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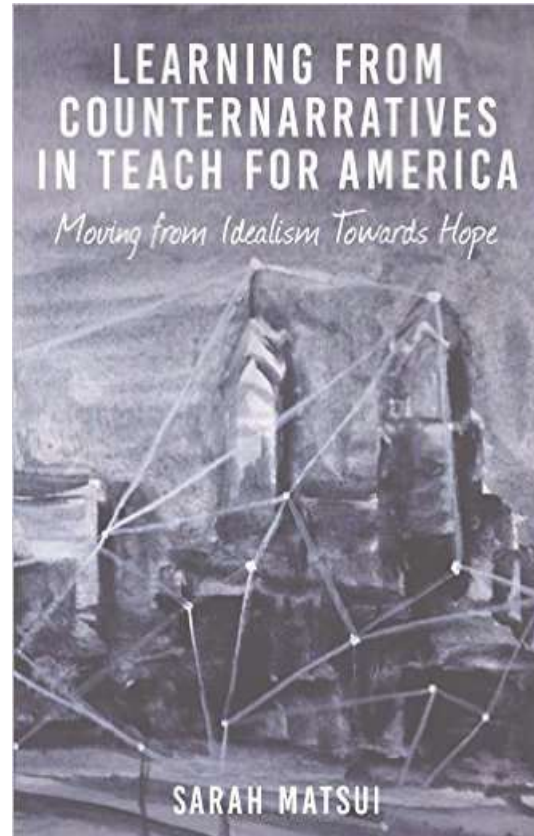
Matsui, S. (2015). *Learning from counternarratives in Teach For America: Moving from idealism towards hope*. New York: Peter Lang.

Pp. 230

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Over the past two decades, Teach For America (TFA) has increasingly occupied a larger space in the educational reform movement. TFA's message that "all children in this country deserve an education that prepares them to reach their full potential" ("Why Teach For America," 2015) attracts young, idealist college graduates and professionals to serve as teachers in low-income, low-performing school districts as a part of their mission to spark change in the educational system. Examination of the TFA website leads you to multiple stories of educators who have made tremendous strides in their students' lives related to academic growth, and statements from students who have their lives changed by TFA teachers, who cared and nurtured them inside and outside the classroom. In Sarah Matsui's (2015) *Learning from Counternarratives in Teach For America: Moving from Idealism Towards Hope*, she uses stories and anecdotes from 13 Greater Philadelphia corps members (CMs) to dispel the message that all CMs are prepared well and



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achieve success in the classroom, TFA employees listen and actively engage with the issues CMs face as teachers, and necessary education reform can be achieved by successful people working hard, no matter what. Moreover, the book takes the time to detail the negative effects that CMs experience during their time in the corps.

The idea for Matsui's book stemmed from conversations and interactions she had with her fellow CMs during her time in the Philadelphia region. Matsui began to see that the feelings of isolation and displeasure that CMs shared with her did not match stories TFA endorsed and shared at recruitment and professional development meetings. Ultimately, it was the results from these conversations that led her to conduct research and write her master's thesis around these counternarratives and shocking revelations. Matsui designed a survey that was sent out to the entire 2011 and 2012 TFA Greater Philadelphia corps, in which 26 participants completed and 13 opted into one-on-one interviews with her. Throughout the next year, she met with these thirteen participants and heard their tales. What she found in these discussions was a large number of young CMs who were turning to alcohol and medication to get through the day and were constantly hesitant to reach out to TFA for help due to their fear of being ignored or blamed for exacerbating the problem.

One of the major takeaways from Matsui's book is that CMs felt like they were not prepared for what they would encounter in the classroom and were not setup to guide their students to academic success. Matsui explains that TFA CMs are provided with an initial summer training that takes place over a five-week period, supplying them with limited preparation for their jobs as teachers; however, she notes that like any professional, teaching requires time to develop needed skills and to navigate the political dynamics at play in school districts. For teachers, it is critical to develop not only pedagogical skills aimed at conveying content but also learn how to

interact with colleagues, administrators, parents, and students. Beyond that, as some of Matsui's interviewees note, they were not adequately prepared to deal with troubling issues such as the death of students or how to handle reporting instances of abuse (p. 114). Further, Matsui details that the lack of preparation and frustration with the teaching profession leads many TFA CMs to consider, or actually, quit the job altogether. However, as Ingersoll (2001) notes, teacher attrition and turnover is a significant problem for education in general, as many people who leave express dissatisfaction with what is expected of them. Still, Matsui's evidence shows a clear example that some CMs in her region did not feel like they were ready to become teachers, something TFA claims to provide and do well for their recruits. These counternarratives stand in stark contrast to the hero narratives of TFA corps members that are often presented and supported by TFA as an organization.

Another issue covered throughout Matsui's book is the notion that TFA staff members do not listen and work to solve the problems explicated by CMs. Many CMs expressed to Matsui (2015) that they shared concerns regarding their performance in the classroom or their stress levels related to the profession, yet they were constantly met with scripted responses that did not offer any real solutions or empathy (p. 24-26). Beyond that, those interviewed felt that TFA employees ignored CM challenges in a way that created a culture of shame and guilt for any conceived failures (p. 108-10, 120-21). Instead of hearing out CMs and working together to find solutions that would not only help them feel better but also improve their skills in the classroom, interviewees reported feeling neglected or shut down. Matsui notes that this ultimately led to corps members ignoring TFA staff or spending time treating the TFA mission as more of a joke; CMs mainly wanted to complete their two years and remove themselves from the classroom. CMs frustrations with TFA staff members also spread into classroom evaluations that were

conducted. Several of Matsui's interviewees expressed disappointment with the feedback they received, mentioning that TFA seemed too focused on just receiving student assessment data and criticizing CMs for scores (p. 26), telling them that they had no relationships with their students (p. 112 and 118), or condemning lesson plans (p. 136-37) instead of gaining tips that could improve their teaching skills. Evaluation and feedback are critical for novice teachers, particularly for CMs who are placed in challenging classrooms in high needs areas. As Darling-Hammond (1986) notes about evaluation:

