

Handful of Heroes: Lessons from Special Operations Forces for Classroom Teaching in Public Education

Prepared by Tony Klemmer, Cara Candal

On May 1st, 2011, twenty-three highly trained Navy SEALs descended on a small compound one hundred and twenty miles inside Pakistani airspace. In less than 40 minutes, they successfully completed their mission. They had to refuel in mid-air and suffered a helicopter crash among numerous other obstacles, but zero casualties. With the US President, Vice-President and other senior advisors watching in gripped silence, members of a SEAL Team, the elite of the elite, conducted the raid that ended the long reign of terror of Osama bin Laden.

Perhaps more striking than this story of success is its pedestrian regularity. On that same night of May 1st, twelve other similar missions took place in Afghanistan—more than 2,000 have taken place over the last several years in the war on terror. Special Operations Forces (SOF), including the Navy SEALs, play a critical adjunct role to the regular armed forces and security agencies of the United States and other countries. In fact, without the air and ground support of conventional forces, SOF cannot function effectively. On that night in May, it was a “conventional” army Chinook helicopter that safely returned one of the SEAL teams after it blew up its damaged helicopter in the compound in Abbottabad.

Just as conventional forces are the backbone of our military, teachers are the backbone of our nation’s schools. While the comparison may seem sweeping, our country’s teaching force, in many ways, plays a role similar to that of our military. Strong national security is an important part of an overall strategy for securing the future of our nation; the military protects citizens from harm both at home and abroad. In parallel, teachers protect the nation’s economic security by educating the populace to become a strong and productive workforce. Without such a workforce, the nation’s economic security is at stake.

There are lessons that the military can teach us about our nation’s schools. We consider here how elite clusters of teachers might be deployed in ways similar to elite military special forces. We suggest that a “Navy SEAL” teacher corps can complement the good work of “conventional” classroom teachers in order to improve the quality of public education in this country, especially in our nation’s high needs schools.

We now understand, better than ever before, that effective teachers can have an enormous impact on the educational outcomes of their students. We also believe that those teachers can have an even greater impact on the success of a school when administrators thoughtfully deploy them by positioning them to lead and extend the capabilities of their colleagues. What too few schools and districts have yet to

Special Forces are:
... elite tactical teams trained to perform high-risk ... missions that conventional units cannot perform. Special Forces ... need to be physically and mentally robust and have the confidence, courage, and skill to operate individually or in small teams ... They are high-value assets ... delivering effects disproportionate to their size. (British military establishment description)

exploit, however, is small clusters of their best teachers functioning in the dual roles of true teacher leaders – supporting other adults, while lifting student achievement.

The Parallel

In 1999, Dr. Colin S. Gray, a noted military strategist and historian, published an article in the journal *Parameters* entitled: “Handful of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed?” He describes the critical strategic impact of well deployed special forces as deriving from a combination of “economy of force” and “expansion of choice.”

Military Special Operations Forces

In the military, conventional and special forces often work within a joint command organization structure. Members of special forces are plucked from conventional forces and are selected, trained, and deployed for the most difficult assignments, their role being to enhance the capabilities of conventional forces through extraordinary tactical and strategic capacity beyond that of their conventional counterparts. In military parlance as Gray writes, these specially trained and deployed forces provide commanders with an “economy of force,” in that they have a large impact on the success of a mission while representing a disproportionately small footprint. They also provide commanders with an “expansion of choice,” allowing them to draw on an additional or alternative set of resources when necessary.

A Special Force of Experienced, High Performing Teachers

In classroom teaching, a small force of exemplary, experienced teachers could be cultivated. These teachers would be highly skilled in the tactical domain of teaching and learning, and selected, trained, and deployed to coach, lead, and transfer skills to peer teachers in their schools. Such an elite force of teachers, thoughtfully deployed in small clusters at the schools where they are needed most, would, like military special forces, enable other teachers and deliver additional strategic capabilities to their school administrators. These elite teachers would have a direct impact on student achievement both through the students that they individually reach and through the assistance that they could provide their teaching peers. This expanded capacity, managed within the existing school organization structure, can deliver a similar combination of economy of force and expansion of choice for public education that elite forces deliver to military commanders.

