on the rare occasion when she felt like she had put together a good lesson plan, she arrived at school feeling apprehensive. As the morning progressed and period four loomed larger, the sense of foreboding grew and deepened. Things there had gone from bad to worse. … Some days – too many days – she just wanted to quit. … But she just couldn’t do it. So she found herself living day to day, longing for the weekends and then finding them disappointing, too.⁵

And the environment rubbed off on Rachelle. Returning to Penn for homecoming several weeks after the start of the school year, she was shocked to hear “grammatically correct

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 117.

⁵ Ibid., 152-3.
English. … After spending so much time in Watts, she often found herself mimicking the kids’ speech patterns and reminding herself that ‘Do you feel me?’ is not a standard way of saying ‘Do you understand?’⁶ But she found it difficult to describe to her friends – with whom she had been so close just months earlier – the realities of her new world.

Those realities were harsh. The day before Christmas break, Rachelle went out of her way to help a distressed pregnant girl. Sharita, 15, had nowhere to go after school. She had been kicked out of her foster mother’s house. She wound up at her aunt’s house awhile before running away; she had been raped there by an older cousin. She seemed happy to be pregnant, which bothered Rachelle. “But what are you going to do with a baby?” Rachelle asked. “If I’m old enough to open my legs,” Sharita replied, “I’m old enough to take responsibility for what I’ve done.” Rachelle tried to help – making calls for Sharita, then finding the principal, Dr. Frank Wells. Eventually, the police came to Locke to take Sharita away, and Rachelle never saw her again. Rachelle drove home in tears. She had missed the holiday party. She was rattled by Sharita’s story. She called her dad, who reassured her that if she couldn’t cry after an episode like that, then she couldn’t possibly have a soul.⁷

Later in the year, Rachelle tried to calm down some rattled boys who had seen a former student pull a gun on another student – not far from the school’s front door. They ran up the stairs and into Rachelle’s classroom to flee the conflict. She fed them a snack and waited five minutes before sending the boys on their way. “Thinking about it later, she realized that the kids had known exactly what kind of gun it was; they could identify

⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁷ Ibid., 159-160.
it even from a distance. It also dawned on her that those three tenth-graders had obviously seen people get shot before. *How crazy is that?* While the incident that day ended up with the gun-wielder lowering his weapon and leaving campus, there was a gang-related homicide shortly thereafter – off campus, but just outside the school walls, mere yards from Rachelle’s classroom.

In the classroom, the struggles continued. On a day where her TFA advisor was visiting, her students were particularly unruly.

Rachelle had promised herself she would never allow the job to make her cry. But, man, did she come close. … [The] boys were out of control – shadowboxing, singing rap songs, hurling insults. Rachelle barreled her way through a lesson on mitosis, but she did so over a chorus of expletives running from ‘nigga’ to ‘fuck you’ to ‘homo faggot.’ The advisor ended up keeping several of the kids after class and lecturing them. … The next day, when the bad behavior continued, Rachelle sat them down for a chat. ‘I am embarrassed for you,’ she said.9

She decided then that her classroom model was not working. Her incentives needed to become more valuable in her students’ minds. So, several months before Memorial Day, Rachelle mapped out a trip to Catalina Island – a trip that would take many students as far from Watts as they had ever been. Only good behavior and improved grades would allow students to join the group to Catalina. On May 31, she ended up taking 20 young men and women with her, for three days, on a trip she called the highlight of her year.10

It was a great success. Rachelle opened up, and so did her students. She told them they had taught her plenty. She thanked them all. And they showed their appreciation. One student, Pedro, wondered: “How come you so nice, Miss Snyder?”
Her response: “They pay me the big bucks, Pedro.”¹¹ There was euphoria on the car ride home for everyone, eager to return home and tell classmates and family members about their trip outside their comfort zone. About 10 blocks from the school, the cars stopped for a food break, and here, Rachelle received a stark reminder of the region to where they were returning. Upon rolling into a McDonald’s parking lot, the students refused to get out of the car. They were wearing blue. The McDonald’s was in Blood territory. “Two of the kids had been jumped before by gangbangers; why risk spoiling one of the happiest times of their lives?”¹²

Ultimately, successes like the trip to Catalina were followed by pitfalls – some minor, like the realization the boys couldn’t get out of the car, others more serious, like the realization that her efforts at the end of the year felt futile. Over the course of the school year, Rachelle picked herself up again and again. And in the end, she wasn’t sure what that amounted to. One thing was certain: she had lost touch with TFA.

She knew she hadn’t taken advantage of TFA that way she could have. … But TFA had had no impact on her day-to-day life as a teacher. And she was pretty sure she had had no impact on TFA, either – she was definitely not closing the achievement gap. Her kids couldn’t read any better at the end of the year than when they started. If she did anything, maybe it was to get some kids to come to school who otherwise wouldn’t have come. Maybe.¹³

Still, Rachelle had found a way to connect with her new community. A longer way from La Jolla than the 100 miles on a map would indicate, this blond-haired, blue-eyed “Barbie doll,”¹⁴ as some of her students called her, was an integral part of the Locke fabric – however effective she proved to be as a teacher. And she got better, winning a mayor’s

¹¹ Ibid., 267-268.
¹² Ibid., 268.
¹³ Ibid., 295.
¹⁴ Ibid., 4.
award for teaching excellent in her second year at Locke. By her third year there, she ran a professional development session for new teachers. But conditions, Rachelle sensed, were worsening. Six of her special education students were reading at a kindergarten level. Safety that third year seemed to be at an all-time low. “Someone is going to die here,” Rachelle thought. So she made a change, staying in education – she now works for KIPP Sol in Los Angeles as a founding school leader – but leaving Locke, as most of her TFA compatriots did within their first two years of teaching.

PHILLIP GEDEON: Locke High School, South Central L.A.,
ninth grade geometry, 2005-2007

Phillip Gedeon came to Locke through TFA at the same time as Rachelle – with one important distinction. He was black. And he knew that would help him in the classroom. Before deciding to apply for TFA, Phillip believed that his being African American could have an impact on his ability to close the achievement gap. He had seen his mostly white classmates at Connecticut College go on to have positive experiences with TFA. “If they are so successful,” Phillip thought, “think what I, a single African American male, could do in the inner city!” And Phillip was right: during his first few months at Locke, he had far fewer racial conflicts in his classroom than other teachers.

There was one problem: by November of his first year, he felt burned out. A lot of the teachers there did. “Already a lot of the teachers were saying this would be their last year at Locke.” For Phillip, encounters like the one he had with Darius were daunting. After being absent for almost a month, Darius showed up to Phillip’s math

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15 Ibid., 328.
16 Ibid., 77.
17 Ibid., 98.
class and revealed he had been at home for his own safety: he had been engaged in a gun
stalemate with another young man. Phillip asked if a resolution was within sight.
Darius’s answer – “One of us is gonna have to shoot the other. Whoever shoots first
solves the problem.” – rattled Phillip but bounced off the rest of the class as a normal
teenage dilemma, nonchalantly delivered and casually received. Phillip had grown up in
a low-income community and was raised by a single mother. But he’d never heard
anything quite like this. In the moment, how was Phillip supposed to teach after hearing
a story like that? He did the best he could. “The only answer for Darius’s situation.”
Phillip thought, “was to make the time that he had with him meaningful, to make the
moments in Mr. Gedeon’s class the best moments of Darius’s day.”¹⁸

That attitude – coupled with a laser-like approach that wasted no time – helped
Phillip maximize his instruction time most days. He allowed certain boys who used
profane language but were good students – productive, intelligent and well-intentioned –
to carry on, hoping that permitting young men to be themselves would promote continued
hard work. He was critical of a Hispanic pride day in which many students left school to
march downtown, showing appreciation for their heritage. “It was an entire day wasted
for children who couldn’t afford to lose a single minute,”¹⁹ Phillip thought. The day after
the march, he didn’t address it with his students. Instead, they jumped headfirst into the
day’s lesson. “He had geometry standards to cover.”²⁰ Midway through the year,
Phillip’s focus, passion and effectiveness as an instructor earned him the praise of Dr.
Wells, whom at a faculty meeting highlighted Phillip’s “master” teaching: “Have you

¹⁸ Ibid., 100.
¹⁹ Ibid., 239.
²⁰ Ibid., 241.
seen Mr. Gedeon teach? You need to. He gives administrators like me hope. … I was utterly amazed.”

