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Helpful or Harmful?

Teach For America in a Hartford Elementary School

Hartford has the reputation of being a school district with low performing schools and difficult students. Teach for America came to Hartford in the fall of 2007 with the idea of helping students in need of good teachers. However, Teach for America is often criticized for throwing teachers into difficult districts with little experience, inadequate training, and a poor support system. With Teach for America now in its second year in Hartford, there are 166 corps members in the Connecticut region. What is happening inside these schools? More specifically, how is a struggling Hartford elementary school affected by a strong reliance on Teach for America?

Teach for America (TFA) is a national program that places the “best and brightest” of recent college graduates as classroom teachers in urban and rural high need classrooms. Corps members come from all academic majors and commit two years to the program. Its mission is to “eliminate educational inequality by enlisting our nation’s most promising future leaders in the effort” (teachforamerica.org). The idea came from Wendy Kopp, a Princeton University senior writing her undergraduate thesis. Convinced that the top college students would take better jobs than teaching, she set out to entice them with the promise of making a difference.

TFA claims that their bright, energetic recruits are able to make more progress with students than beginning teachers and veteran traditionally certified teachers (Student Impact Study by Mathematica Policy Research 2004, teacherforamerica.org). Yet, teachers receive just five weeks of training during the summer before teaching on their own in the fall; just a fraction of what a traditionally certified teacher would go through. This training involves co-teaching summer school classrooms and attending workshops. The premise of TFA assumes that other than subject-matter knowledge and general intelligence, no serious preparation is needed to teach effectively (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

Educational inequality is a very important social justice issue, but many question Teach for America's methods of tackling this problem (Darling-Hammond, 1994). With little experience in the classroom and minimal training, many educators worry that TFA teachers are not ready for the demands of high need districts. Despite their worries, TFA is now in 29 communities across the nation and 6,200 members strong in 2008. TFA teachers impact 400,000 students annually and with 20,000 teachers in the program since its inception in 1990, they have impacted 3 million students to date (teachforamerica.org). Although many disagree about the premise and effectiveness of TFA, it is obvious that it is significant either way. Teach for America places teachers in districts that need the most help and with students who have the most to lose, making this something that we should examine more closely.

Previous Research

The premise of Teach for America asserts that teacher certification is not necessary to teach. In fact, TFA sees certification as a barrier for intelligent and driven

people to get into teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Darling-Hammond asserts that teacher education matters now more than ever with greater demands on teachers. She argues, “The capacity to understand another is not innate; it is developed through study, reflection, guided experience, and inquiry.” Teachers must not only have “deep and flexible knowledge of subject matter” as TFA emphasizes, but also several levels and types of prior knowledge and the ability to assess how students are learning and adapt their instruction to accommodate different learning styles (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Research has demonstrated that certification does matter and certified teachers are better rated and are more successful with students than teachers who are not (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Teach for America believes that intelligent people with subject matter knowledge will be effective teachers, but research has shown that knowledge of learning, teaching methods, and curriculum influence teaching performance more (Darling-Hammond, 2000). In fact, students of teachers who have not completed their certification learn less in critical areas such as reading, writing, and math (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) found that students of Teach for America teachers and other non-certified teachers made about 20% less academic growth per year than students with traditionally certified teachers. They conclude that traditional certification programs result in positive effects on the academic achievement of low-income primary children. Additionally, they conclude that programs like TFA appear harmful to students and are actually increasing the achievement gap between poor, minority children and more advantaged ones. They found that teachers who had training in pedagogy outperformed teachers without such training, and that traditionally certified teachers teaching in their area of certification outperformed both certified teachers teaching out of field and

alternatively certified teachers. It appears that the route of certification and what teachers are certified in strongly influences student academic performance.

