



ISSUE BRIEF: March 2009

New Research on Teacher Preparation: Does the Conclusion Match the Data?

I. Overview

It is critical that educators, legislators, parents and the public know as much as possible about the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs. For this reason, we welcome the interest by Louisiana officials in probing to determine the “value added” impact of teachers who reach the classroom through different teacher prep programs. Unfortunately, the headlines generated in recent months by a Louisiana State University (LSU) study have been based on a flawed interpretation of the research.¹

The misguided conclusion that some have drawn from the LSU study is that Louisiana teachers who are trained through a fast-track, alternative program called The New Teacher Project (TNTP) outperform experienced teachers in raising student achievement.

The LSU study examined student achievement in reading, math, science, social studies and language arts. Teachers were observed over three consecutive school years (2004-05 through 2006-07). All of the teachers recruited by Teach For America in Louisiana are trained through a variation of TNTP.² New Orleans currently employs more than 300 Teach For America teachers, but fewer than 100 of these teachers were employed in the New Orleans area during the years of the LSU study (2004-05 through 2006-07).

The LSU study examined the impact of teachers on student achievement in reading, math, science, social studies and language arts from 2004-05 through 2006-07.

II. Flaws in the Study’s Interpretation

The LSU study collected valuable data, but the interpretation of this data has been seriously flawed in the following ways:

- **The Study Misrepresents What a “New” Teacher Is.** The study gives TNTP-trained teachers a built-in advantage because these teachers are not counted as “new teachers” until after they are certified. As the lead author of the LSU study explained:

“ . . . we only assess teacher effectiveness relative to preparation once they have completed their preparation. We don’t include teaching experiences that are part of the preparation.”

This is a critical detail. This means that the TNTP teachers who were labeled “new teachers” were usually third- and fourth-year teachers. They should not have been considered “new” because they already had been working in the classroom for *roughly two years* while they were completing their 18-month certification program. For this reason, comparisons to other new teachers in Louisiana are not valid.

The LSU study shows that statewide first- and second-year teachers are far less effective than experienced teachers but that these new teachers close most of the gap in their third and fourth years. Yet it’s also worth noting that Teach For America teachers leave the profession at much higher rates than traditionally certified new teachers.³ Many teachers

The teachers trained by TNTP were wrongly labeled as “new teachers” even though they were usually third- and fourth-year teachers.

recruited by Teach For America leave before they are fully certified and before they reach their third year (which was required in the LSU study). These departing teachers are then replaced by other first-year teachers who are also not a part of the research study. In New York City, for example, roughly half of Teach For America teachers leave the profession *before* their second year, and nearly three out of four leave *after* their third year.⁴ (Given that New York City has lower student poverty rates and generally

better teaching conditions than New Orleans, the turnover rate among Teach For America recruits is probably even higher in New Orleans.)

This high turnover is significant because it strongly suggests that those TNTP-trained teachers who reached their third year — and were counted as “new teachers” by the LSU study — were a fairly non-representative subgroup of TNTP teachers. Clearly they are more effective because they are more experienced. Also, the TNTP teachers who stuck around may have received more positive feedback and better mentoring from an experienced colleague than other teachers. Moreover, it’s likely that their persistence as teachers reflected better classroom management and instructional skills than their TNTP peers who left before their third year of teaching. In other words, this study showcased the best possible TNTP-trained teachers rather than a representative sample of all TNTP teachers who taught in Louisiana public schools. These teachers were not novices and should not have been identified as such.

It is encouraging to learn that TNTP-trained teachers who stay until their third and fourth year of teaching appear to do a commendable job. Of course, research shows that most teachers trained through alternative certification programs generally catch up to other teachers by the time they reach their fourth or fifth year of teaching. Yet there is a “cost” to these alternative teacher prep programs. Students pay the ultimate price due to the high turnover rate among brand-new teachers (especially among Teach For America recruits) because research — including the LSU study — confirms that first- and second-year teachers are much less effective than experienced teachers.⁵

- **The Difference Isn’t Statistically Significant.** Even though the study asserts that fully certified TNTP-trained teachers outperform other teachers, the “value added” difference is very small and is not statistically significant. To their credit, the authors of the LSU study acknowledge this fact.⁶

The claims of TNTP-teacher “effectiveness” are based on a 68 percent confidence interval. This means that a researcher is only sure that this interval is different from zero roughly two out of three times. In the educational research community, a finding is generally not viewed as “statistically significant” unless the confidence interval reaches 90 or 95 percent. Because this conclusion lacks statistical significance, there is no reason to believe that TNTP training is an effect tool to help close the achievement gaps in our public schools.

