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# The dangers of relentless pursuit: teaching, personal health, and the symbolic/real violence of Teach For America

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the pressures experienced by teachers as they strive to embody the Teach For America (TFA) motif of ‘relentless pursuit’. It draws on interviews conducted with 36 teachers and uses a Bourdieuan analysis to consider the mechanisms of control manifested through socialization and corps member habituation. The findings suggest that corps members experience both symbolic and self-imposed overt violence as they aim to meet the demands of TFA. This has implications for the increasing number of teachers in programs around like TFA as well as the broader discourses of teacher accountability and the teaching profession.

## KEYWORDS

Teach For America; symbolic violence; Pierre Bourdieu; teacher education; teacher stress; educational policy

## Introduction

Teach For America (TFA) is one of the most influential private organizations impacting the field of education in the United States. As a large, multi-regional organization, TFA partners with some of the biggest donors in the philanthropic space (Scott, Trujillo, & Rivera, 2016), attracts substantial media attention, and increasingly influences educational policies in the United States (White, 2016) and in a rapidly expanding number of countries through its constellation of Teach For All programs (Price & McConney, 2013). TFA also contributes to broader neoliberal educational reform discourses emphasizing education’s ‘products’ (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017) and utilizes student results on standardized exams as the primary means to substantiate its presence, and as a concomitant indicator of teacher performance. Through these corresponding indicators TFA seeks both to prove its impact and to advance its continued prominence in educational discourses. Yet to produce results TFA depends on the overwhelming dedication of corps members (CMs) who are placed in classrooms around the country. These CMs are expected to pursue teaching effectiveness and community engagement at all costs – a stipulation exemplified by the phrase ‘relentless pursuit of results’. This mantra is reinforced and reified throughout TFA’s messaging and has been part of the organization’s lexicon for years, even serving as an official core value (2016a). Socialization into the ‘core/corps identity’ is remarkably strong, and can be epitomized by other memorable phrases associated with TFA, such as the desire for CMs to be ‘stewards of the movement’ and ‘continuously improving effectiveness’.<sup>1</sup>

Although the goal of relentless pursuit is admirable – as is the increasing emphasis in educational circles on ‘grit’ (see Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009) – the resultant effects for CMs, who typically enter teaching without previous pedagogical training beyond the 5-week Summer Institute, can be extremely damaging.

This article explores the dangers of ‘relentless pursuit’ by exploring the quotidian experiences of CMs in one Midwestern city in the United States who started their two-year TFA commitments between 2009 and 2013. We posit that the TFA model is premised on the utilitarian (ab)use of corps member teachers as they strive to achieve specific ends at all costs, in spite of potential collateral self-damage. Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence, we suggest that TFA has historically selected CMs for whom indoctrination into their educational paradigm is possible, encouraged corps member to (re)construct themselves in the TFA image, and subsequently maintained an unhealthy institutional culture that demands CM adherence. In tandem with minimal teacher preparation that falls far short of what is provided by traditional teacher education programs, what results is a form of removed but self-imposed overt violence, as many CMs push themselves beyond the boundaries of mental and physical health. The control and symbolic capital maintained by TFA, and magnified by peer pressure from other CMs through socialization and the social field in which they operate, shames CMs for potentially exiting TFA prior to the end of their two-year commitment and contributes to the unsustainability of TFA as a model of teacher preparation. Arguably, it also diminishes the quality of schooling experiences for the students taught by CMs.

This article is presented in four primary sections. The first section outlines our conceptual framework by explaining briefly the TFA program. It then summarizes Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory, emphasizing social fields, capital, and symbolic violence, as well as his use of the term discourse. The second section explores approaches to researching TFA with Bourdieu and describes our research methods, which included interviews with 36 current and former CMs. The third and fourth sections examine the discourse of ‘relentless pursuit’ and other dominant cultural motifs to reflect on the ways in which CMs are embroiled in a larger culture of pressure and control.