But Phillip had his ups and downs, to be sure. After feeling rejuvenated over a Christmas break that saw him lesson plan instead of head home to visit family, Phillip’s first few days back at school kicked his butt.

By the end of that first week back, Phillip was drained. He walked around his classroom in a daze. When he finally did get it together to go home, he had a bite to eat and went to bed. It was eight-thirty. Why am I here? What can I do? How do I give both myself and my students hope?21

One of the sources of inspiration that helped Phillip endure the tough weeks was the camaraderie among the teachers at Locke. He and another teacher “had a running competition to see who could visit the other more during their breaks. He enjoyed the collegiality at Locke, especially among the TFA folks. In fact, he didn’t know how a teacher could make it at a place like Locke without the support of colleagues.”22 But Phillip, who took pride in his planning and his ability to instruct his students, didn’t necessarily need motivation from an outside source. His TFA mentor, Samir, had a background in math and felt capable of helping Phillip. But Phillip “really had no use for Samir … [and] didn’t want to listen to his critiques.”23

Before long, Phillip began to think of Locke as more of a building pretending to be a school than an actual school. That attitude led to his worst stretch of the year.

The troubled started on Tuesday. His eyes welled up with tears just thinking about it. The kids were sassy, even defiant, in periods one and three. Even his best-behaved students were out of whack. Phillip felt like he had lost control and was floundering at sea. And he felt angry. That afternoon he had stayed for the

21 Ibid., 180.
22 Ibid., 162.
23 Ibid., 169.
faculty meeting, when what he wanted to do was go straight home to his room. … I need to be on my own and calm down. I have to get my spirits up so I can go back in tomorrow. Wednesday wasn’t any better. He was still angry at the kids – and at himself, too, for feeling that way. He decided he had to do something drastic to get their attention. So he made them queue up outside the door, then let them in three at a time. ‘This is your warning … I will call home and kick you out. Go to your chair, sit down, and don’t say a word!’

Some kids heeded the warning better than others, but three that day were kicked out of the classroom.

After that, Phillip had his ups and downs. … But … he never lost control of a class again. In fact, he learned to look past some of the behavior he had once found so disrespectful. Many of his kids had such hard shells covering such fragile interiors; he had to remind himself … that it wasn’t about him. He really did have to understand where they were coming from before he could get them to see things through his lens. So he tried not to take things personally. He knew the kids didn’t hate him; it was just the opposite. The like him because, bottom line, he treated them with respect.

That approach worked well for Phillip, who was awarded the Marva Collins Award for Outstanding African American Educators through Loyola Marymount University during his second year of teaching. That came on the heels of a few months spent teaching summer school, which Phillip loved. By his third year in education, Phillip had moved to West Adams Preparatory High School. He’s now the director of math instruction for L.A.’s Alliance College-Ready Public Schools.


Teachers in high-need schools have a hard time finding people who can relate to their experiences. They also, inevitably, have some difficulty relating to anyone not teaching – or not interested in learning about their students. For Taylor Rifkin, who attended the University of Southern California, that realization came shortly into her first

24 Ibid., 279.

25 Ibid., 280.
year of teaching at Locke. At a party in Hollywood – where she had spent plenty of time while a college student – one boozed-up partier seemed intrigued, momentarily, by Taylor’s new job. “Wow!” he said. “You’re changing lives!” Then, without batting an eye: “Do you know where the rest of the soda is?”

This exchange took place just as Taylor was finding her stride as a teacher. Midway through the fall, she “felt so good about what she was doing that she would have taught at Locke High School without pay.” She was all in. That mindset permeated her entire life. She couldn’t go shopping without thinking of her students. Fifty bucks of spending money from her father she used on books for her kids. She did all she could to sell them on the incredibly fun facets of college life, opening up about football games, her boyfriends and even keg stands at parties – all as a way of motivating her students to graduate. Her commitment was a result, also, of her believing in the fellow TFAers around her. “They were all so smart, so hardworking and capable. She loved them.”

Which made saying good-bye to another first-year corps member, Dave, so hard. When he quit his job in December, a farewell statement stuck with Taylor: “The TFA lifestyle is not sustainable.” Recent events had made Taylor think that Dave was right. After feeling so positive about everything in the middle of the fall, doubt had begun to creep into her mind. Even as her students generated high test scores, she was dubious.

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26 Ibid., 109.
27 Ibid., 109.
28 Ibid., 109.
29 Ibid., 172-173.
30 Ibid., 110.
31 Ibid., 140.
“Are they really learning?” Taylor wondered. “Do they understand concepts? Am I placing too much emphasis on test results and not enough on the fact that these kids can’t read?” By early November, a thought entered Taylor’s head for the first time: “You know, I don’t want to be here.” A week later, she drove home from school crying after trying to diffuse a racial conflict – Latino versus black, a common source of tension at Locke – in her classroom. Ultimately, but calling the police and keeping a “putative street wrestler” – Breana – in her classroom, Taylor prevented a planned brawl.

Events like these weighed on Taylor over Christmas break. Instead of relaxing with her family and enjoying a trip to Mexico, she was anxious. “She couldn’t sleep at night. When she was able to rest, she woke up with heart racing. She was thinking bad thoughts, generating awful, negative emotions.” But she drew on the strength she had used to overcome anorexia as a middle schooler, reciting the serenity prayer routinely – and she ended up taking “mental-health days” periodically to keep her spirits up.

By the time spring arrived, Taylor had endured the worst personally – while flourishing professionally. Her students reading scores on the Gates-MacGinitie test had increased, on average, by more than 2.9 years. And the anxiety that accompanied the gains at the outset of the year had disappeared. She knew her students were learning. And she attributed their progress, in large part, to their willingness to buy in. One

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32 Ibid., 111.
33 Ibid., 141-142.
34 Ibid., 175.
35 Ibid., 176.
36 Ibid., 238.
student, Yemane, began the year at a sixth-grade level and wound up at a twelfth-grade level. “I started listening,” Yemane said. “I had never listened before.”

It was clear Taylor had been listening, as well. She took pride in talking about her students, and by the end of the year, she had begun speaking as a TFA rep – opening up about the type of young person candidates would be teaching if they took the plunge.

Taylor told them the kids were very raw, very literal, funny but real. If they didn’t like what you were wearing, they’d tell you. If you cam in with a new hairstyle, they noticed. She was always struck by how canny they were. Once, when she was on the phone, the kids could tell that her laugh was not sincere and scolded her: ‘You sound like a rich white person, Miss Rifkin!’

It was clear, though, that her students adored her. On one occasion, when Taylor left Locke to observe an English class at another school, the questions poured in from her kids. “‘You leaving school? You going? You like that school? Were the kids quiet there? Do you like them better?’ The questions came so rapidly she couldn’t answer them all. ‘I’m not going anywhere,’ she said.”

In her second year at Locke, Taylor felt less sure about that statement. There were days where she thought: “I could really make a difference here if I stayed.” And then, she’d see a kind running through the halls with blood streaming down his face, and the thought would change: “Coming to Locke is like entering the gates of hell – abandon hope all ye who enter here.”

By her third year of teaching, Taylor was at Animo Watts II Charter High School in Los Angeles. Today, she is the director of school leader

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37 Ibid., 299.
38 Ibid., 290-291.
39 Ibid., 142-143.
40 Ibid., 330.
recruitment at Achievement First in New York City – and a far cry from the girl who attended USC in the early 2000’s.