- **The Study’s Sample Is Too Small.** The sample size (roughly 40 to 60 teacher observations per academic subject) in the LSU study does not provide enough data to draw sound, reliable conclusions about the value or impact of TNTP. By comparison, the study of teacher attrition in New York City (cited earlier) was based on more than 700 teachers and multiple observations of these teachers.⁷

The study offers no real insights on the recruitment strategies in New Orleans because only a handful of New Orleans teachers were part of the study.

- **The Study Provides No Real Insights on New Orleans.** A spokesman for TNTP claimed that the LSU study proves that “New Orleans’ strategy of engaging groups like our organization and Teach For America in the rebuilding of the school system is paying off.”⁸ This assertion is a huge stretch, and there are two reasons why.

First, although most of the TNTP-trained teachers are working in New Orleans this school year, the LSU study does not offer meaningful insights on their impact because only a few New Orleans teachers were included in all three years of the LSU study.

As the study’s authors confirm, their data was drawn from teachers who were teaching the same students who “remain[ed] in that school for the entire year” for each of the three years of the study.⁹ Hurricanes Katrina and Rita severely disrupted the 2005-06 school year, and only a handful of schools had reopened by March of that school year. In addition, many students and their families fled New Orleans in advance of these storms and did not return until the following school year — including thousands who enrolled mid-year.

Second, the study offers no genuine insights for the city’s reform experiment because it is based on data that only covers one full school year in post-Katrina New Orleans. Although the title of the LSU study includes the words “Overview of 2007-08 Study,” none of the data were drawn from teacher observations during the 2007-08 school year.

III. Summary

It is clear that there are many TNTP-trained teachers in Louisiana who are going the extra mile to help their students learn. The AFT and their experienced colleagues welcome their energy and commitment, especially those who want to make teaching their career. Yet neither the data nor design of the LSU study allows us to conclude that TNTP teachers are having a greater or lesser impact in raising student achievement.

We urge LSU researchers and state officials to continue exploring the critical issue of teacher preparation, but we also hope they will expand their research to the crucial area of teacher turnover and the school climate or working conditions that may encourage turnover. The AFT also urges Louisiana officials to more closely study the impact of new teachers (from all alternative preparation programs) who are *not* certified.

The AFT and its affiliates will continue to participate in this ongoing debate. Training, preparing, supporting and retaining classroom teachers are crucial to raising achievement, especially in public schools that are struggling.

Notes

¹ George H. Noell, Ph.D. et al, “Value Added Teacher Preparation Assessment Overview of 2007-08 Study,” Executive Summary, Louisiana State University, Nov. 17, 2008.

² Sarah Carr, “Study Challenges Assumptions on Louisiana Teacher Training,” The Times-Picayune, January 3, 2009.

³ After the first three years in New York City, for example, the attrition rate was 73 percent for Teach For America recruits, compared to 29 percent for regularly certified teachers (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2006).

⁴ Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2006.

⁵ See: “No Experience Necessary: How the New Orleans School Takeover Experiment Devalues Experienced Teachers,” June 2007, a report by the American Federation of Teachers, Louisiana Federation of Teachers and United Teachers of New Orleans; accessible at:

http://www.aft.org/presscenter/releases/downloads/NoExperReport_07.pdf.

⁶ On page 3 of the LSU study’s executive summary states: “Programs whose *effect estimate* is above the mean effect for experienced teachers by its standard error of measurement or more. These are programs for which there is evidence that new teachers are more effective than experienced teachers, but this is not a statistically significant difference. The difference between these programs and the mean for new teachers would commonly be statistically significant.” See: George H. Noell, Ph.D. et al, “Value Added Teacher Preparation Assessment Overview of 2007-08 Study,” Executive Summary, Louisiana State University, Nov. 17, 2008.

⁷ The study included teachers whom the LSU researchers were able to observe for each subject and for each year taught.

⁸ David Keeling, communications director for The New Teacher Project, was quoted in: Sarah Carr, “Study Challenges Assumptions on Louisiana Teacher Training,” The Times-Picayune, Jan. 3, 2009.

⁹ George H. Noell, Ph.D. et al, “Value Added Teacher Preparation Assessment Overview of 2007-08 Study,” Summary of the Technical Report, Louisiana State University, Nov. 17, 2008.