## Conceptual framework

### *Teach For America*

In 1990 Wendy Kopp founded TFA with the intent of supplying the nation’s ‘best and brightest’ to the teaching profession (Brooks & Greene, 2013), who would commit to teaching for two years in under-performing public schools. In subsequent decades TFA has expanded to include more than 50,000 current and former CMs across 52 regions (2016a). Corps members complete an intense Summer Institute that includes some practice teaching as well as sessions about educational approaches and theories, all of which are mediated through the organization’s lens. TFA largely hires former CMs who have completed their two-year TFA commitment to act as Corps Member Advisors facilitating CM learning (Schneider, 2014; Veltri, 2010) and, arguably, reproducing TFA ideology. As primarily non-education majors, these CMs, nearly two-thirds of whom are graduating seniors (TFA, 2016a), typically begin their new roles as full-time classroom teachers with little knowledge or experience beyond Summer Institute. They are therefore generally less equipped than graduates of traditional teacher education programs (Veltri, 2010),

who typically spend considerably more time on educational coursework and in practicum teaching experiences before entering full-time work as a classroom teacher.

A substantial body of literature explores critically the effects of TFA across a wide range of issues including how the program has: influenced teacher recruitment (Labaree, 2010; Straubhaar & Gottfried, 2014); supported neoliberalism and privatization, often through the charter school movement (Kretchmar, 2014; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017); altered educational policy-making (Kumashiro, 2010; White, 2016); or buoyed White interests (Lapayese, Aldana, & Lara, 2014). Yet an inadequate body of literature explores how CMs are situated within TFA's larger approach to teacher practice and in what ways they respond to institutional and pedagogical pressures, including 'relentless pursuit'. Although CMs have been positioned as privileged actors in the educational milieu (Barnes, Germain, & Valenzuela, 2016) and these conditions warrant analysis, it is important to consider simultaneously the effects of TFA on CMs themselves and how the organization's symbolic power looms large in the (un)consciousness of its teachers. Indeed, possessing and even utilizing privilege can co-exist and co-mingle with forms of domination.

### **Bourdieu and education**

Pierre Bourdieu remains one of the most read sociologists of the twentieth century and his work comes to bear on education in multiple forms. On a foundational level, Bourdieu (1977) describes the notion of *habitus*, or the norms and dispositions that guide our behavior and into which we are first socialized as children. Bourdieu's work carefully considers the relationship between structure and agency, and our ability to affect change in our lives based on our positionality and own sense of being. We exercise our agency across *social fields* – or interpersonal environments – using forms of *capital* that are traded and assigned value, as in a marketplace. These forms of capital include economic capital (money or forms of wealth), social capital (personal connections and what they can help one accomplish), cultural capital (norms and dispositions that are assigned value), and symbolic capital (the status and overall distinction of an individual). Individuals to varying degrees possess these forms of capital, which operate in fluid but interconnected ways. The social locations of individuals are therefore mediated, negotiated, and in many cases constrained based on their collective forms of capital. The resultant context is a constant state of 'interactional' flux within social fields, which have structure but are in no way static.

Symbolic violence occurs when a culture of power arbitrarily assigns value to symbolic capital and the individuals within that system habituate and accept their position. In turn, the culture of power is (mis)recognized as legitimate. This is one of the reasons that symbolic violence is most insidious: those experiencing symbolic violence have to some extent perpetuated and participated in a broken system. Bourdieu (1977) posits that elements of symbolic violence exist in hidden and implicit forms: '... the violence of credit, confidence, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety ... [are] the gentle, hidden form[s] which violence takes when overt violence is impossible' (p. 196).

As such, the ability to exert influence can be itself a form of symbolic violence. One way in which symbolic violence is enacted is through *discourse* – a form of social practice that 'structur[es] the perception[s] which social agents have of the social world ... and does so all the more significantly the more widely it is recognized, i.e. authorized' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 105). By using particular language – or patterns of naming, systems of classification, etc.