One run-in late in her first year of teaching shows the impact Taylor’s time at Locke had on her persona. It was prom night, and she was chaperoning the Locke students at the Biltmore in downtown L.A. when she ran in to some USC students she knew who had graduated earlier in the day. Upon seeing Taylor, they could not comprehend what she was doing there with “these black kids dressed up like Lil’ Bow Wow.” From that point forward, Taylor realized she was in the right place. It was a reminder of how happy she was to be teaching at Locke. “Under no circumstances would I want to be back at USC,” she said. “These people are so ignorant. My life is so different now – and so much better. This is the richest experience anyone could have right out of college. I am so fortunate.”


Born in Saudi Arabia, an Armenian raised in New Jersey and a recent graduate of Boston College with a double major in biology and English, Hrag Hamalian stepped well outside of his comfort zone by accepting a position with TFA in Los Angeles. His transition to teaching – and to life after college – seemed to happen overnight, and when he reflected on it, it shocked him.

His life had gone from carefree to crazed in a matter of months. During his senior year at BC, Hrag had been able to kick back some. After a Thursday night of partying, he’d wake up at 2 p.m. on Friday, go to his one scheduled class, and then rev up for the weekend’s festivities. Now he was rising before dawn and working late into the night. He was getting five hours of sleep – if he slept at all. On top of that, for the first time in his life he had to cook and clean for himself.

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41 Ibid., 308-309.
He felt like he was sixty years old. When he woke up in the morning and looked in the mirror, he thought, *I am my dad.*  

Hrag taught biology – five periods a day – and went to graduate school at Loyola Marymount; these activities “enveloped his whole life. … All he ever thought of was school.”  

Hrag lived with another teacher at Locke, Mackey – with whom he had an interesting relationship. Mackey proved to be helpful for Hrag, but the help was not necessarily reciprocated.  

They didn’t eat together, and after a while, they didn’t talk much, either. Mackey loved to hash out the day; Hrag couldn’t bear even thinking about it. … They carpooled to Locke. … Mackey knocked on Hrag’s bedroom door at 5:30 a.m. [every day]. … There were mornings when Hrag would simply announce: ‘I’m not going!’ But because Mackey was on the other side of the door waiting, he would eventually get up and get dressed and go to work.”

One day, when Hrag decided to drive to school on his own, he had not been able to get out of his car because of an awful knot in his stomach. The stress of the early school year manifested itself in back pain and other physical maladies for Hrag. On that morning, Mackey arrived 20 minutes after Hrag and found him “stretched out behind the wheel, eyes closed, he panicked. Pounding on the car window [Mackey] cried: ‘What are you doing? What are you doing?’ Hrag asked himself the same question again and again.”

Images from the classroom stuck with him like leeches. A boy’s poetry book, filled with blood. “The poetry was pretty good; the blood was disgusting.” A boy who

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42 Ibid., 103.
43 Ibid., 104.
44 Ibid., 105.
45 Ibid., 146.
46 Ibid., 146.
took to Hrag and hounded him about their going to Jamba Juice together. He was eventually expelled, and Hrag felt like it had been his fault.47 A troubled young girl with cuts on her wrists finally forced him to throw up his hands. “Who am I kidding?” he said.

I don’t know what I’m doing. The fact that it’s left to me to identify a girl who is on the verge of killing herself is ridiculous. You can fake the teaching, but when it comes to this stuff, you can’t. How can it be that I’m the one diagnosing or even realizing that this girl is in trouble? I don’t even know who her guidance counselor is. If something happens, I could be held liable. I don’t know who to go to. And if I don’t write it on my hand, I won’t remember to even report it. It’s crazy. Oh God, I hope she’s okay.48

Hrag proved to be resilient, though. He rarely showed his frustration with his students – instead feigning confidence, continually saying, “I am about to blow your minds,” which the kids loved. Eventually, that feigned confidence became authentic as Hrag got to know his students and began planning lessons with which they could identify. His “Who My Baby Daddy?” lesson while introducing phenotypes and genotypes was a student favorite. He grew to love his students, “even the ones who drove him crazy.”49

But he made sure to maintain a strict divide between school and home. On one occasion, he was about to open his car to head home when he realized he had a stamp in his pocket from his classroom. “Rather than carry it home, he trudged all the way back up three flights of stairs and stashed it in the classroom. When he left at the end of the day, he didn’t want to have to think about Locke again until he walked back in the next morning.”50

47 Ibid., 149.
48 Ibid., 150.
49 Ibid., 223-224.
50 Ibid., 221-222.
His classes went more and more smoothly as the year progressed, but Hrag’s toughness was continually tested. On a late-year field trip to Cabrillo Beach, a fight broke out in the parking lot, and Hrag got hit in the head. While he was not injured seriously, he returned to Locke that evening only to discover that his car had been broken into and his CD’s had been stolen.\textsuperscript{51} He, like Taylor, needed a mental-health day or two to get through it all. In fact, they became close friends, taking impromptu trips up and down the coast together, helping support one another through the toughest years of their lives. They exercise plenty, and for Hrag – who put on lots of weight at the start of the year – it was a benefit; he lost 15 pounds before the end of the school year.

Hrag returned to Locke for a second year – “more or less heading up the biology department”\textsuperscript{52} – and today, he is the head of school and founder of Valor Academy in Arleta, California. But it was hard for him to escape the harshness of Watts after that first year, such a stark departure from the life he had enjoyed the year before at Boston College. Even on the last day of his first year of teaching, as Hrag prepared for the end-of-year faculty party, he had problems. A student hit his car in the parking lot as he was leaving school – Hrag’s second car accident of the month. After Hrag politely declined the student’s offer to bring the car to his uncle’s body shop in the heart of Watts, the student called Hrag a racist. Hrag did not attend the party that evening. He went to Las Vegas.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 272.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 325.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 322.
CHAPTER 6
UNPACKING THE PILGRIMAGE:
AN ANALYSIS OF LIMINALITY IN HIGH-NEED TEACHING

An individual pilgrimage often originates in a vow.

— Victor Turner¹

In Chapter 3, we say that liminality applies to “all phases of decisive cultural change.”² This lumps teaching in the high-need school into the category of liminal activity, but it does not necessarily prove that teaching is a pilgrimage. This chapter will apply the theory to the facts – analyzing specifically how teaching is liminal, all the while hewing closely to Victor Turner’s definition of liminality. As we go, it will be useful for us to continue emphasizing the truths about liminality as Turner sees it through the vehicle of pilgrimage, on which he also ruminates at length. Therefore – as a way of gaining insight into our subjects, the teachers – we will show how they are pilgrims and, in as much, how their pilgrimages are liminal experiences. Much of Turner’s terminology will be broken down more meticulously than it was when introduced in Chapter 3. And once the terms are rooted in liminality, they will be used precisely as a way of explaining how the teaching experiences of Eli Savit, Shoshana Gitlin, Barlow Flores, Rachelle Snyder, Phillip Gedeon, Taylor Rifkin and Hrag Hamalian were all – in their own ways – pilgrimages.

Pilgrimage is not merely a metaphor for teaching. Teaching is a pilgrimage. The commitment made by 20-somethings like Eli, Shoshana, Barlow, Rachelle, Phillip,

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Taylor and Hrag – before any of them ever took a step inside the classroom as a teacher – required in many ways a leap of faith. Not all of the seven alternate-certification teachers had grown up in affluent areas, but none had been raised in poverty, either – and none had attended a high-need high school. They each went on to attend respectable four-year colleges – some of the best in the country, in fact, including the University of Pennsylvania, Boston College, Kalamazoo College and the University of Southern California – and could have pursued any number of paths upon graduation. And yet each of them, through their own impetuses, felt drawn to education, to helping young people, to sharing their knowledge and skills, to working in a high-poverty community. In a way unlike marriage or priesthood in its duration but not in its earnestness, these seven teachers took a vow – not just to closing the achievement gap, but to leaving their respective comfort zones and armoring up on the front lines of education.