“What are the conditions for the successful deployment of an elite teaching corps?” In his article Gray poses the same question about special operations forces in the military. Gray identifies four broad categories to frame the discussion: Political & Cultural Context, Mission Objectives & Tactical Considerations, Competencies, and Policy Implications, all of which contribute to the greater overarching objective of achieving “significant strategic success.”

Political & Cultural Context

Gray suggests that special operations forces (SOF) should have sponsors in the unified command, civilian bureaucracies, as well as the White House and Congress. That is, they have to be supported in their work by a diverse group of constituents—without such support they cannot, according to Gray, “fulfill their strategic potential.”

Like their military counterparts, elite forces of classroom teachers need a wide network of support, especially if they are going to remain in the high needs schools and hard-to-fill positions where their skills can most benefit students. Research tells us that there is a “strong relationship” between good teaching and student achievement. It also tell us that while teacher turnover in all schools is high (almost 50% of teachers leave during their first five years in the profession), it is even higher (by almost a third) in low-income urban school districts.

Unlike their military counterparts, elite teachers do not always enjoy support from a diverse set of constituents. Even if teachers are lucky to have the support of an effective administrator, the form that such support takes might not always be conducive to allowing elite teachers to work *both* in the classroom and as leaders of other teachers, helping their peers to be more effective in the classroom as well. Also problematic is that even when administrators provide the right kind of job flexibility and moral support for teachers, they are not always in a position to see that those teachers are rewarded for taking on extra or more difficult work—in many states and districts, administrators are hampered by compensation policies that are directly tied to teachers’ union work rules.

Further complicating matters is the changing but tenuous relationship between teachers in individual districts and state governments. Though states now have more authority for education than ever before, many are loathe to interfere with the relationships between teachers and local districts, focusing instead on blanket rules for teacher certification and licensure. Finally, as the federal government has no constitutional authority for education, it is not in a position to create policies that will actively support teachers, even elite teachers, in a manner that might more forcefully contribute to teacher retention. While the federal government can provide incentives for districts that recruit and retain elite teachers, teacher employment remains an intensely local affair.

The creation of a system of support for elite teachers that is aligned at the national, state, and local levels would be an important step in the effort to retain our nation’s best and brightest in the neediest classrooms. Such a system would encourage localities to differentiate teachers based on the impact that they have on student performance. It would also provide the most elite teachers with additional training focused on the skills that they need to enhance their own performance in the classroom and enable other “conventional” teachers to enhance theirs. Through training and even compensation, such a system would actively encourage elite teachers to stay in schools with the greatest concentrations of high needs students, thus focusing our nation’s greatest weapons in the war on the achievement gap where they are needed most.

Mission Objectives and Tactical Considerations

To better understand what such a coordinated effort might look like, it is first important to understand how elite teachers can best be deployed and to what ends, specifically. According to Gray, for special forces to have “positive strategic utility” they need to fit within a greater framework of strategic purpose, in particular one in which conventional forces alone cannot accomplish the mission. If an abundance of highly qualified, committed classroom teachers

existed, and if all schools were performing at high levels, then the addition of a special force of teachers might not be necessary. However, as the data provided above make clear, there is a dearth of highly qualified, experienced classroom teachers committed to high needs schools.

Moreover, it is painfully evident that the current approach to deploying conventional classroom teachers is not having the intended strategic result of producing strong student achievement and an educated and productive workforce. We've known of the existence of an achievement gap in this country based on race and socio-economic status since the Coleman Report of 1966. Despite pouring an unprecedented amount of resources into our nation's neediest schools, an gap in achievement has remained. As Gray points out, for a mission to be successful, strategic intervention must be both feasible and well timed; we know that it is feasible to close achievement gaps in this country, as pockets of high performing/high needs schools have shown. We also realize that for the large numbers of students who continue to be underserved by our nation's schools, the time for meaningful action is now.

But support from a diverse set of constituents is not the only thing that elite teachers will need if they are to fulfill their mission. Perhaps even more important is the relationship elite teachers will have with the conventional teachers in their schools. In his discussion of military SOF's, Gray identifies a direct correlation between the "likelihood of success" of the mission and the level of support that SOF's receive from their conventional counterparts. SOFs need to help their conventional compatriots see the path to victory and help build momentum and a clear sense of the finish line. Conversely, SOFs cannot be everywhere at all times, nor are they well suited for every kind of mission—the likelihood of their success is in many ways dependent upon their strategic relationship to and cooperation with conventional forces.

