

4-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Franco, Libby, "Fighting the Good Fight: Perspectives on Teach For America from Current and Past Corps Members". Senior Theses, Trinity College, Hartford, CT 2007.
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Fighting the Good Fight:

Perspectives on Teach For America
from Current and Past Corps Members

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Ed 400: Senior Research Project
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December 19, 2006

Introduction

Teach for America (TFA) began as the brainchild of educational activist Wendy Kopp. When Kopp was a senior at Princeton University in 1989 she chose to focus her thesis on the issue of educational inequality in America. She devised a plan that included sending motivated individuals into schools throughout the nation to help in the fight against under-resourced schools. The product of that thesis is now one of the leading educational programs in America.

TFA is a nationally recognized program that sends college graduates into our nation's most challenging schools. These graduates, referred to as the TFA corps, are a select group of highly ambitious individuals that have taken on the daunting task of helping to eradicate the educational inequalities that exist in America's schools today. They attempt to accomplish this by spending 2 years as a full-time teacher in needy districts scattered throughout the United States. In its 16 year history, TFA has sent over 17,000 teachers into disadvantaged schools and has impacted more than 2.5 million students (www.tfa.edu).

Although many positive reports have been produced regarding TFA, it is important to also understand the critiques of sending under-prepared teachers into our nation's most challenging schools. Therefore, my research addressed "How do the Teach for America program participants (specifically, the teachers) view their experience? Why?" Through my research, I hope to gain an understanding of the experiences of individuals that are going through or have gone through the TFA program and to use this knowledge to understand how this relates to their overall

satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the TFA program. This information will be invaluable when analyzing the overall effectiveness of the program.

Significance

In its 16 year history, TFA has generated a lot of public interest. As a result of this, a significant amount of information has been published regarding the value of this program for our struggling national educational system. However, there proves to be little published about the impact or value of the program for the individuals that are actually out there in the field. I speak specifically of the recruited TFA teacher corps that are sent to key sites around the country each year. Through my study, I hope to provide a better insight into the TFA program as a whole by focusing on an area that has not been given much attention in academic research or the news media. There have been numerous statistical assessments of the program's effectiveness, but I hope to shed light on the personal aspect of the program by illustrating the sentiments of the TFA corps. Understanding how the teaching corps view their experience is crucial when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the program. Therefore, this information could prove useful when evaluating TFA and other public policies that aim to tackle one of the most significant problems facing our country today.

Working Thesis

Throughout my research I have uncovered that most TFA members are satisfied with the program and their experience with it. Their experience is positive

regardless of if the individual is still in the program or has already finished their 2-year stint. However, the sentiments towards the TFA program are even more positive the more years that the individual has been out of the program. This could be because of the challenges of being in a classroom and dealing with the regulations of the individual school coupled with the TFA guidelines that creates an atmosphere of high stress for the individuals that are currently in TFA. The individuals that have already finished the program do not have these high pressure situations to structure their recollection of TFA and, as a result, they view their experience in a more positive light.

My research question also asks why these individuals express these sentiments. Although the overwhelming response was positive from my respondents, each of them did share similar feelings regarding areas in which they were dissatisfied. Therefore, I was able to construct a response to my research regarding the reasoning being the TFA teaching corps' satisfaction and also their dissatisfaction. The TFA corps that I interviewed cited the relationships that they forged with their students as the most compelling factor for their overall satisfaction. There are a lot of challenges that are associated with teaching and, as uncovered in the testimonials of the TFA corps members, it seems that the interaction with the students serves to mitigate the stresses of the job. They predominantly attributed their dissatisfaction to their own unique experiences relating to the broader societal issues that plague our school system today. It seems that they were not dissatisfied with TFA as an organization but with the structural and organizational problems in schools and the plight of impoverished families.

Literature Review/ Conceptual Framework

Within the world of academic research, TFA is reported on heavily. From tales of educational inequality and the deprofessionalization of teaching, it seems like everyone has an opinion about this revolutionary program. However, I was able to uncover only a few select articles that spoke to the sentiments of the teaching corps. These articles were hardly academic but were rich with personal narratives and opinions.

Articles such as I have previously described include Molly Ness' testimonial "Lessons of a First Year Teacher" written in 2001. Ness details her experiences as incredibly powerful but fears that she did more harm than good during her 2-year stint in Oakland, California.

Another resource that I used was Sarah Sentilles' Taught By America which was published in 1995. In this book, Sentilles recalls her experience in Compton, California. She shares heart breaking memories of the students that she taught and the vast insufficiency of the resources and conditions of the school for the students. She also describes sentiments that I also uncovered in my own research regarding the children's experiences with violence and neglect and how that affects their hope for a good education.