Turner says that every pilgrimage originates in a vow – like the ones these teachers made – and is followed thereafter by a separation. The first phase of the *rites de passage* Turner adopted from Arnold van Gennep and expanded into liminality, separation is the detachment of an individual from “an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both.”³ Separation comes first in the three-pronged transition process and sets the table for the second and most prolonged phase, the limen – or margin – wherein the liminality occurs. The liminal period is where the characteristics of the ritual subject – which Turner also terms a neophyte and a liminar – are ambiguous. In the limen, the liminar “passes through a cultural realm that

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has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.”\textsuperscript{4} The vast majority of substantive analysis here will be located in and around the limen. Aggregation, the third phase, follows the limen and indicates that the transition is complete, that the passage is consummated.

The three phases of transition are where our worlds of pilgrimage and liminality collide. In her introduction to the book \textit{Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture} that Turner published with his wife, Edith, in 1978, Deborah Ross writes that the Turners’ work “presented a unique anthropological contribution to the field of pilgrimage studies, providing a hermeneutical lens for interpreting pilgrimage experience through the concept of liminality.”\textsuperscript{5} Ross’s categorization of the work helps us understand how the liminality present in the \textit{rites de passage} is worth studying in view of pilgrimage, an act that elementally \textit{is} a right of passage. The pilgrimage itself exists in the limen and, therefore, it is liminal. But we cannot enter the limen just yet.

For the individual subject here to become a pilgrim, it must meet a requisite besides the vow: the willingness to detach from some point or state preceding limen to reach the limen. After that, any idea of meeting requisites – or controlling much of anything – is lessened significantly upon entry into the limen, upon beginning the pilgrimage. Turner says that “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”\textsuperscript{6} Really, liminal entities can only control their departure from a certain point or state. They can only choose to separate. In as much, it’s safe to liken the phase

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Turner and Turner, \textit{Image and Pilgrimage}, xxx.
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Turner, \textit{Ritual Process}, 95.
\end{itemize}
preceding the limen – the separation – to leaving home or, simply, departing from the everyday, the customary, the normal. Once the pilgrim finally separates and enters the limen, he is released “from mundane structure,” on his pilgrimage in earnest.

The pilgrim, by making a foray into the unfamiliar and entering a state “betwixt and between” her norm, undergoes an abrupt “leveling.” Turner, who addresses ritual very similarly to the way he addresses pilgrimage, here discusses “leveling” practically, showing how the circumcision rites for members of the Ndembu tribe in Zambia ceremoniously remove their former statuses and – essentially – their identities after the separation phase by actually removing their clothes. “The novices are ‘stripped’ of their secular clothing when they are passed beneath a symbolic gateway; they are ‘leveled’ in that their former names are discarded and all are assigned the common designation mwadyi, or ‘novice,’ and treated alike.” The symbolism present in this ritual encapsulates a leveling while also showing a lowering, of sorts. It’s true that even a chief’s son – with revered status in the tribe – is brought down to the level of his fellow ritual-goers in this tradition; Turner sees this as emblematic of liminality in general. “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low.”

Separation and the leveling that follows it in the limen can be seen among high-need teachers by acknowledging the places from where they detach. The “fixed point in the social structure” from where Rachelle detached was the University of Pennsylvania – by all means an elite university, among the top 10 most years according to *U.S. News &

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9 Ibid., 97.
World Report. The “set of cultural conditions” from which Eli detached were the people and events and shenanigans that contributed to the culture at top liberal arts school Kalamazoo College – and the status Eli maintained amidst that culture. As seniors, Rachelle and Eli were certainly some form of “high” – as Turner would define it. College was the time of their lives. What is more, they attended elite universities and did very well at those places – graduating near the tops of their classes. The reality in examining their pilgrimages as liminal experiences, though, is that the degrees Rachelle earned from Penn and Eli from Kalamazoo ceased to matter the moment they entered the high-need classroom, the moment they arrived at the limen. The past experiences they carried with them definitely contributed to their character along the way, amidst their journeys – having shaped and continually shaping who they were at that stage in their lives – but after separation, neither Rachelle or Eli was “high.” Instead, the “low” loomed.

In a day and age that seems to demand higher education for professional advancement, liminal experiences like pilgrimage challenge that notion, instead taking an individual’s “status” in society and making it moot. Rachelle and Eli had worked hard at their schools to earn high marks and gain a reputation among the faculty, excel on the soccer pitch and basketball court, respectively, and carve out solid futures for themselves upon graduation. But after being accepted to TFA and beginning their teaching careers, their pasts were rather insignificant. The eight goals Rachelle scored her senior year did

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not begin to define Rachelle, nor did her psychology background. Eli’s double major—philosophy and political science—as well as his all-conference honors for a great senior year on the hardwood were, now, extraneous bits of his DNA. By entering the margin, Rachelle and Eli were not magnificent. We can infer that Turner would see them as having been leveled in the limen to the more generic status of high-need teacher—far more ambiguous than they had been at Penn or at Kalamazoo. To their students, to their new colleagues, they were simply Miss Snyder and Mr. Savit.

Although they were teachers by title after their separation periods, Rachelle and Eli had in actuality embarked on a journey where they wore many hats: educator, sister, brother, mother, father, counselor, friend, listener, storyteller, entertainer, expert. These were just a few of the roles their new jobs demanded they play, and it was impossible to predict which day would call for which hat. Thus, Rachelle and Eli appropriately met one of Turner’s definitions for a liminar: persons who “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.”¹² Even for subjects who enter the limen voluntarily—as all seven of our teaching subjects did—it is alarming to be suddenly without classification, to elude any sort of status locator in a new place. As we will see later in this chapter—in a closer studying of Turner’s take on the limen—subjects inevitably experience a troubling lost-in-translation moment or three after the separation phase. And it is often not until a neophyte embraces one resulting factor of the leveling—communitas, another concept we will examine in detail later—that he or she begins to accept his ambiguity, her place in the limen.

¹² Turner, Ritual Process, 95.
In addition to the sudden ambiguity of the identity in the limen, Turner says that liminars exhibit behavior that is “normally passive” in their new environments. In the case of our teaching subjects, most of whom before beginning teaching would have been classified distinctly, not ambiguously – and probably as assertive rather than passive – their new character traits often lead to a sort of identity crisis. Turner acknowledges the stark changes present in the limen but offers no sympathy for their lack of identity. Instead, he emphasizes that this “limbo of statuslessness” is imperative for the passage from lower to higher status in society. “Each individual’s life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and communitas, and to states and transitions.” The structure and states, here, lie outside of the margin – either before the separation phase or after the aggregation phase. The communitas and transitions, of course, lie in the limen. Understanding that distinction doesn’t necessarily make the transition for liminars any more seamless.

It is understandable that the abruptness of the ambiguity which arrives for teachers after the separation phase can be shocking – especially for neophytes who, in their previous phases, saw themselves in a certain light and became comfortable with that light. And even if they are as determined as teachers like Rachelle and Eli and Phillip to command confidently their new environments, the leveling in the limen can be jolting. For Rachelle, that meant doubt creeping in and affecting her normally upbeat attitude: “Some days – too many days – she just wanted to quit.” For usually laid-back Eli, that

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 97.
meant the foreign feeling of stress – and hours of lesson planning until he found a model that worked for his students. For Phillip, the leveling led to a questioning – of himself, of his new charge, of his new place of residence after spending the last 22 years of his life on the East Coast, most recently at Connecticut College. “Why am I here?” he wondered. “What can I do? How do I give both myself and my students hope?”

For Hrag, even his own race befuddled him. When a black girl asked him about it one day in his biology class – during a lesson on stem cells – Hrag could not bring himself to tell the students anything substantive about his background. An Armenian born in Saudi Arabia and raised in New Jersey, all Hrag could muster was a confused “What’s my race?” The girl’s response, essentially an explanation for her asking the question in the first place: “You not white, right?” Hrag had come from Boston College, a place where he was, more or less, the man – popular, handsome, driven to fun, living up all that college has to offer – to a place where he was far more “homologous,” one of Turner’s 26 properties of liminality. His status, his good looks, his being the life of the party – none of that mattered in the classroom. He was just another first-year teacher. Just like the Ndembu tribe boys, studied by Turner, preparing for their circumcision ritual, Hrag was subject to the sung mantra: “Even if your child is a chief’s son, tomorrow he will be like a slave.” Leveled, he was now in the limen – a Locke teacher, and a liminar, by Turner’s definition of the word: people who “have no status,

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17 Ibid., 81.


