

A Personal Perspective on the *Teach for America* Program

Note: Brianna Andrade, an undergraduate working with our Center at UCLA, indicated that her sister was in her second year with *Teach for America* and that this provided her with a personal window on the program. With the literature as background, Brianna interviewed her sister and provided a write-up. The following is an edited version.

What is *Teach for America*?

The following basic information on *Teach for America* (TFA) was culled from the work of Clark, Isenberg, Liu, Makowsky, and Zukiewicz (2015).*

Established as a nonprofit organization, *Teach for America*'s (TFA) stated aims are to alleviate the teacher shortage and improve the educational opportunities of students living in urban and low income regions across the United States. Specifically, it recruits and trains promising college graduates from elite colleges to become teachers for underprivileged students. An extensive screening and interview process is used to select individuals with demonstrated leadership skills and strong academic backgrounds and who indicate a commitment to reducing educational inequalities.

Those selected commit to teach for two years at an urban or inner city school serving students living in poverty. In preparation, these "corps" members attend an intense, five-week summer institute training. Corps members are taught about curriculum, literacy and diversity. They shadow teachers and teach summer school students under the supervision of veteran teachers, receive feedback on their performance, engage in group discussions on teaching practices, and learn about lesson planning. Following this training, corps members are expected to complete courses while teaching in order to receive a state teaching certification in the form of a license, certificate, or credential that deems them qualified to give instruction under federal law.

After completing training, corps members apply for positions in TFA partner public charter and public school districts. These are generally low-income, high-need schools. Once hired, these novices are provided support from a Manager of Teacher Leadership Development (MTLD), a mentor who provides assistance and observational feedback during their two-year commitment. They are also provided with online resources to help them find teaching practices for their classrooms, and they attend group meetings to discuss effective teaching models and resources that could help them improve planning and instruction.

Controversy about TFA

As an alternative route for teacher certification, critics are concerned that the TFA corps is not well enough trained to meet the needs of students attending school in economically disadvantaged communities. TFA counters this by stating the program is as an immediate and effective strategy for combating teacher shortages by placing highly motivated young people to teach in hard to staff urban areas – where personnel often are newly credentialed teachers and substitutes or emergency hires.

Part of this ongoing debate stems from the difficulty in interpreting data about the effectiveness of TFA. Some studies claim TFA personnel outperform non-TFA teachers as measured by reading and math scores; other studies report opposite findings. Analyses suggest that experience and preparation of those in the samples probably account for differences (Heilig & Jez, 2010).**

*Clark, M. A., Isenberg, E., Liu, A. Y., Makowsky, L., & Zukiewicz, M. (2015). *Impacts of the Teach For America Investing in Innovation Scale-Up*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research. <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-publications-and-findings/publications/impacts-of-the-teach-for-america-investing-in-innovation-scaleup>

**Heilig, J.V. & Jez, S.J. (2010). *Teach For America: A Review of the Evidence*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/teach-for-america>

One Corps Members' Experiences

Rita, a second year TFA corps member, provides not only a perspective on one new teacher's experiences but a glimpse at the challenges many other novices may encounter. Interviewed in her second year of teaching, Rita's story reveals a myriad of problems.

Rita's first year of teaching was as a middle school mathematics teacher at a urban charter school in Connecticut. She describes the school and community environment as not very conducive to teaching and learning. And she indicates experiencing a lack of quality mentorship and teaching resources, an everyday battle to re-engage disconnected students, and feelings of discouragement, frustration, and inadequacy.

Reflecting on her training, she feels the month at a charter school was insufficient. On the job, she felt that the school administrators gave subpar professional development to incoming teachers. Knowing that she was inadequately prepared and was not receiving the necessary guidance at her school, Rita contemplated leaving the profession numerous times.

Others did leave. There was a high degree of turnover in administration and in staff. (This was exacerbated by the discovery that the charter school principal had engaged in fraudulent behavior, leaving the school with a million dollar debt.) She believes the instability, feeling unsafe at school, the daily emotional distress and anxiety, and the lack of union representation all were factors contributing to the tumultuous environment experienced by students and staff.

Rather than quit teaching, Rita decided to seek employment in a public school (despite Teach for America's policies against transfers). To her surprising, she found the pay was almost \$15 thousand greater and the workday shorter. But with that came further challenges.