– those in power can shape and constrain social structures to maintain their (il)legitimacy (Fairclough, 1992). What is most troubling about these relations of domination, especially in the context of education, is that the origins and practices of power are typically invisible and therefore often left unchallenged.

## Researching TFA with Bourdieu

This study builds on and extends the important work by other scholars researching TFA, as well as Bourdieu, to focus on the symbolic/overt violence of TFA on CMs themselves. First, we draw on work by Anderson (2013), who explored TFA's structures and public documents (such as websites and publications) to elucidate the position of power that TFA has created as well as how it has established itself as a source of symbolic capital exerting symbolic violence toward both CMs and the students they teach. She highlighted, for example, how the large number of applicants to TFA enables the organization to arbitrarily select the characteristics it deems valuable, thereby privileging certain qualities, such as leadership skills or an ingrained reluctance to quit, over others. Indeed, TFA has maintained, and in some ways manufactured, its own legitimacy and exclusivity, as some literature has suggested applicants may complete the first stage of the application – which is relatively simple and straightforward – on a whim (Mandel, 2015). However, subsequent application procedures are complex and require a wide range of 'competency demonstrations', including in some cases phone interviews, online activities, group interviews, etc. (Whitman, 2012).<sup>2</sup> The ease of the first round ensures a large number of applicants complete an initial application, which also guarantees that only a small percentage of applicants who complete the first, easy step will proceed through all of the subsequent rounds and be accepted into TFA. This process manufactures and maintains the organization's exclusivity (thereby increasing its symbolic capital) because TFA can distinguish itself with its low acceptance rate.

Building on Anderson's (2013) work, this article uses empirical data to ground our theoretical approach in the lived realities of the teachers themselves. It extends research by Brewer (2014) and Matsui (2015), who each examined the interactions between CMs and the broader TFA regime. Brewer (2014) explored the construction of accountability logic and how in TFA the onus of success – including the outcomes of student learning – is placed squarely, and solely, on the shoulders of CMs. Yet Brewer's work focused primarily on high burnout rates among CMs and less on the symbolic and overt violence produced through TFA. Matsui (2015) examined the 'TFA script' and how phrases such as 'relentless pursuit' are replicated through TFA training and CM culture. Our research builds on this work as it explores the interactions between the symbolic violence of 'relentless pursuit' and embodiments of overt violence. In so doing we aim to highlight links between symbolic violence and the self-imposition of physical violence or reduced self-care and potential harm.

We argue that proclaimed instances of self-imposed physical harm are merely conscious snapshots of deeper, unconscious modes and results of domination. This confluence of violence is evident in the discourse used by CMs about TFA as well as their physical manifestations of stress, reduced mental health, limited sleep, and substance-abuse. While all novice teachers may experience stresses unique to beginning a new career, TFA's application process, selection of CMs who are willing or able to (re)construct themselves in the TFA image, and reinforcement of language that attributes student achievement

almost exclusively to what exists within a teacher's internal locus of control make it uniquely complicit in corps' members self-harm. By drawing on the existing *habitus* of CMs and inserting them into a new *field* of teaching filled with pressure, guilt, and exceedingly high expectations, especially given their limited teaching experience, in essence TFA completes the linkage between symbolic violence and the realization of overt violence.