Meaningful evaluation would provide an assessment of teaching that reveals not only whether or not a teacher does specific things at certain times (e.g., whether or not a teacher has lesson plans, behavioral objectives, and an orderly classroom during the two periods a year when the evaluator appears) but whether a teacher has sufficient knowledge, skill, and judgment to make sound teaching decisions over a sustained period of time on behalf of many students with diverse needs.

The above description falls in line with what should be expected of a classroom evaluation, which as Matsui's colleagues describe, is not what they experienced from TFA staff. Evaluation should feel like a process that is based on trust and a sound relationship, not guilt or shame.

Matsui spends an entire chapter, along with other portions of *Learning from Counternarratives in Teach For America*, discussing TFA's mission statement and mottos aimed at sparking educational reform. Mottos like "Nothing Elusive" and "No Excuses" left many of those interviewed by Matsui exasperated, as they claimed that TFA placed an emphasis on simply not working hard enough as the only reason students and teachers from low-income, low-performing

districts were failing. Those interviewed stated that TFA fails to take into account the resource gaps of poorer districts, as well as the cultural experiences that exist in these communities that may hinder a child's education. In their opinion, TFA articulates that "working harder" will be enough to move students up several grade levels if they start the year behind where they should be. Another slogan touted by TFA is their desire to "close the achievement gap" that exists between white and minority students. Matsui and her peers question the validity and practicality of these statements, by asking how any one teacher can truly revolutionize an entire process; instead, it only adds to the pressure CMs feel in the classroom. Ravitch (2014) calls TFA a hoax, stating that while it may have begun as a good idea, it now claims that its teachers are better trained and more qualified than those who have spent years studying education, despite no research that adequately shows they are doing a better job in schools. Ravitch does argue that TFA has sparked conversation regarding reform but that their movement is not one that will cure education's ailments. Matsui's counternarratives seem to indicate that TFA CMs can only do so much, acting more as just small part of the necessary changes that should be made to education.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of Matsui's book are the sections that discuss how CMs struggled with fatigue and relationships, suffered a lack of weight control, or turned to alcohol, counseling, or medication to get through their two-year commitment. Of her 26 respondents, 25 reported some sort of negative effect experienced while in the corps. Over 70% experienced fatigue, while around 40% suffered from weight loss or gain, strained relationships, or increased alcohol consumptions. Matsui shared that some CMs sought out counseling in order to talk with someone in a safe space about their experience, noting that others expressed interest in counseling but did not have the time or money to seek it out. Still, others noted that increased stress levels led them to

drink more in order to calm their nerves or balance the tension they were experiencing, even though they knew it was an unhealthy, damaging behavior. Matsui's counternarratives offer insight into how stressful the teaching profession can be, as well as what happens to successful, idealist youth who experience failure for the first time in their lives.

As a whole, Matsui's book has several strengths. First, she acknowledges that she had a fairly positive experience in TFA, and her experiences provided her with many opportunities, such as completing a Master's degree in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her book is meant to act as a learning experience for those interested in TFA and to help the TFA organization better support their corps members. Also, she acknowledges that her study takes place in only one region of the country and represents only a limited amount of CMs from the Philadelphia region. However, she was able to sit down with the thirteen volunteers for extended interviews, which added depth to the book. It also allowed her to address a number of topics related to the TFA experience in her region. Finally, in the last chapter and in Appendix D, Matsui discusses questions and patterns that have developed from her research, as well as presents suggestions for improvement to TFA. Among these suggestions are to improve the connection between TFA and counseling organizations to allow CMs places to take care of their mental health, consider other forms of teaching for CMs (such as acting as co-teachers in the first year) to allow them time to strengthen teaching abilities, and to have TFA staff create places for CMs to share resources with one another.

While there were several strengths of Matsui's books, there were areas where improvements could be made to strengthen

her overall argument and thesis. Though her book is about TFA CMs and their experiences in low-income, low-performing districts, adding more research about novice and even veteran teachers who are also employed in these regions would offer insight into the lives of others in similar situations. If they share different, or even similar, experiences, this would add value to her argument, and it would mean that these issues should be studied throughout the teaching profession. Further, in her chapter about negative experiences while teaching, Matsui could benefit from going into greater detail how about factors like counseling and increased alcohol consumption affect teachers inside and outside the classroom. While these answers may be obvious, adding the research and detail would not take away from the message she is trying to get across. Lastly, though the book emphasizes the use of counternarratives, the book does not offer much from the TFA side. Though there is a chapter discussing their mottos and slogans, the rest of the book is truly an expression of the interviewees. Their opinions and exchanges dominate a majority of the text. Adding some perspectives from TFA employees, beyond what is found on their website, would round the book out as a whole.

Overall, Matsui's book is a worthwhile read, and one that offers a great deal of insight into the world of TFA and corps member experiences. It offers a chance to look beyond the popular narrative that TFA expounds. A few of the mentioned changes would add depth and clarity to several of her chapters, but those who want to learn more about TFA from those who have lived in the belly of the beast will not be disappointed.


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