19 Ibid., 108.
property, insignia … indicating rank or role … that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands.”

Indeed, Hrag had fewer ways – no ways, initially – at Locke to indicate he was a cool dude. Phillip lacked any real clout in a new school as a first-year teacher and was, early on, subject to the moods of his students; his actions didn’t dictate the classroom tone. Eli wore no sign on his chest indicating his status as a brilliant mind – one of the brightest of his generation – urging his students to take advantage of the knowledge before them and listen. And Rachelle had no characteristic to distinguish her from the other diminutive, white females who had come through Locke as teachers and made a minimal impact, departing after one year – teachers who had failed.

No, upon entering their respective high-need schools, Hrag and Phillip and Eli and Rachelle were not – especially to their students – the promising young leaders of America that TFA purported they were. Instead, the 22-year-olds were “in the interstices of social structure” and “on its margins” – two common characteristics of liminars, according to Turner. The important distinction here between liminars or pilgrims – a term worth re-introducing at this juncture – and teachers is that most liminars can exist within a vacuum of sorts comprised of just themselves and their equivalent peers. The teacher, of course, has a set of students – an important factor in the course of the day. The pilgrim does not. Yes, the pilgrim may have a specific charge, or overseer (perhaps even a teacher-like presence, which we will discuss momentarily), or destination, or tradition to uphold. But to Turner, the pilgrim is one entity among many other virtually identical entities. He is homogeneous. Turner says there exists kinship among the

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 125.
homogeneous pilgrims themselves, but he does not examine in depth the ways in which pilgrims interact with outsiders – with non-pilgrims. In as much as that is an imperative facet of the teacher’s entire makeup – interacting with non-pilgrims or, in other words, their students – then it is important to acknowledge it as an inherent difference between the pilgrim and the teacher.

That pilgrims do not have students and teachers do is an important nonparallel – one that, if ignored, makes this an inauthentic exercise. While Chapter 3 saw us posit ideas like a pilgrim’s unflinching obedience – in this instance, to the abstract “prophet” of closing the achievement gap as a stand-in for students – the reality is that pilgrims have no actual audience before them, no students, in the midst of their journeys. The pilgrims are the audience, the ones expecting to be moved. In some cases, pilgrims have guides helping facilitate those journeys. For young liminars in the midst of a ritual or rite de passage, a guide’s presence necessitates a certain decorum: Turner says, in line with the notion that liminars are “normally passive,” that they must also “obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint.”

Teachers – at least in the middle of their school day, when their charge is to get students to obey them – are not typically asked to follow specific sets of instructions, nor are they typically subject to punishment.

(A quick, worthwhile aside: as we stated in Chapter 3, it is confusing to call the teacher the instructor in this scenario. The teacher is not the leader here, but rather, the follower, the student, the pilgrim. Which is why we have, in the spirit of simplifying this shifting of roles, replaced the idea of Turner’s instructor, or “prophet or leader” – as he calls it in listing his properties of liminality – with the notion of closing the achievement

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gap. It’s reasonable to think that Turner would excuse the sacred-to-secular conversion here given all the work entailed for teachers in trying to educate the students who have long lagged behind their more affluent peers in the classroom. The teacher’s job is to prepare effective lessons for her students; to continually hone her craft; to be present – and consistent – for her students; to educate, empower, motivate, enlighten and love them. We can infer that Turner would see the high-need teacher’s charge as “total obedience to the prophet or leader”23 – especially because of the humility and unselfishness demanded of these teachers on a daily basis. To Turner, humility and unselfishness, like passivity, are chief characteristics of the liminar.24)

One more noteworthy difference between pilgrims and teachers rests in the reality of the pilgrim’s daily walk. Pilgrims have comrades beside them at the pinnacle of their voyages; teachers, conversely, are on an island in the classroom, fending for themselves. Imagine a Muslim in Mecca, or a Catholic hiker walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain. The Muslim has a fellow pilgrim – or thousands of them – kneeling to his left or right. The hiker has a group of like-minded pilgrims with her, making the trek to Galicia, home to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.25 The teacher, on the other hand, is on a solo mission. And while he may have the support of other teachers in the building or throughout the district helping to lift his long-term morale, during the duration of class, he is alone in front of his students when it matters most. Yes, the pinnacle of the school day – when the overarching goal requires students’ learning – is the lesson, where it’s on

23 Ibid, 111.

24 Ibid., 95.

the shoulders of the teacher and no one else to impress upon the students the topic du jour.

Turner, though, would likely say not to overlook the power of the support teachers receive from their peers and give to other teachers. To him, communitas is a paramount characteristic of liminality – specifically, a natural result of the leveling that occurs in the limen phase of the *rites de passage*. If leveling causes neophytes to be “reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life,” then, Turner says, those liminars will – amongst themselves – “tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism.”

It is a comradeship that “arises spontaneously” among the homogeneous in the limen – “an essential and generic human bond … richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable. It has something magical about it. Those who experience communitas have a feeling of endless power.”

Yes, communitas is the eventual result of the leveling that can so powerfully stifle teachers upon entry into the limen. But communitas, too, is powerful. And to survive and thrive in the high-need classroom, it is imperative. Accordingly, the preceding definition of communitas is applicable to the liminal experiences of teachers like Hrag in the high-need classroom. Hrag would never have retained his job at Locke were it not for the support of his roommate, Mackey. He would never have shown up for school. Mackey, a TFA corps member like Hrag, would pound on Hrag’s bedroom door many mornings – around 5:30 a.m. – and not relent until Hrag had dragged himself out of bed. They were not friends before committing to TFA. And even though they were


roommates, they didn’t eat together or hang out together too often. Still, something drove Mackey to help out Hrag in the wee hours every day. They both taught at Locke. They had the same commute and, more or less, the same daily challenge. Thus, we can infer that Turner would see Mackey’s knocking on Hrag’s door as the endowment of an “additional power” to help himself – and, more importantly here, Hrag – “cope with their new station in life.” They were in it together, having committed to TFA it the same year, having been placed at the same school. It’s likely that Turner would see theirs as a “uniform condition” that spawned comradeship.

Simple actions – like knocking on a door – can contribute to the richly-charged affects and magic that define communitas. For Barlow, at Whittier Education Campus in D.C., the magic stemmed from the spontaneous. Barlow did all he could in his one year of teaching to stay upbeat and positive. He could not do this on his own. So, during his planning periods, he sought out available colleagues to chitchat or grab a quick bite to eat. His willingness to be gregarious – and his fellow teachers’ willingness to reciprocate Barlow’s warmth – kept his energy high and his mood mostly positive. We can infer that Turner would see the daily spurts of comradeship as moments encapsulating the “essential human bond” that certainly can be spawned many places – but tend more frequently to arise in a situation where there is widespread homogeneity, like there is in the limen.

Communitas is a liminal phenomenon especially in the sense that it exists most strongly among fellow neophytes – among those who are ambiguous together, those who are homologous. Communitas was especially uplifting for Phillip Gedeon in Los Angeles, who identified with his colleagues inside of Locke – drawing inspiration from
them and developing an intense comradeship with them – but clashed with an outsider like Samir, his TFA mentor and an experienced teacher. Samir, objectively, should have been a valuable resource for a first-year teacher like Phillip. But Phillip wanted nothing to do with him. Yes, Samir had paid his dues by teaching in a high-need school. But Samir had also left the classroom to work, instead, with teachers. The connection to pilgrimage here is clear. A pilgrim like Phillip doesn’t necessarily want his hand held as he approaches the metaphorical shrine. Rather, he wants to steer his own ship. He longs for independent self-discovery. And that ability to walk on one’s own – perhaps side-by-side with a fellow pilgrim, but unimpeded by any other outside influence – is monumental. Sure, a dude like Samir knows his stuff. But that doesn’t mean he knows Phillip. And we can infer that Turner would see that as a powerful distinction. The spontaneous development of comradeship – intense comradeship – Turner says, arises among the homologous. It does not arise among anyone simply present in the limen. Just as the *Mfumwa tubwiku* – or senior instructor – does not undergo the circumcision rites of the Ndembu boys and, therefore, is not leveled, he cannot develop the same, common, intense comradeship the boys can. That bond of communitas, Turner says, is unique to the fellow liminars, wherein lies some of its magic.