The findings presented in this article stem from a broader study exploring teacher identity conducted with 36 CMs. The first phase of 27 interviews, conducted by Matthew, utilized a semi-structured protocol addressing CM identity and experiences in the corps. The protocol was later adapted based on preliminary findings to capture emerging themes and the desires of participants to expound on their challenges and triumphs in TFA. One emergent theme from the first phase concerned the common feeling of being overwhelmed and unable to meet the implicit demands of TFA. Later conversations with Elisabeth highlighted the ways in which 'relentless pursuit' operates as a discourse of control that both manifests limited self-care and also influences the broader educational landscape as shaped by structures of discursive power. The interview protocol was therefore adapted before Elisabeth conducted the remaining nine interviews to include specific questions about stress, drinking, and mental health – issues that emerged organically during phase one. As a means of fulfilling state mandates, CMs in this Midwestern TFA region completed graduate coursework at Greenwood University during their two-year commitments, where both authors taught CMs in core educational foundations units. Matthew taught three cohorts of CMs, while Elisabeth taught a subsequent cohort. Thus, the interviewees in this article constitute a multi-year view of perspectives across four cohorts of CMs who entered the corps between 2009 and 2013.

Our roles as instructors/researchers necessitated a thoughtful consideration of our positionalities. We aimed to welcome constructive critique and acclaim of TFA, a commonly polarizing organization, during the coursework at Greenwood. Our approaches varied due to our different experiences as former public school teachers: Matthew is a graduate of a traditional teacher education program, and Elisabeth is a former TFA corps member from a different TFA region. Yet we both attempted to create safe spaces in our courses and in the interviews for honest reflections and comments. CMs were invited to participate in the study during the last sessions of our respective courses, with the interviews to occur in a public setting after final grades were submitted. Although CMs opted-in to the study, they generally represented the diversity of demographic characteristics and school placements found in their individual cohorts. All interviewees were given pseudonyms, an especially important step given the sensitive nature of some of the topics covered in interviews and TFA's documented history of countering critical accounts (Scott et al., 2016). Interviews were transcribed and coded inductively for salient themes related to the discourses of teacher identity. The research findings presented in the following section reflect the themes that emerged from the data and draw on many emic – and insider – terms utilized by CMs.

## **The discourse of relentless pursuit**

### ***Operationalizing relentless pursuit***

'Relentless pursuit' is arguably the most common TFA phrase. A book by this name has been published by a former CM (Foote, 2008), and an entire chapter is devoted to

‘working relentlessly’ in *Teaching as Leadership* (Farr, 2010, p. 197). This text essentially serves as the TFA manifesto, or what Matsui (2015) terms the ‘TFA-endorsed metanarrative’ (p. 59). Interestingly, the chapter in Farr’s text on ‘relentless pursuit’ devotes less than five pages to ‘taking care of yourself’ (pp. 217–221). Moreover, this chapter is laden with vexing quotes from CMs that highlight their conflicted realities and how their behaviors can be linked to the allure of relentless pursuit and pressures to perform. CMs who implement ‘no work on Friday nights’ rules are held up as models of appropriate and sustainable professional behavior and others who are excited to be lesson planning at 10:00 pm on a Thursday are celebrated for their relentless pursuit (p. 218).

While there are elements of individual choice in these CMs’ decision to relentlessly pursue raising their students’ results, it is clear that TFA constructs and maintains its symbolic capital in strategic ways that benefit the organizational goals, but not necessarily the health of the CMs.

All of the research participants were asked to comment on their feelings and experiences of relentless pursuit. The responses reflected amazing conceptual clarity and consistency. Common phrases used by CMs to describe this notion included:

- Calla: ... just whatever it takes.  
 Madeline: You do whatever it takes to make sure your kids make a year and a half worth of growth, whatever it takes.  
 Tamara: ... this idea that, like, do whatever it takes ...  
 Kirk: Doing whatever it takes. Like finding a solution ... if it [the solution] is not there, like making one ... pretty much just never giving up ... persisting in the face of insurmountable odds.

The coding across participant responses highlighted their emphasis on pursuing academic results at any and all costs (i.e. doing ‘whatever it takes’). The related notion of never quitting – itself a common theme that arises in the process for applying to and interviewing for TFA – arose with equal frequency in our interviews with CMs. To them, ‘relentless pursuit’ implied:

- Martha: I think just, like, never giving up ...  
 Nina: ... we are not giving up ... we try things until we fail and then we try something else ...  
 Celeste: Not giving up ... Not seeing an obstacle as, ‘Ohhhhh that can’t happen’ ... setting your priorities and then going after that. If it is possible, then it can be done. So do it.