Despite these few unique testimonials, there is a noticeable lack of concrete and well researched studies done on the plight of the TFA teacher. This lack of corps accounts in the modern press is a dangerous oversight by this organization and by the corps members that experience it. Now that TFA is gaining popularity and many

programs are basing their structure on TFA, criticisms need to come forward in order for this program to really take full stride.

Some of the most relevant literature that I used included “A Survey of Principals in Schools with Teach For America Corps Members” by Kane, Parsons & Associates (2005). This extensive article included the perceptions of the teaching corps as viewed by the principal’s in the schools that they teach in. This article proved invaluable when analyzing the perceived effectiveness of the teachers.

The second article that should be referenced is “Who Will Speak for the Children? How Teach for America Hurts Urban Schools and Students,” by Linda Darling-Hammond (1994). This article explores the downside of the TFA program and how it is detrimental to the students that it involves. This article was important for the research that this project included because it elaborates on the negative aspects of this program in a setting where most of the publications tend to be positive regarding TFA.

The third article that I found absolutely essential to my research was one written by Edith Tatel entitled “Teaching in Under-Resourced Schools: The Teach For America Example (1999). This article details the cause that TFA is aiming to improve upon, the characteristics of corps members and their professional development, and also illustrates that having these individuals enter our struggling national education system cannot possibly be a bad thing because it aids one of the most significant problems facing these institutions – understaffing.

Despite the breadth of information that I was able to come across regarding the TFA civil debate, alternate perceptions of the program, and a few narratives, the

existing literature on TFA seriously neglects to address the sentiments of the teaching corps. In my paper I attempt to branch from the typical TFA rhetoric that is all too prevalent in today's media and finally give a voice to the TFA corps members that are out there in these struggling schools.

Methodology

My research project included extensive qualitative research. To gather the information necessary for my research project, I conducted structured interviews.

The first interview that I did was with two TFA recruiters. I asked them direct questions regarding some of the myths that I had heard about TFA and the reasons behind corps member sentiments (for full listing of questions, see Appendix B). This interview allowed me to discuss and dispel some of the common myths about the program through the eyes of individuals who are well versed in the TFA rhetoric. This interview enabled me to fully understand the core issues regarding TFA which was invaluable when I eventually conducted interviews with the actual corps members.

For the bulk of my interviews, I spoke with current and former TFA corps members. In order to get into contact with these individuals, I utilized administrators at Trinity for information regarding graduates from the college that had gone on to become involved with TFA. I then contacted the individuals that they uncovered via e-mail and set up interview times. I was able to have 10 interviews in total with 3 past TFA members and 7 current members. The interviews were conducted on the telephone and the interviews usually lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. I asked them a series of pre-determined questions (See Appendix A) and asked supplemental

questions if I deemed it necessary throughout that individual interview. Throughout my extensive interviews, I received personal accounts of what it is like to be a member of the TFA teaching corps and the sentiments behind their overall impressions of the program.

Finally, I supplemented my research on TFA by sitting in on a TFA information session being held at Trinity College. This session was helpful because I became aware of the amount of teacher corps and students that it involves each year. This made me even more passionate about my research because I knew that what I was going to uncover would be beneficial to many because of the scope of this program in society. I also was educated on the central goals of the program as well as concepts such as the Summer Institute and other aspects of TFA that were the focus of a lot of attention in the materials that I had previously been reading about.

Limitations

As with any research, aspects of the scope and methods of the research process led to some distinct limitations that need to be acknowledged to fully gain an appreciation of the complete study that is being described here.

The phone interviews were extremely challenging to get comprehensive detail from. I had to feverously scrawl notes down as the individual continued to make comments. I attempted to remedy this problem after the third interview with the teaching corps and utilized a tape recorder and put the phone on speakerphone so that the interview could be more fluid and I could listen more intently as it was being

recorded for me. I continued to take notes when I had the tape recorder, but simply to keep my place.

Another limitation that I experienced that deserves to be acknowledged is that the pool of individuals that I initially interviewed was strictly Trinity College graduates. When I needed more individuals to supplement my study, I utilized the Trinity graduates to put me in touch with friends and roommates of theirs that were also affiliated with TFA. Therefore, not all of my respondents ended up being Trinity College graduates, but the social networks that these individuals hailed from left me with a distinct group. This limitation shows that my study does not include a random sample of TFA graduates, but a distinct segmentation of society and social network that was utilized strictly because of accessibility and respect for the significant time constraints.