There is no doubt that many of the people Teach for America chooses are intelligent and enthusiastic about teaching, but they find that without preparation, it is difficult to succeed. The communities Teach for America places recruits in are in dire need of well prepared teachers, something that they should not claim to be. Despite saying the Summer Institute where TFA trains their teachers for 3-8 weeks is rigorous and intense, four separate evaluations found that it did not prepare candidates adequately (Grady, Collins, & Grady, 1991; Popkewitz, 1995; Roth, 1993; Texas Education Agency, 1993). One corps member who taught in Los Angeles said, “Eight weeks of training may be long enough to train neighborhood cleanup workers or even police auxiliaries but it isn’t enough for teachers” (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Darling-Hammond states that TFA’s training is nothing like structured teacher preparation that a traditionally certified teacher would receive. The program, which is now five weeks according to TFA’s website, focuses on “cookbook techniques,” rote approaches to teaching, and short lessons of complex ideas without much explanation (Darling-Hammond, 1994). In order to be effective teachers, recruits would need more experience in the classroom and more guidance in designing lessons, subject matter, pedagogy, child and adolescent development, and theories of teaching, all of which would be included in a traditional certification program (Darling-Hammond, 1994). TFA also trains corps members in assertive discipline techniques and advocate that children learn best when “psychologically managed.” Assertive discipline techniques tend to blame students if learning is not successful and emphasizes tough punishments for breaking rules such as

moving and talking. Darling-Hammond argues that unsuccessful TFA teachers tend to blame the children rather than their inadequate preparation.

Teach for America teachers with little training have been found to be less effective in building higher-order thinking skills and reduce curriculum demands to simple, routine lessons to control students more easily (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Professionally prepared teachers learn methods that promote student development and independent and critical thinking. Shapiro (1993) in a survey of Teach for America teachers found that many found the value of workbooks because despite being boring, they kept the students busy, and if they were busy, they were not making trouble for the teacher.

Hawkins, Stancavage, and Dorsey (1998) in Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2002) found that students who were taught by teachers with less than five years of teaching experience performed below the level of those students whose teachers had 6-10 years or 25 or more years of experience. Lopez (1995) also found that teachers maximized student performance after 7 years of teaching experience. It is obvious that it takes a great deal of time to become a very effective teacher in the classroom. The TFA program allows inexperienced teachers to become classroom instructors without knowledge of valuable teaching strategies and child development that are essential tools for teachers. The premise of the program and the two year commitment never allows members to maximize effectiveness. Although teachers become more effective with experience, TFA teachers leave after their two year commitment and the children never fully benefit from the gains the teacher made and begin again with inexperienced teachers. This cycle is

something that is a chronic problem when teachers are placed in districts that tend to already have high turnover rates.

Teach for America teachers do not tend to stay in teaching and leave at a higher than average rate than traditionally certified teachers. Although many enter the program with intentions of exploring teaching as a career, they leave discouraged because they feel unsuccessful. Of the corps members that began TFA in 1990, 58% left before their third year. This is nearly three times the national average for new teachers. Of the recruits in Baltimore in 1992, 8 had left by mid October and 62% left within 2 years (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1994). A district supervisor in New York City recalled having to ask many TFA recruits to leave because they were so poorly prepared (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Teachers leaving mid year creates a sense of loss, feelings of abandonment, and an interruption in learning for the children. Teach for America claims via their website that 91% of corps members return for a second year but do not give statistics on how many stay after their two year commitment (teachforamerica.org).

Teachers that elected short term alternative certification programs like Teach for America also reported being less satisfied with their preparation and less committed to remaining in teaching than other new teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Ingersoll (2002) argues that schools are not paying enough attention to staff retention and focus on short term solutions in programs like Teach for America. “The solution is not solely recruitment, which has been the focus of much policy, but must also include teacher retention...recruiting more teachers will not solve the teacher crisis if 40-50% of these teachers then leave in a few short years. The image that comes to mind is a bucket rapidly losing water because of holes in the bottom. Pouring more water into the bucket will not

be the answer if the holes are not first patched” (p. 39). Darling-Hammond (1994) agrees and states, “Keeping new teachers who are well prepared is as important as recruiting them.” Although many hope that TFA recruits are the answer for struggling districts, it is possible that they create more instability within schools as they create more turnover, a problem that policy makers must address.