The degree of similarity across their responses illustrates the extent to which the TFA discourse was embedded in the minds of its CMs. This is likely due at least in part to the corporate nature of TFA and the ways in which the organization maintains consistency in its branding and messaging (Lahann & Reagan, 2011) throughout CMs’ selection, training, and professional development. It may also be due to the limited exposure most CMs have to the field of education before joining TFA:

- Matthew: Do you think ... TFA has a strong influence on people’s perspectives?  
 Biashara: Oh yeah, for sure! I mean, because most people don’t come in thinking about education at all, you know, or planning on being a teacher. And then everything they learn about teaching (and) education comes first and foremost from TFA.



Your first five weeks, all your readings, the articles they include, the speakers they have. Like, everything is through that lens.

TFA therefore serves as the primary conceptual lens through which the CMs view teaching and the discourse of 'relentless of pursuit'. In sum, through the corporate messaging and in the absence of other perspectives, it seems the 'relentless pursuit' message reached CMs loudly and clearly – as Carly summarized, 'you are going to live by this'.

### ***Embodying relentless and individual pursuit***

Even before CMs were expected to engage in relentless pursuit, the recruitment process established TFA's mechanisms of symbolic violence. Dorian, one of the CMs in the study, believed that most CMs had 'seldom experience[d] failure' and were 'relatively successful as a whole' when they did encounter challenges. This emphasis on teacher responsibility in tandem with TFA's recruitment procedures contributed to CMs' feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and beliefs about the unsustainable nature of the teaching profession. Dorian continued,

... now that we actually experience failure [through TFA] and we have very little control over it ... I have kids that I have been trying to teach how to read ... and they have not progressed at all ... there is a lot of guilt.

Dorian believed that this guilt was a natural, even expected component of the teaching experience through TFA. He believed that guilt is common 'especially given the type of people they [TFA] actively recruit'.

As suggested above, the notion of relentless pursuit is based on a fundamental belief that student success is the primary, if not sole, responsibility of the teacher. Brewer (2014) discussed the 'hyper-accountability of holding teachers solely responsible for student outcomes' (p. 257). His research highlighted how the model of accountability common to TFA contributed to disillusionment with the teaching profession and, ultimately, increased burnout among CMs. In the TFA model CMs must 'accept that the teacher is the foundation for student outcomes' (Brewer, 2014, p. 258) and focus on their 'internal locus of control' (Farr, 2010, p. 199), not external factors, such as poverty, as excuses for poor academic performance. While it is likely that all teachers who work in under-resourced and disadvantaged schools face exceptional challenges, TFA's institutional culture simultaneously under-prepares CMs for this type of environment and pushes them to 'make it work' largely on their own. In sum, CMs' potential failure is their sole responsibility.

The question, then, is how the guilt and primordial emphasis on oneself, through symbolic violence, manifests itself through CM experiences. Dorian addressed this locus of control specifically, noting the belief that 'you should have control over' your classroom. He reflected further, questioning himself and the norms he had implicitly adopted: 'If that is true, I know we hold that mentality, then why can't we teach this child how to read?' Dorian ultimately concluded that the guilt produced through the relentless (and individual) pursuit of results 'is certainly a hard thing to psychologically deal with every-day'. Yet in the absence of previous teaching experience and adequate support from TFA and/or their school, it is not surprising that many CMs experience exhaustion and limited self-care in response to this immense pressure. As Sandy lamented, 'you are



expected to do miracles ... you are expected to work all the time, which even though they tell you to have time to yourself, like, you feel guilty'.