For many first-year teachers in programs like TFA and The New Teaching Project, regular meetings of corps members outside of the school day can contribute to the magic and power of the communitas, as well. These meetings can strengthen comradeship significantly, and they can be reminders of the leveled, shared experience among pilgrims. While teaching in the Bronx, Eli earned his Master’s of Education from Pace University in Manhattan. Eli didn’t value the instruction, but he found the reuniting
with his TFA brethren from around the city to be invaluable. “The best part about Pace,” Eli said, “was the esprit de corps – knowing that there’s other people going through the same thing you are, knowing that you’re not alone, that there are other first-year teachers dealing with precisely the same issues.”

Shoshana had a similar experience in D.C., earning her Master’s from American University. But she didn’t have to turn as far for her support. Two other likeminded D.C. Teaching Fellows worked in her building. They teamed up with Shoshana to bring continuity to the ninth-grade classrooms early in her second year – continuity that resulted from a focus on the minutiae, like having identical classroom setups, decorations, routines, rules and even pencil placement on the desks. It was the highlight of her time at H.D. Woodson – and ultimately kept Shoshana going longer than she would have without the teammates, without the communitas. “I wanted to quit plenty of times that first year-and-a-half, but I also felt a deep bond and connection with Katie and Becca,” Shoshana said. “I felt very committed to them and committed to the Teaching Fellows.”

It’s safe to infer that Turner would see Eli’s Master’s classes as a reminder that he and his peers had been “reduced or ground down to a uniform condition” together – and that they reciprocally were helping one another “cope with their new station in life.” Same goes for Shoshana’s bond with her fellow teachers. Without them, she’d have been a one-and-done teacher at H.D. With them, she felt “an essential and generic human bond … richly charged with affects” – bonds and charges that lifted her up, providing extra motivation in the midst of a tough setting, a tough year. Turner would likely see

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Shoshana’s experience as something even more specific – as an example of *normative* communitas. To Turner, normative communitas is where resources are mobilized and organized “under the influence of time,”30 where the group holds one another accountable for its goals and where the human elements of communitas are “organized into a perduing social system.” While Shoshana’s successful classroom did not exactly *perdure* – it ran smoothly for two months – she did draw energy from her peers to accomplish something she, or any of them individually, could not have accomplished on their own. They used their free time in the summer to sit down and plan. They showed humility by taking one another’s suggestions. They did all they could to present a united front. “We had the most structure you could have inside this unstructured environment,” Shoshana said. “… We made a school within a school,”31 – surely a “mobilized” and “organized” effort.

One snippet of Turner’s definition of communitas is both counter-intuitive to the concept of liminality and supportive of the great power of communitas. “It does not merge identities; it liberates them from conformity to general norms.”32 In one sense, this is puzzling. In his properties of liminality, Turner groups together ideas like “absence of status” and “total obedience” and “homogeneity” and “totality.” And here, he utilizes terminology that seems to oppose those properties, which begs the question: how does communitas – a liminal phenomenon – “not merge identities” and liberate neophytes “from conformity to general norms”? It seems as though, if a liminal experience like teaching is characterized by qualities like homogeneity and totality, then conformity

31 Ibid.
would not be far behind. Those who are the same – or, at least, complementary in the limen – would likely conform to some set of values rather than be “liberated from conformity.” And in line with the notion of leveling and the overall shared experience, it seems like neophytes’ identities would be merged in the midst of the limen. Turner, here, seems to say otherwise.

Now, in another sense, this part of Turner’s definition – a departure from conformity via a separation of identities – sounds as though it could be a return from the “low” of liminality to the “high” of the previous or future state. If the limen is where neophytes are leveled and carry “few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state,” then a “liberation from conformity” could entail an arrival at a place outside of the limen – like the aggregation phase – or at least some notion of approaching that place. Yet, because communitas exists in the margin, its purpose is not to deliver a neophyte to her aggregation. Rather, the purpose of communitas is to affect pleasure, to harness magic, to instill feelings of “endless power” on those in the limen. And to, when that aggregation phase does arrive, release a liminar “revitalized by their experience of communitas”33 back into the structure of some sort of norm, some sort of more clearly defined state. For a teacher like Barlow, who – in his current job as a youth program director – draws from his experiences in the classroom at Whittier every day when he interacts with troubled youth around D.C., this revitalization resonates. While his previous job as a teacher lacked structure, it did provide communitas. Now, in a job more defined by structure, that past communitas helps him relate to the youths with whom he currently works.

33 Turner, Ritual Process, 129.
This purpose of communitas is important to keep in mind as we dive deeper into the limen and examine qualities that carry with them a more negative connotation – and, in as much, show that Turner felt there was discomfort and danger in pilgrimage. While Turner says that neophytes are entities in transition – and without a place of position in their state – he also posits that other characteristics of liminality are “submissiveness and silence. … neophytes in many rites de passage have to submit to an authority that is nothing less than that of the total community. This community is the repository of the whole gamut of the culture’s values, norms, attitudes, sentiments, and relationships.”

The initial idea of community brings to mind the notion of buy-in and commitment. But to think that commitment, to Turner, is a result of submissiveness and silence is curious. It’s one thing to undergo a transition and another thing entirely to march along blindly, without objection, to every value, norm, attitude, sentiment and relationship present at the site of the pilgrimage, the location of the limen. While submissiveness echoes Turner’s idea of obedience, it seems to be even more in line with his likening of liminality to darkness – which, for the sake of insight into the high-need teachers’ plight, is useful to explore. Turner mentions darkness mostly in passing but does occasionally use dark images to characterize liminality. For instance, there is a dark quality to “nakedness,” to disregarding personal appearance, to “total obedience,” to “silence,” to suspending family ties and obligations, to “mystical powers,” and to the “acceptance of pain and suffering.” While these are merely seven of Turner’s 26 properties of liminality, they all capture to some extent the dark nature of the limen.

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34 Ibid., 103.
35 Ibid., 95.
Thus, we can infer that there is a certain harshness – a discomfort – that can occur inside the limen.

We can see that darkness in some of the trying experiences of the high-need teachers in this study. Her experience teaching at Locke ultimately drove Rachelle Snyder to another school. It took three years, but the prevailing, macabre thought – “Someone is going to die here” – was unavoidable after all she had heard and seen and internalized at Locke. The overwhelming sense of foreboding that crept in each day before her troublesome fourth-period class. The encounters she had with pregnant teenagers. The inescapability of guns in her community. The ridiculousness of the Bloods-Crips color fixation (red versus blue) and the violence resulting from it. The horrible strings of expletives she would hear while teaching – even while being observed. All told, it was a dark experience at Locke for Rachelle. Yes, she connected with students. And yes, she inserted a glimmer of sunshine into the dark by providing 20 of her students with the trip of their lifetimes. But even when returning from Catalina – which had been such an escape from the darkness – there was an abrupt and harsh reminder of gloom. After running free on the island for three days, the kids feared getting out of the car in the McDonald’s parking lot back in Watts because of the color of their shirts. An obfuscating cloud, to be sure. And while darkness need not define all pilgrimages, it certainly applies to Rachelle’s.

