

Teaching After Katrina Versus Teaching in the Terrordome:

An Analysis of Urban Education Reform from 2005 to 2015

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HEATHER KIRN LANIER IS A FORMER TEACH FOR AMERICA 2002 CORPS MEMBER who was placed at a public school in Baltimore, Maryland where she taught English for two years. *Teaching in the Terrordome: Two Years in West Baltimore with Teach For America*, Lanier's nonfictional account of her two years spent teaching in a urban public school, was published in 2012. In the thirteen years since Lanier completed her two-year commitment with Teach For America (TFA), urban education reform has changed dramatically while garnering mainstream attention in the media, political campaigns, academia, law and policy. The purpose of this paper is to contrast my own personal experience completing an Alternative Certification Program similar to TFA and teaching for two years in New Orleans, Louisiana with Lanier's time in Baltimore. While I began teaching in a similar environment only one decade after Lanier, I endured a completely different experience. I assert these disparities can illustrate the shortcomings of recent education reform.

At least until the conclusion of the narrative, *Teaching in the Terrordome: Two Years in West Baltimore with Teach For America*, Lanier does not attempt to lend aid to one side of the debates concerning urban education reform. Nor does she give detailed solutions on how to improve failing urban schools. Instead, Lanier eloquently describes her experience completing a task most recent college graduates would find incomprehensible: teaching for two years in a failing school with only five weeks of training for preparation. The narrative aims to educate those outside of the education field of the ineffectiveness that infiltrates all levels of urban education in many present day American cities. However, *Teaching in the Terrordome* accomplishes much more, offering different forms of insight depending on the reader's prior experience; the strength of the narrative is its relevance to a variety of reader demographics. For

those who have worked at a school outside of an urban setting, the book can be used to compare successful and unsuccessful schools in a multitude of ways. Alternatively, those who have worked at a similar school to Lanier's, such as myself, will appreciate reflecting on difficult experiences with a narrative that captures the daily and yearly frustrations only a high-needs school educator would fully understand.

In the years since Heather Kirn Lanier attended summer institute, TFA has become a strong component of the debate surrounding education reform. Founded in 1990 by Wendy Kopp as a thesis project with 500 members, TFA has grown from around 1500 yearly corps members during Lanier's participation to around 6000 in 2013 (TFA, 2013). Similar programs, such as The New Teacher Project started by TFA alum Michelle Rhee have also expanded in this time. For example, teachNOLA, one part of The New Teacher Project, tripled in size from the time I participated, in 2010, to 2013, increasing from about 60 to 170 yearly members (TNTP, 2015). During this time, charter schools have increased in almost every state. Nationally, the number of charter schools has tripled since the turn of the century from about 2000 to 6000 (NAPCS, 2014). Many prominent charter school advocates and organization leaders are TFA alumni, including Sara Usdin (New Schools for New Orleans), Chris Barbic (YES College Prep), Dave Levin (KIPP Schools), and Cami Anderson (Superintendent of Newark, NJ Public Schools). Lanier taught at a traditional public school, Southwestern High School, that was closed in 2007, torn down, and replaced by a SEED foundation boarding charter school. Charter school growth will be integral to my analysis of Lanier's work even though the author does not directly address the topic in *Teaching in the Terrordome*.

Alternative Certification Programs

'Alternative Certification Program' (ACP) has become common vernacular in the education field. ACPs help recent college graduates or people looking to change careers receive their teacher certifications without having to receive formal degrees in education. While ACPs have existed for years, there has been a steady increase in both available programs and enrollment in the last decade. Lanier is no longer one of the few individuals who passed through a program like TFA. However, she is unique in that she can articulately describe her experience with clarity, making the narrative clear and substantive regardless of the reader's prior experience. Many of the determined, bright individuals who go through ACPs have skills in advanced science, mathematics, or political science fields. Lanier's talent is her writing, having majored in English at the University of Delaware. She is not an education reformer, nor does she pretend to be. This knowledge is important before reading *Teaching in the Terrordome*, as the book does not attempt to answer the difficult questions facing education reformers; it merely seeks to explain the complexities found in a failing urban school.