One research participant, Maddie, theorized the rationale for promoting relentless pursuit. After completing her two-year commitment, she became a mentor and assisted CMs coming into the region. Through this experience as well as reflection on her own time in the corps, she 'sort of realized' that TFA uses phrases like relentless pursuit to 'try and keep people excited, you know, and not to feel hopeless because there are going to be times when this is going to feel hopeless'. Indeed, many CMs commented that the idea of relentless pursuit, though cliché, was predicated on a positive, results-focused mindset. This was encouraging at times, but also led to other issues such as feeling lost. Maddie continued, 'when you are trying so relentlessly to keep this positive mindset, you know sometimes people's individual feelings can be lost in that'. She ultimately believed that 'relentless pursuit' was a 'scary phrase ... because it is a little overwhelming'.

### ***Suffering under relentless pursuit***

The TFA mantra and culture maintained both an explicit and implicit emphasis on working non-stop, often to the detriment of the CMs. At the conclusion of our interview with Maddie, who remained in teaching into the third year, she reflected on her first two years by distancing herself from the experience: 'the way my life was the first two years here, like, that is not a sustainable lifestyle to have for your entire life'. Her usage of the phrase 'way my life was' connoted an act of separation, a means to ensure a more healthy and sustainable lifestyle apart from the control of TFA and her responsibilities in the classroom. She continued by highlighting how it 'would have been really upsetting and really hard to handle' if her 'whole life' was going to embody the pressure and stress she experienced during her first two years. Sandy likewise looked back on her years in TFA, specifically noting how it changed her. Previously she finished her undergraduate degree at a highly ranked, local institution in only three years while also working at a job and competing in university athletics. Despite this habitus and self-proclaimed 'work ethic', Sandy felt that TFA altered her personality in considerable ways:

I don't think I am as nice a person as I was. I don't think that I am as easy going ... I think it changes how you interact with people and, who knows, maybe when I am out of TFA I will go back to how I was, but I think I am a more negative person. I think I do not spend as much time with my family, and when I do, I don't think I am actually 'there' ... I think it [TFA] is damaging to pretty much all aspects of your life.

Sandy expressed throughout the interview that she adamantly desired to be a teacher in under-served urban schools, but was beginning to question this goal. She continued, 'I am very stressed out. I am very irritable. I think I am frustrated a lot and stressed out a lot. I am very anxious and I wasn't like that before [TFA]'.

One contribution to the stress and physical manifestation of CM domination was the lack of sleep that CMs felt they could claim for themselves. As new teachers with minimal training who often worked in intense educational contexts, the CMs sacrificed their sleep on many occasions but also felt a strong sense of guilt when they did get adequate, or even just recovery, sleep. Lori suggested, 'you do have to have some sort of balance and being able to, you know, not feel guilty about sleeping in on the weekends because that is taking away from your relentless pursuit of whatever'. The lack of sleep

cited by many CMs in the study was a seemingly basic, surface-level consequence of working hard in a new job.

Yet on a deeper level, the control manifested through the notion of relentless pursuit reflects a more symbolic layer of the organization's culture. Nadine remembered asking about another CM who missed an event on a Saturday and was told they were at home, 'working for like 24 hours straight on one lesson plan'. She noted 'that kind of stuff is praised and encouraged' by TFA. She stated some CMs 'worked non-stop' and were then held up as models, 'kind of like, "Look at what he's doing in his classroom! This is so great!" ... But it's like, well yeah, but he didn't sleep for two days!' In these ways TFA's corps culture reproduced certain norms within its social *field* that were incredibly unhealthy and encouraged CM compliance.