Teach for America teachers, as many new teachers, have a difficult time in their first years on the job. However, studies have found that TFA corps members’ performances are very uneven in the classroom and they experience many difficulties (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Gomez and Grobe (1990) found in a study of an alternative certification program similar to TFA, that performance varied wildly between and within members. Uncertified teachers also report having greater difficulties planning curriculum, teaching, managing the classroom, and diagnosing students’ learning needs than fully certified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Teach for America teachers have also been found to be “less able to adapt their instruction to promote student learning and do not see it as their job to do so, blaming the students if their teaching is not effective” (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Learning how to manage your class is one thing that educators claim is the most difficult skills to attain. A district supervisor in New York City recalled entering a TFA classroom to find the teaching sobbing and the room in chaos (Darling-Hammond, 1994). When teachers cannot maintain control of their classroom and provide an environment conducive to learning, the children suffer. Their lack of training and preparation leave them with no skills or strategies to draw upon when things get hard. Additionally, their self-confidence and sense of efficacy is lower than those who went

through traditional programs leaving them without many essential tools for being good teachers and leaders (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002).

Teach for America's approach reinforces the image of teaching as anti-intellectual and the deprofessionalization of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1994). In fact, students in teacher education programs are generally more academically successful than the average college student (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Darling-Hammond (1994) echoes stating that the alternative to intelligent, untrained TFA recruits are intelligent, well-trained recruits from many competitive colleges. She argues that we do not need alternative certification when the traditional certification is training more prepared and effective teachers. TFA and their proponents contend the certification requirements are lengthy and costly and keep many intelligent people from teaching (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). These TFA advocates also claim that there is no special body of knowledge that teachers need to know in order to be successful, thereby reinforcing the idea that any intelligent person can teach and deprofessionalizing teaching.

Others question the methods of TFA and see the premise as demeaning to teachers. A recruit that decided to go the traditional route said, "The program didn't look at teaching as a profession. Who would go to Surgeons for America? You give us your enthusiasm and youth and we'll train you to do a heart bypass during the summer? It's like putting a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound. This is not an answer to the problems of urban education. If anything, it cheapens education. It gives you the idea that anyone can teach" (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Educators contend that certification in a profession is meant to insure a minimal level of competency. TFA teachers may have mastered basic skills, but without training in pedagogy, they lack deeper understanding. This

understanding is essential to move lessons beyond the basics and create independent, critical thinkers (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002).

The public and academics have taken an interest in the Teach for America program because of the idealism that started it all. Smart, energetic, young students that are ready to teach in America's toughest schools and liberate them from public school mediocrity is something that we would all like to believe in. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Debates over what makes an effective teacher, what kind of preparation is necessary, how to keep good teachers, and what TFA's methods say about teaching as a profession, all play into this complex issue. However, this study will focus on a small portion of this very complicated argument. Although on paper TFA sounds like a promising alternative, this study seeks to uncover how a struggling Hartford elementary school is affected by a strong reliance on Teach for America. It will not provide a final answer to whether or not Teach for America is good for the nation or even Hartford, but it will take a closer look inside one school.

Methods

To understand how Teach for America has affected one school that relies heavily upon it, I conducted an ethnographic study. I interviewed seven teachers; three from Teach for America, three veteran teachers, and 1 beginning traditionally certified teacher. TFA teachers were in their first or second year with two first years and one second year. I considered any teacher that had been teaching for more than 5 years a veteran teacher. One of the veteran teachers took a job as a curriculum specialist in the 2008-09 school year but had been a teacher at the school for some time. The beginning traditionally certified teacher was in his first year of teaching.

I contacted the school about conducting interviews with teachers and my interest in Teach for America in particular. She emailed my request out to teachers and two responded. I met with both of them and snowballed my sample from there. I asked who they thought I should speak to and who I interviewed also depended on my ability to find them in the school. All teachers I asked to participate in the study agreed and signed consent forms. Teachers agreed to be interviewed if their names were kept anonymous. I recorded each interview for my records and transcribed them, leaving out names of participants, the school, or any other identifiable statements.