Ethnographic Description

TFA is subject of a large an ongoing civil debate regarding its effectiveness as a public policy system that aims to tackle a significant social problem. The two central questions that substantiate this debate include the questions “Is the training sufficient for the TFA corps members?, and also “Are the TFA corps making an impact?” In an attempt to round out a thorough investigation of the TFA program for the scope of this research project, this debate was analyzed. The purpose of the research was also guided by the anticipation that it might tie directly into or at least provide insights into the research question itself.

The first question, “Is the training significant for the TFA corps members?” allows a thorough analysis of the TFA training technique. Presently, the bulk of the TFA corps member training consists of an 8 week program in the summer prior to the anticipated school year. This program is commonly called the Summer Institute and is known to be incredibly rigorous and demanding. The Summer Institute aims to give the corps members a crash course in what they need to know to be a teacher. This institute is given a lot of attention with regards to the debate because it is here where many forge their complaints about the under preparation of the TFA staff. In my interviews, I aimed to address this issue because throughout the reports on TFA, frustration and insufficiency of corps members is attributed to the inadequacy of TFA training such as 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”(Darling-Hammond, 1994). However, some reports state that no training is sufficient to train teachers for these demanding schools and it is not TFA’s fault for not preparing these individuals efficiently. “In reality, neither traditionally or alternatively certified teachers are prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in our most needy schools” (Tatel, 1999). In light of these findings, this concept was directly addressed in the interviews and the response from the corps members was startling. Most corps member said that TFA does the best job that it can.

“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.”

- Corps Member (1998-2000).

Another corps member reiterated this sentiment when he said:

“It was very organized and they probably covered as much as they could have given the time and amount they needed to address.”

– Corps Member (2002-2004).

Therefore, due to the fact that overwhelming feedback illustrated that the blame wasn't allotted to TFA regarding the teachers feeling vastly under prepared, the reasons behind their sentiments was still not understood. The other facet of the debate needed to be addressed in order to remedy this.

The second aspect of the debate that was to be addressed was “Are the corps making an impact?” The research, as with the first aspect of the debate, has alternate opinions expressed the research. One side of the argument states that the TFA teachers do a poor job of educating our nation's students. “[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” (Darling-Hammond, 1994). The other side of the debate shares a different opinion. “Citing corps' members' hard work, dedication to teaching, and ability to learn quickly, principals confirmed that TFA teachers effect great gains in the classroom.” (Klane, 2006). Once again, the sentiments of the interviewed corps member gave invaluable insight into this debate. The overwhelming response was that yes, they are making gains in the classroom.

“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.”

– Corps Member (2005-2007)

Another corps member shared her experience in the classroom and how she makes an impact that extends even outside of her classroom.

“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.”

–Corps Member (2005-2007)

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

My research asked specifically, what the perceptions of the TFA teaching corps were in regards to the TFA program and why. In my research I uncovered the strongest reasons regarding their overall satisfaction and dissatisfaction. I have explained and elaborated on these sentiments below.

Satisfaction

When asked about the most rewarding 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.” – Corps Member (2005-2007)

The usage of the term “kids” when referring to her students signifies a distinct bond with that individual that transcends the traditional teacher-student role. This relationship proves to be worthwhile and lasting relationship for the teachers.

This corps member illustrates just how important the interactions with her students are with her overall satisfaction with the program:

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...I would do absolutely anything for them and they feel the same way about me. It is a truly unique and rewarding relationship and an untold aspect of TFA.” – Corps Member (2006-2008)

This teacher allows a unique insight into what her individual feelings can be on the job on a day to day basis. She also illustrates the direct impact of the students on her feelings and how it is a reciprocal relationship.

Dissatisfaction

I found out that the general dissatisfaction with TFA stems from the individual school that the TFA corps member is at and not the TFA organization itself. It seems to stem from systematic problems within schools and homes of these children.

One TFA alumna spoke of the extreme nature of her school and how this affected her experience.

“The hard part was dealing with everything around [my students]. In class they were fine but I had to make sure the kids wandering the halls wouldn’t come in and disrupt my class. Also, the violence in the home coupled with the fact that many parents were never around because they held multiple jobs left these kids without a solid home life or any real role models at all. Dealing with that daily was really hard for me.”

- Corps Member (2000-2002)

Another TFA teacher spoke to the insufficiency of the home life and the neglect and poverty that these children experience which directly ties into her feelings of frustration and helplessness on the job:

“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?’”