Many CMs believed they would be equated with uncaring and undedicated individuals if they did not sacrifice their physical health for expectations of TFA, unattainable as they were. As Nadine suggested: 'no matter how hard I tried, or like, no matter how much I made my classroom my life, it was like we weren't achieving what TFA said we were achieving, or said they expected us to be achieving'. Again, the chapter in *Teaching and Learning* on relentless pursuit says little about what is being sacrificed toward the goal of relentless pursuit but is clear that the internal locus of control lies at the feet of the teacher, not larger structural or systemic issues. In this way, CMs are essentially utilized to maximize TFA impact and not considered as individual actors, as Kari suggested:

I think it [TFA] is very detrimental to my physical and mental health honestly. I don't think it is a healthy organization as far as taking care of its employees ... that is something that really bothered me ... I felt like I was just a number. I was a corps member. I was always labeled as a corps member, and I was never, like, a person that needed to sleep.

It is clear that many CMs felt obligated by TFA to relentlessly pursue their work in the classroom, sacrificing their sleep and personal well-being as a result. Further, they often attributed these self-harming behaviors not to their schools or students, but to TFA itself.

An additional topic of discussion frequently raised by CMs during the interview was the use of alcohol. In a jovial but sadistic fashion, Leslie suggested that CMs would say, 'I am relentlessly pursuing a hangover for Sunday morning'. This quote emphasizes the complicit elements of the CM behavior while in TFA. Though cognizant of the symbolic capital embodied in a phrase such as relentless pursuit, Leslie also rightly observed that some CMs engaged in risky behavior because they had adopted the external, arbitrary quality of the phrase itself. Another CM commented that she did not feel like the teacher she wanted to be and therefore became 'a person I hate' in the evening, deciding to 'drink a lot ... because I didn't know what to do because I felt like such a failure ... like I feel like I drank a ton more that first year of teaching than in college. I felt like the [drinking] culture was more'. Her 'imposter-syndrome' – not feeling like an accomplished teacher – again links TFA to its CMs' unhealthy behaviors in a unique way. Due to the amount of stress and inability to cope with pressures and challenging circumstances, many CMs in the corps 'were all, like, drunken messes' who 'don't drink just the kool-aid', a reference to the compliance expected by CMs who imbibe the message of TFA along with all of its symbolic power.

As suggested above, the study did not have an initial emphasis on mental health, but the theme emerged so strongly from the data that it could not be ignored. The frequency

of related comments in open-ended questions suggests both a desire to speak about these issues with external, non-TFA affiliates as well as the pressing urgency of the issues themselves. For example, Martha spoke of a ‘climax around November, when I, like, [my] mental health went way down’. She later expressed that she wished she knew how TFA would affect her emotional health: ‘I guess I didn’t really expect, to like, I didn’t really feel like my emotional health was thought of very much, nor the students’ emotional health’. Here she is openly critical of TFA and the ways in which the regional staff seemed to ignore her own health as well as that of her students. She continued, ‘It was all about the data and results’. Kari similarly emphasized the utilitarian nature of the TFA *modus operandi* in her comments about how the staff viewed her as a corps member and not as a person. She alluded to military training and the extent that she became a means to an end: ‘I think it is how they enter people in and like join the corps like the marine corps. You are a marine now, you are a corps member now and I was like, “this is weird, my name is Kari”’.

Another CM, Ingrid, noted in her interview after completing TFA that she was working to be ‘more of the person I like to be’ and cited ‘the mental health of the corps member and the toll it takes’ as the first and biggest con of the program. In her opinion, declining mental health and the associated need for counseling were common, if not rampant, throughout the corps.

And I mean I will be very honest, and this is something I am not sure, but I think I need to go see a counselor and I was thinking about that recently because another one of my friends at TFA gave me the card of her counselor and I was thinking about the people I know who are ... so I was trying to count and ... and then I stopped [counting], because that is 50% in our small corps who I know or have at one point in the three years here have received counseling.

Her informal tally yielded a surprising percentage of CMs who were in counseling at some point during the two-year commitment or shortly thereafter. In essence, Ingrid summarized her sentiments as follows: ‘I think it really affects everyone’s mental health a lot and I feel like if you go through TFA and don’t have, like, are [not] mentally upset afterwards somehow, like you are a super human’. Or, as Nadine suggested, ‘I think the problem in [relentless pursuit] is that we’re human ...’.