I also observed formally and informally in the majority of the classrooms of the teachers I interviewed. I often took notes on what the teacher was doing or saying to students and I have used this as data in some instances. Overall, I acquainted myself with the school during and after school hours. It became a regular occurrence to see me wandering the halls or bothering teachers, and this enabled me to talk more openly with teachers and gain their trust.

Findings

Hartford Elementary* (pseudonym) is a school that many would describe as failing. With low test scores, high staff turnover, and students that lead difficult lives, it is one of the lowest performing schools in the state of Connecticut. According to the district, it is in its second year of intervention and must raise its test scores or be redesigned by evicting all administration and most staff. However, during the 2007-08 school year, they did essentially that all on their own. The vice principal of the school left, and some staff members estimate that as much as 75% of the staff followed. As perhaps a last resort or an answer to its budget problems, six Teach for America (TFA)

teachers were brought into Hartford Elementary, four in the 2008-09 school year. When speaking with the teachers, three major trends emerged: Structural, classroom, and teacher Instability. Structural instability is the high turnover and instability that Teach for America teachers produce in the school. Classroom instability is the management issues they face while in the classroom and the inconsistency of methods TFA teachers employ. Teacher instability is the doubt that TFA and veteran teachers have about TFA as an organization, its methods of attacking the problem, and what it implies about the profession of teaching.

Hartford Elementary is in need of stability after the large turnover in the 07-08 school year and educators say that staff retention is an integral part of building a successful school. However, Teach for America recruits are known to leave after two years so the natural question is, why would the school hire them? The answer is simple: Money. The school received a grant to cover a large portion of the salaries of the TFA staff and with a tight budget within the school and in the district, the school felt they had no other choice. Everyone feels the budget issues and one teacher had to buy several student workbooks with her own money because there were not enough for the whole class. Others had to change lesson plans to accommodate more pair work because the children had to share materials. Several teachers told me about a website where teachers can ask for classroom materials such as books and scissors and donors can respond. When I observed one class, they were writing thank you letters to the donors for the new books they had received. Although budget issues are not new or specific to Hartford Elementary, it was a factor in the hiring of so many Teach for America teachers despite the need for staff stability. Teachers and the curriculum specialist also stated that TFA

was pushed hard by Superintendent Adamowski who “was a fan of TFA” as a possible solution for low test scores and failing schools. It appears that the superintendent is willing to try TFA in hopes of reviving this struggling district; yet TFA is inherently producing what staff members say is the school’s biggest issue.

There were no recent statistics I could find on how many TFA teachers do not continue in the school they are placed in after their two year commitment is up, as they have conveniently not put it on their website. Although TFA claims that 91% of teachers come back after the first year, we do not know currently how many stay for their two year commitment or after. In 1990, 58% left teaching before their third year (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Of the teachers at Hartford Elementary I interviewed, some were unsure, but not one said they would stay. One teacher, hired in the fall had already quit by early November, leaving her class to be dissolved and students placed in other classrooms. The children likely felt abandoned and confused by the teacher’s sudden departure. One TFA teacher said, “I’m surprised she lasted that long” (Teacher 1). Lack of support and the demands of the job were cited as possible reasons why the teacher left, but everyone continued on without much concern. The normality and lack of concern that the TFA teachers expressed over this event surprised me, and teachers told me that they knew of other TFA members in other schools that had also quit by early November.

Veteran teachers did express worry about retainment of staff saying, “The schools that are successful are the schools that can keep their staff and they can continuously build the professional development that has been offered so that their staff is becoming more knowledgeable...so that they can progress their students forward because of that. There is a lot to be said for stability. The downside to not having that is you have people

who may or may not stay after two years, we never get to that point and that has really been our issue” (Curriculum Specialist). Other teachers echoed the need to retain teachers if the school hopes to get out of intervention, “I think that if the teachers here stay, if we can retain teachers for a long period of time that will help” (Teacher 4). Veteran teachers seemed to understand how keeping staff and continuing to train them played a large part in the success of a school. The TFA teachers, however, did not communicate worry about how their short time and imminent departure was not good for the school or the students.