Lanier concludes the merits of TFA outweigh its shortcomings. By providing a detailed look at TFA's "summer institute," a five week induction program led by many TFA veterans, and the personalities of former TFA participants, Lanier sets up the reader to understand the program's intricacies. In the summation of the book, Lanier gives her view on the success of the program, focusing on the fact that the majority of her TFA peers have stayed in the education field, if not in the classroom itself. While the sample size offered is small, the reader can draw the conclusion that over-generalizing all TFA participants as merely using teaching as a stepping stone to illustrious careers in law or medicine may be over-simplifying the program's impact.

Appropriately staffing classrooms has become one of the most discussed topics in education over the last few decades (Ingersoll, 2001). Teacher ACPs are strongly correlated with teacher retention. If teacher attrition is high, the need for ACPs increases. Many areas of the US

are faced with the challenge of teacher retention (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003), a problem that has increased over the last three decades (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). Teacher attrition especially affects impoverished schools where teacher turnover is typically higher than more affluent locations (Simon & Johnson, 2015). While there are some benefits for districts with high teacher attrition, including affordability (Ingersoll et al., 2014), turnover ultimately hurts student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Lanier is an example of the positive impact ACPs can have in urban education; she filled a void at a school that struggled to recruit and retain teachers. However, ACPs should be a last resort at filling teaching vacancies and not relied upon on a large scale. Instead, all schools should be working towards retaining and developing teachings.

TFA is one of several ACPs working to place inexperienced individuals in predominantly rural or urban high poverty areas to close the achievement gap. Historically, these schools had few applicants and the potential for classrooms without teachers due to hiring shortages. Waivers or emergency certifications were an immediate short-term solution in districts which could not effectively recruit experienced teachers (Imig, Koziol, Pilato, & Imig, 2009). This is the environment that Lanier describes, a school with a mix of TFA and local veteran teachers. However, ACPs have gradually increased their placement of participants into charter schools which employ a high percentage of teachers lacking education degrees (Kretchmar, 2014). My experience was perhaps more indicative of these current reforms. Upon my completion of teachNOLA, an ACP part of The New Teacher Project, I was hired at a charter school entirely comprised of graduates of either TFA or teachNOLA. Furthermore, New Orleans had a surplus of teachers and many graduates in 2010 were unable to find jobs. The ACPs had effectively pushed out the local experienced workforce and replaced it with young, recent college graduates who lacked tenure or union protections, making them a cheaper and more expendable labor pool (Buras, 2014). Future research should continue analyzing teacher pipelines for high-needs schools including requirements for educators, growth and development, and efforts to retain teachers, as opposed to merely on the student achievement differences between traditional public and charter schools (Ludlow, 2013).

Race

In the opening pages of *Teaching in the Terrordome*, Lanier details the dark, depressing concrete jungle that is West Baltimore (2012, p. 3). People steal cars at gas stations. Garbage litters the streets. This is not a place you want to live and it is not a place you want to work. The school is like a prison. This description stands out to me as I have a good idea of where this story is going, having lived through a similar experience, as I taught for two years at an urban charter school in New Orleans where the student body was 98 percent on government subsidized lunches. Inner-city, low-performing schools do not just look like prisons; they are prisons (Lanier, 2012, p. 5).

While the reader may notice the role ethnicity plays in the narrative, the topic of race is not thoroughly discussed until Lanier's second year of teaching. This was because Lanier did not notice race affecting her classroom until then. One student continuously harasses Lanier about being racist because she gives additional attention to a white student who has a hearing disability. "It was then that I realized the beef between David and me was not logical. Even David must have seen through it. For whatever reason, he had formed an opinion of me that no counter-experience or reasoning could break. I was his lazy, racist, white teacher" (2012, p. 183). Lanier never figures out why this is such an issue; the "whys" are not usually answered in this narrative, often times because they can't be, other times because the answer is insignificant. In

this instance, the teacher was never going to escape the persecution of alleged racism even if she came to understand why it took place.