An elite force of top tier teacher leaders, properly selected, trained and positioned, would bolster school administrators' capacity to reach every student in each school. They could help to achieve that success, not only through their direct work with students, but also by developing, leading, and supporting a strong team of conventional teachers. In teaming with conventional teachers in this way, such an elite teaching corps would provide high needs schools with the "economy of force" that Gray describes in relation to SOFs. Small clusters of elite teachers deployed in this fashion would have a disproportionate impact on their schools. and provide administrators with an expansion of choice in meeting their strategic objectives.

Mission Objective:
Anchor and supplement teaching staff in high needs schools through demonstrated ability to lead student achievement gains in the classroom, lead other teacher peers in their development, and support school leadership in systemic change.

When considering the use of special forces, decision makers and leadership need to be open and flexible, but at the same time disciplined and focused in their choices. Gray says decision makers cannot be "too doctrinaire." They must be open to "innovative, non-standard solutions to problems," and focused on non-traditional, novel, operational tasks. These requirements manifest themselves in the dual approaches of special forces, where they enable conventional forces through their leadership and at the same time create new strategic capacity.

Such flexibility and openness to innovation, though present in the world of public education, is by no means pervasive, and it is critical to the radical improvement of the nation's high needs schools. Continuing to employ the same conventional teaching forces in the same ways, has not and will not have the necessary strategic result. Complementing this approach with a special force of highly trained teacher leaders could provide the same impact that it does in military affairs, expanding strategic choice for school leaders with an economy of force.

When does it make sense to use special forces? Gray suggests that an "absence of alternatives" drives such decisions. He calls it "the last straw." Specifically, special forces are well suited to situations where their unique capabilities are most needed, where conventional approaches haven't worked, where conventional forces lack the "reach or agility" to do the job entirely, or where inherent weaknesses in a conventional approach have been identified. Anchoring effective change initiatives in high needs schools where adequate student achievement gains have been elusive represents a parallel opportunity in public education.

According to Gray, when special forces are "tasked with the impossible" as they routinely are, they must be granted every technological and operational advantage available, particularly because they are asked to "operate at the edge of operational feasibility." These advantages are drawn from their expertise, competencies, unique training, deployment and commitment to the mission, which would also apply to the concept of a special force of teacher leaders. The dual objectives of improving student achievement directly while simultaneously supporting the performance of peer teachers provides just such a challenge.

Competencies

For choice to be usefully expanded, what sets of competencies must an elite teacher corps have? By definition, special operations forces need to be elite teams, highly trained and skilled in their trades. "Tactical competence is fundamental for strategic utility," according to Gray. There are a number of tactical competencies that he identifies as critical for success.

- Highly trained and suitably equipped personnel
- Excellent leadership qualities, initiative and resourcefulness
- Planning by some of the same people who will lead the mission
- Coordinated carefully with conventional forces

Gray argues that, "the importance of tactical competence is so obvious that it requires no particular emphasis." As we consider the application of special forces concepts for classroom teaching in public education, the same can be said. Tactical competence for teacher leaders includes not only mastery within the traditional domains of teaching and learning, but also the separate domain of supporting organizational effectiveness and supporting the needs of other adult learners.

Special operations forces need to represent exceptional human and material assets, hence the designation "special." They typically represent a small force relative to conventional forces, less than 10% in military affairs, which gives them some of the flexibility and agility they need. Given the small scale, high stakes nature of their work, significant resources are devoted to selection

and training of these elite forces. Skimping on such resources can have “distressingly large consequences” in the field, “on the sharp edge,” as Gray warns. Our country currently lacks formal programs of study exclusively designed for experienced, high performing teachers to prepare them for leading such efforts in high needs schools.

When deploying special forces, added mass is not an option. The economy of force (small footprint) represents a key strategic advantage for special forces. Quality is key and more does not mean better. In order to effectively avoid “mission creep” and maintain focus, special forces require tight coordination with conventional forces. The quality of this coordination is deemed critical to the overall accomplishment of the objective.