Rachelle tried to affect her students by imparting them with her skill set, her positivity, her knowledge and her love. She ultimately submitted to the powerful negativity present at Locke – not an “authority” in and of itself, but still, some sort of “repository of the whole gamut of the culture” there – and opted out. The same was true

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36 Foote, Relentless Pursuit, 328.
for Shoshana, who, midway through her second year of teaching in D.C., submitted to the stresses and the pressures at H.D. Woodson and quit – her decision no doubt influenced by the sum of the school’s parts: its “values, norms, attitudes, sentiments, and relationships.” Something about the limen, for her, sent Shoshana into a constant state of distress. She called it the lowest point of her professional life.

Not all of Turner’s properties of liminality are dark, of course. “Communitas” and “equality” and “humility” and “sacredness” and “unselfishness” certainly connote positivity. Even properties like “total obedience” and “acceptance of pain and suffering,” through certain lenses, can be viewed as reminders of the positive qualities of liminality – and of pilgrimage. If we again transpose Turner’s more sacred idea of the “prophet” into the teacher’s more secular idea of closing the achievement gap, then – as we introduced in Chapter 3 – we see how the pilgrim must do all she can to obey its power.

Taylor Rifkin is a good example of the teacher with a determined obedience to closing the achievement gap and, in as much, she is a good example of the pilgrim with a total obedience to the prophet. Taylor never bent – her expectations never lowered – in her pursuit for student excellence at Locke. Even as good test scores rolled in early in the year, she questioned their validity. Throughout the year, Taylor’s continual ups and downs – “She was a mass of contradictions. One minute she’d be on cloud nine, and the next, another cloud, a dark cloud, would move in and take over”\(^{37}\) – revealed a sort of suffering that could not be assuaged without proven student progress. Because Taylor continually questioned the validity of her students’ scores, it is almost as though she accepted that suffering – inviting some pain, becoming some sort of quasi-masochist to the struggles of the achievement gap. We can infer that Turner – at least in viewing

Taylor’s struggling, her restlessness – would liken it to one of his properties of liminality: the acceptance of pain and suffering. Outside of the margin, in a more structured environment, the opposite of this property, to Turner, would be the avoidance of pain and suffering. Ultimately, Taylor stopped hesitating when the good scores rolled in. She, perhaps – by the end of her first year – was liberated from the conformity of the limen, as Turner would say. Indeed, late in the school year, when she learned her students’ reading scores had jumped more than two grade levels, “Taylor was beside herself with joy. … She knew her kids were learning. … My kids have totally learned how to write an essay, a five-paragraph essay with sophisticated transitions – and their reading levels have jumped.”

Phillip was no different, and that was clear to anyone who set foot in his classroom. To Samir, Phillip was “a very thorough, by-the-book teacher whose high expectations were having an unexpected effect on the kids. They appeared to be actively engaged in learning geometry.” Phillip had a way of framing for his students the importance of their educations – and it fostered an urgency among them to excel. “Let’s talk about reality,” he told his students in October.

The reality is the people on the outside … don’t care about all your trials and tribulations and who you really are. All they see is the test scores, the grades, the attitude. They don’t see what we as teachers see on a daily basis. … You have to realize what people from outside the community think of you. They don’t spend money on this school on a daily basis because you tell them on a daily basis that you are not worth it. Why spend money when you don’t do the work? … You have to understand that every action has one of two consequences: you can either support their beliefs that you are unworthy and that you don’t care so why should they, or you can show them that they are wrong. How? You be the students they think you cannot be. Study. Do your homework. Come to class and do as well as you can. You need to make a choice. Every time you do something, think of

38 Ibid., 292-293.
39 Ibid., 64.
the consequences. Are you supporting or disproving their theories about who you are? The cards are stacked against you. But that doesn’t give you an excuse not to play the game. That should give you the excuse, the motivation, to work twice as hard.40

Talks like that one – along with nonnegotiable demands for quiet in the classroom and consistent productivity while at school – may be why, one day toward the end of the first semester, a student named Carnell said, in front of all his classmates, “Mr. G, you are the best teacher I ever had.”41

Just as comments like Carnell’s are no true barometer for student progress, the improvement made by Taylor’s students is no real indicator of the fruitfulness of her pilgrimage. And while Turner does not explicitly express an ultimate result for a pilgrimage – or any liminal experience upon exiting the limen and entering the final, aggregation phase – he does mention a higher level of “power” within the liminar. It results from the sort of approach displayed by Phillip and by Taylor – a product of total, humble obedience in the limen. “A well-known example is the medieval knight’s vigil, during the night before he receives the accolade, when he has to pledge himself to serve the weak and the distressed to mediate on his own unworthiness. His subsequent power is thought partially to spring from this profound immersion in humility.”42

And yet, this “power” can never be realized within the limen itself. Turner says, instead, that the pilgrim is likely unaware of the liminal impact of a given experience in the midst of that experience. “The pilgrim,” Turner says, “… may not consciously grasp

40 Ibid., 102.
41 Ibid., 162.
42 Turner, Ritual Process, 105.
more than a fraction of the message … [but he becomes] … increasingly capable.” This point of view puts into perspective the significance – or lack thereof – of every small failure and frustration from day to day for the high-need teacher. There are countless. And in the thick of the school year – especially for a first-year teacher in a struggling school – a barged-in homeroom door can have a lasting effect on one’s disposition. A student urinating in the middle of class during the first month of school is likely to stick with a teacher, as well. Hearing that your student has been threatened, or mugged, or even killed doesn’t seem to be news that can – at least initially – be brushed off casually for the sake of continuing a lesson.

We can infer that, for Turner, trying to analyze each minor success and failure along the way of the pilgrimage is irrelevant. Trying to grasp why a student has acted a certain way is less than fruitful – and often beyond a teacher’s control. Indeed, only a “fraction of the message” is clear in the limen. And although it becomes clearer and clearer along the way – gradually – there is no epiphany awaiting the pilgrim in the aggregation phase. Instead, there is the satisfaction of continued improvement, more clarity and increased capability. Turner would likely agree that, for the teacher, this gradually increasing capability would take the form of, perhaps, greater rapport with students or less and less shock at some of their more outlandish moments as the year marches on.

Once that year ends, we have arrived at an appropriate place to put up a stop sign – or, in other words, to return to a more fixed place in the social structure – and look back on the previous nine months as a difficult-to-define, unstable state: as a definite limen.

Ibid., 10.
After that last day of school, the teacher, the liminar, the pilgrim has consummated his passage. He has reached the aggregation phase. It can also be argued that a subject’s entire career as a teacher would define the entire limen. In the case of the teachers in this study, whose career durations in the high-need school varied, we cannot establish a universal end point for the limen. But it is, to Turner, where liminality ends and the third phase of the *rites de passage* begins. By definition, aggregation is where the subject “is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtues of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.”

The aggregation phase is not defined by transition, or communitas, or absence of status. No, aggregation is defined by the opposites of these properties of liminality: state, structure and status. After leaving the limen of *her* liminal experience – quitting her job at H.D. Woodson midway through her second year of teaching – Shoshana composed herself, took a week to determine what she wanted to do, and finally decided to apply for another teaching job in D.C. For her, it was a state of flux, of joblessness, of freedom from H.D. It was, for the first time in almost two years, a *state* – period. She was unemployed – a place she didn’t want to be – but a place nonetheless, a cultural realm with no ambiguity. After leaving the Bronx to return to his hometown of Ann Arbor, Eli had a much more predictable, professional structure head of him: that of law school at the University of Michigan. While he had fostered an environment conducive to learning in his U.S. history class in New York, he also had students affiliated with gangs who, at any

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44 Ibid., 95.

moment, could choose to disrupt class or not show up for class – circumstances well beyond Eli’s control. The law school setting left little room for spontaneity and was instead defined by its structure. After deciding to leave Whittier following one year of teaching, Barlow took a job with a youth program. He now is the program director for the Latin American Youth Center – a job with plenty of notoriety in both the education community and the Hispanic community of D.C. The status he lacked as a teacher in the limen at Whittier he now has at his new job outside of the school – outside of the limen, after aggregation – where certain societal norms and ethical expectations dictate his actions on a day-to-day basis. The ambiguity of his status in the classroom is a distant memory. Today, Barlow carries the status of program director for one of D.C.’s most influential youth organizations. His state is clearly defined.