TFA is not entirely complicit in the movement to privatize public education, as they have placed countless recruits into impoverished public schools. However, as the program has increased, so too has the number of charter schools. This is most apparent in New Orleans where almost every school is now an independently run charter school. The privatization movement has vehemently avoided the topic of race in current education reforms. Education reformers often cite the achievement gap and the disparities between wealthy and poor schools in the United States in an effort to reach as many demographics as possible, as opposed to focusing on the differences in achievements between white and black students. This has led to a serious void in discussions on desegregation, a process responsible for greatly closing the achievement gap in the second half of the twentieth century (Ravitch, 2013). Prior to Hurricane Katrina, teachers and school administrators comprised a large portion of New Orleans' black middle class. The privatization movement has replaced these local workers with a mostly white workforce through TFA and TeachNOLA, circumventing democratic processes such as town hall meetings (Buras, 2014). Similar to Lanier, I found myself reducing a complex situation, whereby a white outsider who has not lived and worked in a city attempts to understand the environment, to a very simple objective: teach the students in front of you as best as you can. One white teacher from outside the state is obviously not problematic. However, an entire school system being overtaken by the ideals of a few people who benefit greatly from the privatization process is surely something which other states must seriously question when looking to New Orleans as a model for education reform (Buras, 2012). Ignoring complex racial issues, typically through the demonization of the 'lazy public school teacher', further complicates a topic, education reform, which is often simplified to brief talking points for politicians.

Leadership

Lanier's second year begins with a new principal who was effectively terminated by her prior school after an unsuccessful short term. The new principal has a poor understanding of the culture at Southwestern High School and makes mistakes in the first few weeks of school. In one such instance, the principal gets upset when teachers do not take the fire drills seriously. However, in previous years the teachers were forced to disregard fire drills because they occurred almost every day. This is an obvious problem for Lanier, as she makes one of the stronger points in her narrative. How can school leaders be successful if they do not even have a general understanding of how the school has been run in the previous few years? Successful school leaders empower teachers to use their training and experience to be innovative in the classroom and meet students' needs. In contrast, poorly prepared principals and administrators are constantly swapped around different failing schools with the hope that the experience will eventually pay off. Not surprisingly, it does not. That is not to say the failure of Southwestern was solely the principal's fault; the lack of achievement was far more complicated than any one person or role. Lanier does not claim to understand the myriad of reasons that many schools are failing but rather merely describes her time in a failing school.

Administrative duties or protocols prescribed to teachers by school leadership can infringe on instructional planning time and efforts by teachers. This can be compounded if school leadership frequently changes, resulting in new requirements which teachers must master each year. Changes in school culture or grading policies can also create challenges for students. Charter schools were initially intended to decrease administrative bureaucracy in schools and focus spending on instruction for students. This has not been the case thus far, as charter schools

have been shown to outspend their traditional public school peers in administration while spending less on instruction (Arsen & Ni, 2012).

Lanier's experience with a new principal after her first year teaching is not unique. About one in five principals leaves their respective school each year, typically due to district leadership decisions, leaving for a more prestigious or affluent school, or burnout (Béteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2012). Leadership turnover can create instability in the school and classrooms. In a successful suburban public school employing veteran teachers, these effects may be negated whereas less experienced teachers in an urban area with fewer resources may struggle to balance new leadership expectations. Even the most successful principals will likely not see exceptional growth in student achievement, such as exam scores or graduation rates, until after they have been serving at the same school for a few years (Coelli & Green, 2012).

Charter management organizations (CMOs) are started by individuals or groups with a wide range of experience. When I began teaching in 2010, my CMO was entering its fourth year, started by an individual who had recently completed an M.B.A. at Harvard University followed by a fellowship with Building Excellent Schools, a nonprofit that prepares individuals to found CMOs. My principal had about five years of teaching experience and was a former TFA corps member. It was common for similar charter schools to hire former teachers to become deans of instruction or behavior, vice principals or principals. The principal I worked under left after my second year, as did the principal who was hired to fill the void. Data on school leader qualifications at charter schools is currently lacking. However, because schools have more autonomy, mandated qualifications are often nonexistent. For example, suburban affluent schools with more job applicants often require a principal certification or graduate degrees in education to even apply for the position. It was not uncommon in New Orleans at the time to be leading a school with three or four years of teaching experience, a five week summer institute of training, and an undergraduate degree in a field other than education, such as history or English. The privatization model aims to insert more 'talent' into schools through ACPs, but from my experience in New Orleans, school leadership continued to suffer serious yearly turnover similar to that which Lanier experienced in a traditional Baltimore public school.