– Corps Member (2006-2008)

It seems as though the root of the dissatisfaction, as explained by these individuals, lies within the extreme poverty that they witness in these needy schools and the way that these social issues are not addressed or remedied in the school system. These core issues directly impact their experience with teaching.

Conclusion

With regards to the specific pool of subjects that I interviewed, my research has revealed that most of the individuals that have gone through the TFA program as corps members have valued their experience.

The aspect that proves to be the most rewarding for the corps and the reason for their satisfaction with the program is their relationships with the students. The teachers specifically detail their students as their “kids.” This enables the reader and researcher to acknowledge that this relationship transcends the typical student-teacher bond and is a deeper more meaningful bond for all parties involved. Although the TFA corps members claimed that they maintained strict professionalism, they still described these tight-knit relationships that proved to impact the student as well as themselves.

The people I interviewed dispelled the myth that the summer institute or any of TFA’s efforts to prepare these individuals for the daunting task was inadequate. In fact, many TFA corps members stated that TFA does the best to prepare them considering the amount of time they have and the plethora of information that they need to get through.

The corps members also addressed whether they are making an impact and with the responses gathered, the overwhelming response was that indeed, they are making an impact. They described making an individual impact within their classroom and also supplementing this impact with their overall efforts to contribute to the movement of bettering education.

As a result of my interviews, the root of a majority of the dissatisfaction with the program lies within each individual situation and the outside factors that prove to make the task of educating these students extremely difficult. These factors include violence in the community, a lack of support at home for the students, a disruptive school environment, and deficient school supplies or services for the students.

Further Insight

The Teach For America teachers bring up significant social issues in their detailed and moving accounts of their experiences. We need to look at these issues and figure out a way to contest them. We need to ask ourselves, how are we as a society going to combat the problems that are riddling our national educational system? Teach For America is attempting to staff these schools with bright and motivated individuals but is that enough to aid these floundering schools? This result of the interviews and the research allows a keen insight into the inner workings of our nation's most challenging schools and why it is that they are doing so poorly. The combination of family neglect and violence in the home coupled with little to no reinforcement of academic motivations in the home or community forms a perception of academia as an impenetrable area. The teachers are not at fault for the shockingly low test scores and graduation rates; the structure of the American public school system is at fault for hindering the advancement of the student's academic performance. The research gathered offers a compelling look into the lives of the American public school systems and the plight of the individuals that are in these institutions making strides to fight the good fight.

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Appendix A:

Interview Questions: These Questions were administered to 10 Past and Present TFA Corps Members

Background Info:

1. What year(s) did you participate in TFA?
2. Where was your placement?
3. What grades did you teach?
4. What subjects did you teach?
5. What kind of school are you teaching in?

Impressions:

6. What was your first impression the program?
7. What were your expectations going into the program?
8. What shaped these perceptions?
9. Did the training have an effect on this?
10. What was the most difficult part of your experience?
11. What was the most rewarding part of your experience?

Training:

12. What did your training consist of?
13. How effective do you think the training was to prepare you for your placement?
14. Was it enough training?

Placement:

15. How much experience did you have with the kind of community in which you were placed?
16. Did this have an effect on your experience?
17. Did the training address or help with this?

Relationships:

18. What was your relationship with your students when you were teaching?
19. What is your relationship with them now?
20. Did you get the opportunity to build genuine relationships?
21. Did this impact your experience in any way?
22. What was your relationship with the other teaching staff?
23. Did this impact your experience in any way?

Personal Value of TFA:

24. What does 'making a difference' mean to you?
25. Do you think you made a difference?

26. How do you know this?
27. Were you expecting to see a visible impact of your efforts in the classroom?
28. Did you see a visible impact?
29. Did the training address the idea of what kind of impact should be made?

Future:

30. (A) *If completed program*: What are you doing now? How did you decide this?
31. Did your experience with TFA affect this decision?
32. What did you learn about the teaching profession?
33. What did you learn about American public schools?
34. Would you change anything about TFA? (training, administration, placements, etc)
35. What would you recommend to future TFA participants?

Demographics:

36. Age -
37. Gender -
38. Race -

Appendix B:

Interview Questions: These Questions were administered to 2 TFA Recruiters

1. How did you become involved with TFA?
2. What do you believe are the central goals of TFA in terms of the teaching corps?
3. Are these goals met in most cases?
4. Why/Why Not?
5. Why do you think some teachers are displeased with their experience with TFA?
6. Many people have claimed that the teacher training prior to the 2-year stint is inadequate. What do you think about this?
7. Do you believe that it is possible to fully prepare these individuals for this experience?
8. Would you change anything about how the TFA program is run today?