A similar deployment can be envisioned for high needs schools. A small select team of specially trained, high performing, experienced classroom teachers complement the many other teachers in the school. This cluster of teacher leaders, in concert with others and under the leadership of the school principal, tackles the difficult challenge of radically improving and maintaining high student achievement and leading students to productive post-secondary success in college and the work force, not only through their direct work in classrooms, but through their work with teaching peers to support the overall effectiveness of the school as an organization.

Everyone has a sense of what it means to be a Navy SEAL or a Green Beret. Not much more needs to be said to conjure up images of elite professionals, well equipped to tackle a range of seemingly impossible tasks. This reputation derives from thoughtful planning and execution along the entire continuum from selection and training to proper deployment. It is the interplay of these elements that ensures that special operations forces are effective and therefore revered within their communities of practice and beyond. This credibility is critical.

Unfortunately, the nation’s teaching force does not, as a whole, have the same credibility in the public eye. Though countless teachers have extraordinary tactical and strategic skills and are committed to their profession and to the students that they serve, teachers are not always properly deployed and integrated within established organizational structures. An elite force of highly trained classroom teachers, deployed in small clusters within high needs schools, committed to teaching and capable of supporting systemic change could have the same positive effect on their peers, their schools, and the broader profession of classroom teaching as the SOFs have on the military.

Policy Implications

In order for special forces to be most effectively deployed, certain strategic conditions must be met. As in the military domain, similar conditions will ensure the success of a Navy SEAL-like approach within classroom teaching in public education. A clear mandate must be present. Effective systems for the identification, recruitment, intense training, proper deployment and retention, must also be present. Such a special operations approach would need to represent both an expanded capacity for school leaders and a clear integration with the balance of the teaching force. Extraordinary tactical skills and unique strategic capabilities need to be

embodied in each cluster of elite teacher leaders. Sustainable funding models for the training and ongoing support of such a force also must be present.

If every high needs public school in the nation had access to a team of highly trained, experienced, high performing teacher leaders, dedicated to serving the unique role of a special forces mandate within their schools, the rate of progress at school improvement could certainly increase. Not only would such teachers deliver exemplary student achievement gains directly, but their training in teacher leadership skills outside the classroom would enable the work of other teachers in their schools and create a strategic capability for school and district leadership. Leveraging effective teachers to extend the capabilities of their peers could be a useful weapon in this country's struggle to close the achievement gap and improve achievement outcomes for all students.

Any effort to assemble a national corps of elite teachers would require a highly selective admissions process coupled with intense, specialized, training. Only the best, experienced, high performing classroom teachers who are committed to continuing their work in classroom teaching would be considered. The content of any advanced training would necessarily address the dual roles of these teachers both inside the classroom and outside the classroom (as leaders of other teachers).

Importantly, these teachers should be rewarded for their expertise. If they are the most capable teachers in the school willing and able to tackle the toughest tasks, it is reasonable to think that school districts and charter school and faith-based networks would compensate them commensurate with their contributions and in recognition of the time and effort they commit to the profession. It is also important to note that, like their military counterparts, the honor of being selected for and serving in an elite corps, and recognized for that, will further incent these high performers to remain mission focused—they will be driven by the intrinsic rewards of knowing the vital role they play in the success of every student—even those with whom they do not have daily, direct contact.

In early piloting of these concepts, the newly formed National Academy of Advanced Teacher Education (NAATE) has been testing many of the principles described here. In the summer of 2011, a cohort of experienced, high-performing teachers from school districts and charter management organizations across the country came together for an intense course of study on topics related to their work inside and outside the classroom. The high bar for entry, integrated curricular materials, and instructional approaches provided at NAATE seem well suited to this elite audience. This concept of training elite clusters of high performing classroom teachers for high needs schools may provide a solution to the intractable problem of retaining the best of the best in our nation's neediest classrooms.

Tony Klemmer is the Founder and President of the National Academy of Advanced Teacher Education, a program designed to train an elite force of experienced high performing teachers, to improve their effectiveness, increase their value and renew their commitment to the profession of classroom teaching. He holds a PhD from Salve Regina University, an MBA from Harvard and a BS in Economics from the U. of Pennsylvania, Wharton School.

Cara Candal is the Director of Research and Curriculum of the National Academy of Advanced Teacher Education. She holds an Ed. D. from the Boston University School of Education, an M.A. in Social Science from the University of Chicago, and a B.A. in English Literature from Indiana University at Bloomington.