Money and Testing

Lanier consistently reports the fiscal shortcomings of her urban public school in *Teaching in the Terrordome* by detailing the lack of student supplies, missing desks, neglected school infrastructure, and destroyed textbooks. It is obvious to anyone who has spent an extended period of time in a similar school environment that the students and teachers do not have the resources and materials necessary to succeed. Lanier does not argue that new schools need to be built, or classrooms need to be outfitted with computers, or students need to be given supplies if they cannot afford them. However, the reader can make the assumption that because society has not taken an interest in the school, the students will not either. Spending money on education is a difficult and controversial topic. While increases in spending have shown to decrease the number of students skipping school, it has not necessarily improved the percentage of students completing secondary school (Yamamura, 2011). Current efforts in states such as Pennsylvania to raise state spending on education have focused on the disparities between per student spending in wealthy and poor districts. Lanier described this phenomenon when students are described as arriving at school without writing utensils, or going home to an overcrowded apartment to sleep on the floor (Lanier, 2012, p. 187). A visitor to such a school can immediately predict the differences in graduation rates or SAT scores when compared to a wealthy, suburban high school.

The expansion of ACPs and charter schools has worked to bring school reform into the mainstream. It has also received the attention of philanthropic groups and individuals who have donated millions of dollars to individual schools, CMOs, or legislators who have pro-charter agendas. Potential donors were brought through our charter school to observe classrooms and meet with staff members, mostly on the leadership team. The school was awarded grant money for specific purposes, such as covering the costs of work phones for each teacher. This influx of outside funding is a complex issue. Advocates argue the increased spending can be used to improve teacher salaries or for innovative school programs. Opponents argue the increased spending at charter schools will decrease spending in traditional public schools while shifting control of policy-making to the organizations funding the education projects, such as the Walton Family Foundation, a conservative group that donated over 150 million dollars in 2011 alone (Ravitch, 2013).

The influx of private and public dollars into urban school reform has increased the prevalence and importance of mandated standardized testing. Organizations and governments want to know if their money is being used effectively and to hold individuals accountable if the money is being wasted. Common core is closely tied to the accountability movement. Common Core was originally designed to ensure states were not purposefully decreasing the rigor of their state exams to fictitiously improve education scores (Ravitch, 2011). In 2013, 76 percent of fourth grade students in Louisiana tested as proficient or above in reading on the state exam, while only 23 percent tested as proficient on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Similarly, eighth grade students in Louisiana were deemed proficient or above 66 percent of the time in reading by state standards, but only 23 percent scored proficient or above on NAEP (Williams, 2015). Reasoning for resistance to standardize test expansion is extensive (see: Ravitch 2013). However, I found that at a charter school, constant benchmarking and testing was not viewed as negatively as expected for two reasons. First, an inexperienced staff cannot compare school policies and schedules based on state testing because they have not worked in any other environment. Second, a school hiring individuals from highly-selective prestigious universities may have benefitted from high standardized test scores throughout their academic career and, considering the possible privileges, may not view standardized testing as negatively. This should be concerning for those who work to combat the standardized testing movement.

Teacher Sustainability and Burnout

The strength of the novel is in what it does not attempt to do. It does not attempt to answer every question that plagues a first year teacher in a failing school. Being a first year teacher is difficult enough. When you add extended days, students that are years behind grade level, inept administrators, lack of resources, and surrounding poverty, teachers entering these situations are destined for failure. Given the additional burdens, even the most dedicated and intelligent people will begin to question their supposed impact.

Teaching in the Terrordome omits the personal life of the first year teacher. Very rarely does the reader see the narrator outside of school with friends or family, occasionally drinking a beer with a few other TFA'ers. For teachers who have already gone through this experience, this omission may be disappointing, as the reader is unable to compare how their time outside of school was spent to the narrator's time. However, the book's intended audience is not just teachers from urban schools but rather it is also the general public. For this reason, and in an attempt to focus all attention on the school, the absence of the personal side of the narrator is not problematic for the overall purpose of the book.