## Conclusions

TFA is highly strategic in its selection of CMs. The CMs recruited are typically young adults without previous education training or experience, who therefore have limited knowledge of the teaching profession (Veltri, 2010). Moreover, CMs are expected to be ambitious leaders (Brooks & Greene, 2013) and ‘remarkable people’ (TFA, 2016b) who loathe failing and are eager to reduce educational inequity. In many cases they are sent to geographic regions outside their own communities, seemingly disconnected from support networks. These personal traits constitute the TFA *habitus*, or the typical norms of behavior demonstrated by CMs. CMs are recruited specifically because they are highly goal-driven, even when faced with unconceivable obstacles, such as teaching with no curriculum, limited administrative support, etc.

Building upon this *habitus*, TFA places CMs in the *social field* of corps culture. It manufactures a corporate culture through its terminology (e.g. instructional coaches are termed ‘managing teacher leadership developers’) and produces an immensely powerful and

consistent message (Lahann & Reagan, 2011) that resists or pre-empts critique (Scott et al., 2016). In this way, TFA creates an environment in which it is able to instill its collection of ideologies, philosophies, and phrases into the minds and hearts of its CMs. 'Relentless pursuit' is arguably the strongest of these ideals and, as noted by the findings, the associated pressure drives CMs to remarkable ends. Indeed, CMs deeply internalized TFA's discursive scripts. Although many of them actively resisted drinking the 'TFA Kool-aid' (Matsui, 2015, p. 21) – or as one of our CMs said, 'sip the Kool-Aid ... don't double fist it' – and buying into TFA ideology completely, their lived realities often belied their best intentions. The CMs constantly pushed themselves to track, collect, and pursue the academic results valued by TFA. They also pushed themselves to demonstrate the qualities normalized and valorized by TFA as they constructed themselves in the TFA image. This is symbolic violence at its finest. As a result, work-life balance and sound physical and mental health were ultimately sacrificed out of a sense of obligation to TFA and a relentless pursuit of results.

Yet from a strategic perspective, TFA does not need to promote a healthy, sustainable culture. There is a revolving door of applicants to TFA (though the number of applicants decreased slightly in recent years) and as Labaree (2010) suggested, CMs can freely move in and out of the teaching profession with negligible consequences, unlike their peers from traditional teacher education programs who have been trained specifically to be teachers. Furthermore, TFA only needs CMs to complete their two years of service and produce good 'results' on standardized exams to substantiate its existence as an alternative licensure program. This maintenance of the organizational status quo is manifested at least in part through the symbolic violence of 'relentless pursuit' and CM adherence to 'company policy'. TFA exerts symbolic violence by spending exorbitant amounts of money recruiting young adults through powerful messaging such as 'relentless pursuit' that both positions the CMs as the primary solution to educational inequality and ignores or brushes over the challenging situations in which the CMs will be placed. This *field*, in tandem with likely well-intentioned desires to teach students, is perhaps the most significant contributor to CMs' engagement in unhealthy physical and mental behaviors. While there are dedicated CMs who become excellent teachers, including many in this study, the means to achieve these legitimated ends are unhealthy. Furthermore, both TFA's symbolic and CMs' self-imposed violence raise questions about the continued emphasis on 'relentless pursuit', its costs, and the broader discourses of TFA and related programs around the world.

## Notes

1. TFA's usage of the phrase 'steward of the movement', in its most positive and empowering form suggests the responsibility CMs have on their shoulders to reduce the achievement gap and educational inequity. However, one cannot overlook the potentially disempowering and hegemonic interpretation in the Foucauldian 'pan-opticon' sense of surveillance.
2. It is important to note that TFA, like any dynamic organization, alters its procedures from time to time; therefore, CMs across different cohorts may not have completed identical processes.

## Disclosure statement

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