Fighting the Good Fight

Perspectives on Teach For America from Current and Past Corps Members
Background – Teach For America

- 1989 - Wendy Kopp’s Senior Thesis
- Goal: Close Achievement Gap
- Mission Statement:
  - "One day, all the children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education."
- In its 16 year history, 17,000 teachers have been sent to urban and rural areas throughout the US.
Significance

- TFA is a heavily publicized organization that has a significant social impact.

- TFA funds numerous research projects regarding its effectiveness but there is a noticeable lack of information published that reflects the sentiments of the actual teaching staff.

- Personal Significance – Educational Studies
Research Question

- How do the Teach For America program participants (specifically, the teachers) view their experience? Why?
Methods

- 10 structured interviews with TFA corps members:
  - 7 current members
  - 3 past members

- Interview with 2 current TFA recruiters

- Attended TFA information sessions
Secondary Sources

- “A Survey of Principals in Schools with Teach For America Corps Members.”
  Kane, Parsons & Associates (2005)

- “Who Will Speak for the Children? How Teach for America Hurts Urban Schools and Students.”
  Linda Darling-Hammond (1994)

- “Teaching in Under-Resourced Schools: The Teach For America Example.”
  Edith S. Tatel (1999)
The TFA Debate

- Significant civil debate regarding TFA

- 2 Key Points:
  - Is the training sufficient?
  - Are the TFA corps making an impact?

- Believed that this would tie into my research question – factors leading to overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction.
Debate: What Research Suggests

Is the Training Sufficient?

The Summer Institute

“Just 8 weeks of training...may be long enough to train neighborhood clean-up workers or even police auxiliaries but [it isn't] enough for teachers”

“In reality, neither traditionally or alternatively certified teachers are prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in our most needy schools”
- Tatel (1999).
Debate: What My Respondents Said

- Is the Training Sufficient? - Yes!

“It is impossible to learn everything that you will encounter on the job in the summer institute. They do a great job for the task that they are presented with.” – 1998-2000 TFA Corps Member

“It was very organized and they probably covered as much as they could have given the time and amount they needed to address.” – 2002-2004 TFA Corps Member
Debate: What Research Suggests

Are they Really Making an Impact?

“[TFA] is bad for the children because they are often poorly taught. They often lack continuity in instruction and are frequently exposed to counterproductive teaching techniques that can destroy their inherent desire to learn”

“Citing corps’ members hard work, dedication to teaching, and ability to learn quickly, principals [in a national study*] confirmed that TFA teachers effect great gains in the classroom”
Debate: What My Respondents Said

Are they Really Making an Impact? – Yes!

“I am definitely making an impact. I am one of the only consistent supporters in their lives and just being there for them each day makes a real difference.”

– 2005-2007 Corps Member

“I do everything I can to push my kids forward. I can’t reach all 28 of my students in the same way but I can contribute to the movement of bettering education and that’s what it is all about to me.”

– 2005-2007 Corps Member
Thesis

- Most corps members view their involvement with TFA as a positive experience.

- Most TFA members attribute their satisfaction with TFA to the relationships that they build with their students.

- Most TFA members attribute their dissatisfaction to their own unique experiences relating to the broader societal issues that plague our school system today.
Findings: Reasons for Satisfaction

“My Kids”:

“One of the most rewarding aspects of my experience is my kids. Day to day it changes from ‘I love teaching’ to ‘I hate teaching’ but it is always the students that bring you back and reaffirm why you are doing this.”
– 2005-2007 TFA Corps Member

When asked about the most gratifying aspect of her experience, one TFA corps member said:

“My ‘kids.’ They are really challenging at times but when they really get something, when it ‘clicks’ there is no better pay off.”
Findings: Reasons for Dissatisfaction

**Broader Social Issues:**

“The hard part was dealing with everything around [my students]...the violence in the home coupled with the fact that many parents were never home because they held multiple jobs left these kids without a solid home life or any real role models at all.”

- TFA corps member ’03-'05

“I often wondered to myself, ‘How am I supposed to teach these kids fractions when they are too worried about having their classmates hear their rumbling bellies?’”

- TFA corps member ’04-'06
Conclusion

- How are we as a society going to combat the problems that are riddling our national educational system?