It is difficult to live through an experience such as teaching in a high-needs school for two years and then pick up and move on. The job consumes every aspect of your life and it is nearly impossible to flip a switch, stop caring, and start a new career. The job will follow Lanier forever. These lasting impacts demonstrate the importance of ACPs like TFA. While far from ideal, the programs fill holes in schools which otherwise may go vacant and expose highly intelligent, motivated young people to the crisis that is our education system. The failure of these programs, teachers coming and going from schools far more often, is not entirely a product of their purpose. It is extremely challenging to maintain a healthy work-life balance while teaching in these systems. At the school I taught at, only one teacher was married and not a single teacher had a child of his or her own. Starting a family seemed comical while teaching because the educator's lifestyle makes it nearly impossible to do. Constantly changing administration, avoiding topics of race, leadership challenges, and nonexistent resources are not the only reasons these schools are failing. Complex personal aspects of teaching must also be prioritized, namely the hours required at the job, pay, family support services, and finally the feeling of success that Lanier and every teacher yearns for.

Conclusion

Teaching in the Terrordome: Two Years in West Baltimore with Teach For America is a worthwhile read. For teachers with experience in high-needs areas, the book is an eloquent expression of the short and long-term challenges which consume their lives. For teachers with little to no experience in this unique setting, it offers insight into how their peers must approach the same profession in a completely different way. Finally, for those who are not active participants in the education field, most of whom did not grow up in this kind of environment, Lanier tells a tale which is consistently compelling and emotional. Lanier details the problems which need addressing, while also ensuring that if you think you have a simple solution to fix urban education, you are gravely mistaken.

Lanier's work aptly describes the challenges, horrors, and needs of schools in poverty stricken areas across the country in a manner that can be easily recognized. The narrative of the 'failing urban school' has been used to usher in new school reforms which I assert have been ineffective in many ways based on my experience teaching at an urban charter school claiming to fix many of the challenges which Lanier describes. Policy makers may emphasize increased standardized test scores or graduation rates, but a more holistic understanding of urban schools is necessary to depict continuing deficiencies. While teaching, especially in the first year or two, these macro-level policy concerns will most likely be deprioritized for more immediate issues such as lesson and unit planning, classroom management, and creating assessments. This was apparent in any work discussions among my peers that tended to analyze the behavior of the leadership team, effectiveness of school policies, and concerns about individual students or classes. Policy makers ignore these topics, instead focusing on misunderstood buzzwords such as accountability or high-expectations. These "silver bullet solutions" often divide activists into groups based on their stances on issues such as charter schools, merit-based pay, vouchers, and standards. Lanier does not fall into this all too common trap, acting as a researcher who is gathering information, rather than a politician who points a finger or uses flashy terminology to excite an audience.

Less emphasis needs to be placed on the conventional teacher narrative where an outsider connects with inner-city students, works hard, and pushes them to new heights (Trier, 2001). Lanier attempted this, as did I, as do thousands of new teachers every year, and it does not seem to make much of a difference when looking at where so many of the students end up, regardless

of which teacher they had. This point is emphasized in the book when the valedictorian noted during graduation that a remarkable seven hundred and sixty students out of nine hundred who started at Southwestern High School did not graduate. This book does detail small victories, as Lanier breaks through to some students and invests even the most apathetic scholars. But measuring these successes against the large-scale education failures is insufficient. We need a complete change in culture and attitude in this country, and thinking about what one or a few teachers are doing right is the wrong approach. Instead, we need to look at a teacher's daily and yearly life to see how holistic the change needs to be, which is what this book can provide; not a solution to the problem, but the recognition that a solution is necessary. For many, the expansion of charter schools and accountability will 'fix' the challenges Lanier faced in Baltimore. However, increased teacher attrition and a decrease in teacher preparation will not lead to sustained, long-term success for students, even if an immediate increase in standardized test scores occurs.

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