Teach for America teachers also expressed feeling unprepared and inconsistent in the classroom. One teacher said, “I came to school and I had no idea what to do with kids all day in a room by myself and a lot of management issues were abounding my first year... during the school year I’d go to this PD {professional development} and I would learn this really great idea and the next day I would go in and I’d implement it, but it was happening every month so every month I was doing something different...I was just going around trying everything – every different method they taught me...I mean, it was a rollercoaster. Kids just didn’t get better, they never got better...We had structure but it changed every month and there was clearly no consistency” (Teacher 1). Teachers cited their lack of training as one of the main reasons they felt unprepared. “I was certified in essentially four weeks and never watched a veteran teacher,” Teacher 5 stated, “I wish I had taken a child development class because I don’t know where my kids are developmentally or what they are actually capable of” (Teacher 5). I found it alarming that this teacher is responsible for more than 20 children each day, but did not know where they were developmentally. Not only could she be going way over their heads with

lessons that they cannot yet grasp, she could also be seriously harming their academic development by not challenging them.

Yet this was not the biggest problem teachers discussed. Classroom management and the mastery of this skill came up in interviews with nearly all teachers. Although it is unclear whether TFA teachers struggle anymore than any other first year teacher, they all expressed frustration and a lack of preparedness. “The main issue has really been management and I have no idea how to manage older kids and I’m struggling to figure it out” (Teacher 3). The teacher who was traditionally certified before joining Teach for America, said she “everything that I did was primary – I had it really set in my head that I would teach first graders – I did my student teaching, my practicum, I completely didn’t listen to a lot of information because I had it so set in my mind that I would be teaching babies.” Without knowledge of how to manage older children, the teacher informed me that that day she had made her students copy dictionaries standing up because they had not been listening to her. “I was at the end of my rope with them. I couldn’t teach this afternoon. I could not teach” (Teacher 3). When teachers do not have formal training on how to manage children age appropriately, the methods become irrational and unproductive as demonstrated in this example.

Veteran teachers also observed TFA teachers have trouble with classroom management. “They are floundering with classroom managing - now I don’t know if they were floundering more than any new teacher would. You know, I think some of them were” (Teacher 4). Another veteran agreed and emphasized that without control of the classroom, teaching is very difficult and the students miss out on learning. “I think that the teachers who really struggle – I think the students do suffer a great deal because of

that – they lose out on their learning for part of the year or an entire year while that teacher improves enough to have decent control of their class, to understand the curriculum. You are going to get that with any first year teacher but...if you are going through that cycle every couple of years...they are missing out on part of their education” (Curriculum Specialist). With inexperienced TFA teachers in every grade from 1-6, the curriculum specialist said the school must now make a conscious effort to ensure that the same children are not in TFA classrooms each year. This comment shows the underlying assumption that students of TFA teachers are disadvantaged because of their teachers, something that cannot be repeated year after year.

Teach for America teachers although idealistic to begin with, began to show some doubts and insecurities about the difference they were making and TFA as an organization. When asked if she was making a difference, Teacher 1 stated, “I felt like I was doing more harm than good {last year}. I have a lot of issues with Teach for America – I love its mission, I love its philosophy of you know, that the achievement gap in education is our generation’s social justice issue. But I don’t love their methods of attacking the problem. I don’t think it is the best idea to put a bunch of idealistic college students in classrooms and say, good luck, make wonderful gains with them.” TFA teachers appear to realize that the organization made a lot of promises and had high expectations that were perhaps unrealistic. “I feel like the teaching part is kind of a band-aid. It’s like I’m not helping the system – I’m floundering. I am not ultimately fixing the problem of educationally inequality by being in the classroom” (Teacher 3). The TFA teachers were not blind to that fact that they were not entirely successful in the classroom and that placing inexperienced college students to teach was not the best idea. It seemed

like they realized how hard teaching was once they were in the classroom and many said they often ask themselves if they are making a difference.