Students were skeptical of me; they asked if I would come back every single day for at least a month. They saw me break down once because I was extremely frustrated with the rowdy classroom and lack of administrative support. Another teacher in the high school simply walked out of her math classroom and never returned. In the following months, the science teacher suffered a panic attack and went on leave for a month. Tenured teachers began using all of their sick days towards the latter part of the school year, particularly after winter and spring break, and long-term subs started flooding our school. It is disheartening for students to see what seems like a mass exodus of teachers, so they consider it abandonment.

Part of the teacher shortage problem had to do with the lack of school funding which had serious implications for both teachers and students.

The wealth disparity is high. Public schools are losing funding and hundreds of teachers are being laid off and that is why I have to teach three subjects. We are losing people they consider extra people, for example those that run detention and social workers. We have also lost money to buy supplies.... There is one social worker for the entire school. We have a school nurse that is only there from 10-3, so if a child gets hurt they must call the ambulance. We have one psychologist; he will only show up Tuesday and Thursday but doesn't interact with the kids, only to evaluate them.

Kids dream about going to Yale. I have a girl who says she wants to go to Yale but in the back of my mind I am thinking how she will go to Yale if we don't even have the teachers to teach her the math to graduate. They keep cutting teachers because of the budget.... In one of the richest states in the country! How can this be happening?!

Rita also describes the impoverished and hostile environment as a contributing factor to her student's problems.

Hartford is one of the lowest performing districts, which prompted the Hartford Promise. Its nickname is homicide Hartford. Last summer give or take 40 people were killed during the summer. A lot of students have either seen others shooting or holding a gun. The neighborhood that they live in is high in poverty and violence.... Some students cannot see the board because they need glasses. They are lucky if they have a pair of glasses and if they break, kids begin to tape their glasses because they cannot afford to buy new ones. A lot of kids have a parent in jail or dead, some are homeless or on the verge of being evicted. The students actually come here to get breakfast; they often come to school odorous and with foul breath, sleepy, and without proper attire.

These environmental conditions have taken a negative toll on her students' motivation to try at school. She mentions how her student, Marife, told her, "Why would I have these dreams when I work so hard and I don't get what I want?" This kind of mentality exacerbates her student's learning, emotional, and behavioral problems and without the necessary support to cope with these issues, they often take out their frustrations on the teachers. Teachers then must learn to handle and understand the socioeconomic struggles of their students, but it is not easy.

To hold our professional character, we don't tell students how we don't get paid for all the extra duties, we don't get backup if a student tries to assault us, and we are verbally abused by students who need emotional and psychological support, yet we lack school psychologists and counselors. In this year alone there were two teachers who suffered concussions trying to break up altercations between students, and a student expelled for bringing a gun, and three female students assaulting another afterschool who are now facing expulsion trials. I have 15-year-old students in 7th grade who should be receiving alternative education, who are volatile, and the school simply does not have the resources necessary to help them.

Overall Rita views her two years of teaching as one of the most challenging, frustrating, and disheartening experiences of her life. Yet despite the hardships, she feels the need to continue teaching.

It is extremely frustrating as a teacher, to see the education system fail students in every possible way. I guess I'm humble bragging when I note that my students excelled on the MAP NWEA math test, that some students surpassed the state goal, and I feel that I've set up my students for success in their future Algebra courses. Yes, I do get the frequent "Miss you're my favorite teacher" or the "I want to be like you" or simply "I love you". It breaks my heart knowing that I am the only positive maternal figure in some of their lives, and sometimes their only emotional support. I guess the best thing I've done is stay and be a constant person in the lives of my students. Getting to know how impressionable they are and how much I can influence them positively gives me hope for what's to come. I decided to continue teaching at the public school because I believe in my students' potential and at this point regardless of how energetic and silly they can be, I love them and care deeply for all of them.

Concluding Comments

Novices require effective training and induction to ease their transition from pre-service to in-service, and effective support systems are essential in addressing on-the-job challenges. Many of Rita's concerns and struggles reflect reports in the literature. By understanding and acknowledging the perceptions of novice teachers, the complexities of teaching can be better understood and better solutions to these problems can be pursued. (For more, see *Retaining New Teachers* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newteach.pdf> .)

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