Whether Shoshana continues to teach, or Eli becomes president some day, or Barlow goes on to a national position with some youth development organization remains to be seen. One thing is for certain: it’s impossible to look at the experiences of these teachers – Phillip, Rachelle, Taylor and Hrag, too – without realizing the profound impact that teaching in high-need schools has had on their lives. None of these seven teachers are the same today as they were before separating from their previous norms and entering their ambiguous, liminal states – their respective jobs in high-need schools. Sure, it can be argued that any young professional is going to change throughout the duration of his or her first job. But few jobs demand commanding the attention of 20-plus, often-unruly young people for five hours – at least – a day. Few jobs demand making more than a year’s worth of progress in nine months – the charge for high-need teachers whose students are, more often than not, well behind the grade level at which they’re supposed
to be. Few jobs demand both empathy and charisma on such a grand scale – where death among adolescents is so alarmingly present, where unrelenting energy is so imperative for success.

Teaching in the high-need school demands all those requirements and more. To meet the demands, magical bonds must be formed – bonds that altogether encapsulate communitas. To endure the demands, transition must be accepted, equality embraced, humility exhibited, unselfishness exuded and determination shown – all of these requisites for endurance, of course, being properties of liminality – around every corner. These properties, to Turner, all define the liminal, and they are paramount. But they cannot occur without there first being a leveling – the simplifying notion that all pilgrims, or, in this case, teachers, exist in the liminal state as homologous beings; anything they bring to the pilgrimage – experience, status, age, gender – lacks importance. That is especially relevant here, where the significant lack of experience for first-year, alternate-certification teachers contributes to their collective leveling. Some survive, enduring the harsh conditions. Some thrive, meeting the high expectations. The ones who can find a way to facilitate the most progress are the truest pilgrims of all – 100 percent committed to the cause, vigilantly obeying the secular prophet of the achievement gap, doing everything in their power to close it.
CONCLUSION

There were days where I left school with a hop in my step, went and worked out, cooked myself a healthy dinner and got to bed early – pumped for the next school day. All because a defiant student of mine had, at long last, decided to try and read aloud. And there were days – far more of them – where I left school in a rushed walk with my head down, intending on crushing two McDonald’s double cheeseburgers and a large fry before falling into a deep sleep in my dark bedroom back home. All because two girls had decided to heave dictionaries at one another during my class. The work-home balance for me was never starkly separate; it was all inextricably intertwined. Which is why, looking back on my two years of teaching at a juvenile detention center in northeast Washington, D.C., I have a tough time rationalizing how it fits into the grand scheme of my life. It is unquestionably different from any other period of time I experienced. It was certainly the most transformative time of my life.

When I juxtapose my experience with that of Eli’s and Shoshana’s and Barlow’s and Rachelle’s and Phillip’s and Taylor’s and Hrag’s, I see so many similarities. But I also see a possible solution to the prevailing problem of the achievement gap – one contingent on understanding the very nature of the high-need teaching experience as a pilgrimage. Before my experience, I tried to prepare myself mentally for what lay ahead – same as the other seven teachers in this thesis. But at no point did I approach my new task as a pilgrimage. It was not a journey signifying a passage from one state to another. I did not begin my teaching in D.C. cognizant of any separation from a previous state. Instead, I looked at it as a new job. Yes, I had the achievement gap in mind. And yes, I tried to do all I could each day to help my students. But I was almost completely
unprepared for the impact their presence would have on me. And therein lies the rub: teachers aware of the liminal state they will enter upon undertaking the endeavor of teaching in high-need schools will be far more mentally prepared than I was – or most teachers are – before beginning.

Just think: if certain properties of liminality – like relishing transition, embracing equality, showing humility, exuding unselfishness and remaining determined in the face of hardship – are ingrained into teachers the same way classroom management is, then they will be better prepared for what lies ahead. If Turner’s idea of leveling is explained as teachers begin their new journeys, then the unproductive habit of teachers resting on the laurels of their previous states and statuses will likely decline. If communitas is defined for teachers, then it’s possible they’ll do all they can to support their fellow comrades throughout the year – and seek out more frequently the support that’s so imperative for survival. And finally, if the sacred notion of total obedience to the prophet can somehow be secularly communicated – maybe as a full commitment to closing the achievement gap – then perhaps teachers across the board will buy in to their new charges on a deeper level.

That is not to say that understanding liminality will make a teacher’s job as smooth as peanut butter and velvet. The dictionary heaving can flare up at any second. But I wonder how differently I would have reacted to such troubling moments had I been more aware of my place in the limen – my state between the separation and the aggregation. It calls to mind, certainly, the notion of service – that in the army, or the peace corps, or in volunteering, humans separate from the norms of their lives to give their time for a worthy cause.
What if more of our country’s bright, energized men and women committed to teaching for two years? What if all of our country’s bright, energized men and women committed to teaching for two years? Some critics, like Linda Darling-Hammond, would probably continue to call that proposed solution a “band-aid on a bleeding sore.”¹ But to truly reform education in America – in the high-need schools – don’t we need people like Eli and Taylor and Phillip leading the way? And, after hearing their stories, isn’t it fair to conclude that the lifestyle of the high-need teacher isn’t easily sustainable?

The two-and-out model is not without flaws, of course. Ideally, some of the lawyers and doctors and journalists and physicists of the world would refrain from the courtroom or the operating table and make their place of business the classroom. But that’s rare. And in the long run, one of the primary reasons is money. But there’s something else keeping many of the brightest minds in our country from entering the classroom – even for a spell. Perhaps they don’t see it being beneficial for them. And even if they think differently – even if they could see themselves making an impact on young people – they ultimately see it as less fruitful than what their chosen paths can yield throughout the course of a career. For that reason, the TFA model – the alternate-certification, temporary teaching approach – must be emphasized more stringently in our country. We can continue to encourage and push for the two-year teaching commitment – from recent college graduates, especially – perhaps steering a future Einstein or Pulitzer Prize winter into the classroom briefly before they head to the chemistry lab or the newsroom. And maybe, just maybe, we can make it the norm. In the long run, students will surely come to miss their quality teachers after their two-year stints are done. But

when quality teachers are replaced with quality teachers, what students miss in continuity they make up for with competence.

A cyclical pattern of young, bright, energized teachers continually coming into classrooms across America will not change certain statistics: for the time being, there will still be close to 20,000 high-need schools in our country. Until certain social realities are flipped and poverty is assuaged to a large degree, the way of categorizing the schools and the students in urban America will surely be “high-need.” But one statistic likely to change – if our country can recruit more of its best and smartest to the classroom, even for a spell – is the likelihood of high-poverty students graduating from college. No longer will they be 10 times less likely than their peers in low-poverty areas to experience the opportunities, the expansions of the mind, the fun times that higher education has to offer. The chasm will be narrowed. The gap will be minimized. And if social changes follow suit, perhaps the poverty statistics will, too – eventually leading to a closing of the gap.

It is idealistic to believe that can happen. But it can happen. Here, we once again bridge the sacred and the secular and think about what it would entail for the teachers across America. First, a willingness to teach. Second, a selflessness at school – to defer to one’s students during the day and to, unflinchingly, make them the priority. And third, total obedience to the metaphorical prophet of closing the achievement gap – a kind of obedience that certain schools, like KIPP, and certain teachers across the country demonstrate every day, by demanding unflinching high expectations and doing everything in their power to meet them. Even if those three commitments were made across the country temporarily – for two years – the pilgrimages undertaken would be
widely fruitful, and they would yield results. Teachers would feed off one another’s experiences. Communitas would come to characterize the profession. And long-struggling schools would gradually become beacons of hope, centers of progress, places of consistent high achievement. They would be sites of pilgrimages, places where, as Turner says, “miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again.”

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