Teachers did seem sure that they would make a difference after their commitment to TFA was finished, saying “People who spend two years, go through it, they see it firsthand and then go into policy to be principals and make those decisions; that would actually make a change. That will make a difference in solving educational equality” (Teacher 3). Another echoed stating, “Now that I have experience in an urban school, I will...spread the message of the achievement gap to as many people as possible...I think I’ll be making career choices that reflect my experiences here and I mean like political choices...that reflect these experiences...for the rest of my life I will make some impact” (Teacher 1). It is apparent that these teachers, although they question the methods of TFA, still believe in its mission and strategy in many ways and believe they will make a lifetime of difference from their experience. Whether or not this is true cannot be said for sure, but it is apparent that the teachers still believe this while simultaneously understanding they are not entirely successful as teachers.

The premise and strategies of TFA the organization are demeaning to teachers and the profession, veteran teachers expressed. “They expect these college graduates here to have this growth – the expectation is kind of a slap in the face. I have been teaching here 10 years and you don’t expect that I can make my children have a year and half growth and if I could that I wouldn’t already be doing it... I feel like Teach for America’s philosophy is that if you are a graduate of a good school and you have high expectations, you can work miracles. It is kind of insulting to teachers who have been teaching awhile. Our teachers are going to make a year and a half growth...you guys have been working

all this time but you guys must not be trying hard enough or something like that” (Teacher 4). Teachers felt that the idea of TFA teachers being sent in as “savior soldiers” was saying that they were burnt out, ineffective, and did not care about their students when the opposite was true. The idea is hurtful and makes veteran teachers feel that their work is not valued or recognized. Another veteran teacher echoed saying, “I think that Teach for America as an organization does a lot of promising to the teachers and to the district about what their teachers can accomplish. It is demeaning to a lot of us as teachers who go through traditional programs. We are not uneducated individuals ourselves and so saying that is kind of putting us down and to assume that there is going to be a certain amount of growth from a Teach for America teacher that would not be equaled from a traditional teacher is really unfair – that is an unfair promise to make. There is too many of us here because we want to be here that could go elsewhere if we wanted to and make more money and have a lot less headaches” (Curriculum Specialist). Teachers raised concerns about the expectations of TFA the organization, but interestingly, did not appear to hold it against the teachers themselves. One TFA corps member said “most teachers who are traditionally certified do not look favorably on Teach for America which I totally understand but people did not seem to want to collaborate so I wasn’t going to push it” (Teacher 1). However, veteran teachers did not outwardly express this in any interviews. They did appear to have problems with TFA the organization and its expectations, but did not express feelings of resentment towards the teachers.

After spending a great deal of time with Teach for America teachers and their students at Hartford Elementary, I see Teach for America differently. It is clear that they

select very intelligent, articulate, and enthusiastic young people. Their idealism and eagerness is softening to those who are skeptical of the program as one cannot help but be affected by their struggles and triumphs in the classroom, perhaps because it is easy to root for the underdog. However, their short time commitment and imminent departure creates instability in a school that cannot afford to have more staff turnover. TFA teachers with little training or experience find themselves struggling to manage their classrooms, making learning difficult for their students. Finally, TFA teachers have doubts themselves about the organization and their own effectiveness as teachers although they still believe they will ultimately make a difference in education. The idea of TFA itself is insulting to veteran teachers who felt that the expectations of TFA were unfair and demeaning to caring and experienced teachers. Hartford Elementary is still in danger of being redesigned and a large turnover is expected of the TFA teachers and many others. In the end, the school must retain staff members in order to build up staff knowledge, provide consistency in the classroom for students, and provide an environment where all teachers are valued, none of which Teach for America teachers are able to give.

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