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Teach For America Teachers' Blogs on Teaching

Samantha Nicole Holt
sholt8@utk.edu

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Samantha Nicole Holt entitled "Teach For America Teachers' Blogs on Teaching." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Michael L. Keene, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Russel Hirst, Kirsten Benson

Accepted for the Council:
Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Teach For America Teachers' Blogs on Teaching

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DEDICATION

For the very first teacher to enter my life, who gave me the tools to grow my imagination—my mom.

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ABSTRACT

In 1989, Princeton University senior Wendy Kopp conceived the idea of a national teacher corps that would place the brightest young people in the schools that were the most difficult to staff. This idea, which became Teach For America (TFA), took life in 1990, and has since become a powerful force in the public education reform movement. TFA consistently attracts college graduates from the nation's top universities, and with the funding it receives from private donors as well as the federal government, the organization recruits and trains these individuals who commit to teach in the country's highest-needs public schools. Critics of Teach For America, including the National Education Association (NEA) and scholar Linda Darling-Hammond—whose 1994 critique of TFA nearly destroyed the organization, argue that TFA poses a threat to the future of public education because it places the most inexperienced teachers in the country's most struggling schools. While politicians, CEOs, prominent educators, teachers unions, and celebrities engage in debates on whether TFA teachers have a positive or negative impact on students, the voices of Teach For America teachers themselves have been largely left out of this conversation. This study identifies their attitudes, concerns, and anxieties about teaching by analyzing the blogs of fifteen different TFA teachers on the Teach For Us blogging network. It found that Teach For America teachers felt unprepared for the work of teaching, the culture of the schools where they were placed, and the academic level of their students, yet maintained an optimistic attitude in spite of these feelings.

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"I've seen a rising generation of young people work and volunteer and turn out in record numbers…they have become a generation of activists possessed with that most American of ideas – that people who love their country can change it…they are why 35,000 young people applied for only 4,000 slots in Teach For America."
–President Obama, April 21, 2009

Education Reform and Teach For America

The status of public education in America is a highly contested and volatile issue especially during an economic recession, when voters' awareness of how their taxes are being spent is heightened. It is no secret that the academic performance of American students is not extraordinarily high when compared to that of students worldwide. In a February 16, 2012 appearance on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan stated, "We're sixteenth in the world today in college graduates. A generation ago we were first. It isn't that we've dropped. We've flat-lined and fifteen other countries have passed us by. We have to educate our way to a better economy." According to the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests fifteen-year-olds across the globe, a total of forty countries scored higher than the U.S. in mathematics literacy, while in science literacy, the U.S. fell behind thirty nations (United States iv). With the present state of the economy, the spotlight has fallen on education reform. In an effort to improve public education in the U.S., federal spending on education has, unsurprisingly, increased. According to *The Washington Post*, during the 2012 fiscal year, federal spending on education increased to $77 billion— an 11 percent increase from the previous year (Anderson).

Recruiting highly effective teachers has become a top priority, especially with

many Baby Boomer teachers nearing retirement. In September 2011, Secretary Duncan gave an address in which he explained, “In the next decade, 1.6 million teachers will retire, and 1.6 million new teachers will take their place. This reality presents a true challenge and an amazing opportunity” (Duncan). Yet, the current state of the economy makes investing in teacher recruitment more difficult than it might have been in the past. Public outcry against Washington spending is at an all-time high, which is evident in the number of grassroots movements that emerged between 2009 and 2012, including the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street Movements. Public education has gotten caught in the cross-fires because of its ties to so many contentious political issues, including federal spending, public employee salaries and benefits, and public sector union bargaining power, to name a few. In the midst of such a volatile political atmosphere with failing schools across the country, an organization with aims to provide all children in America with an excellent education, and with a gifted marketing/public relations team, has entered the spotlight.

This organization, Teach For America (TFA), is not new by any means and has been sending graduates from the nation’s top universities to teach in the lowest performing schools in the nation’s most impoverished communities since 1990. In an America that is struggling to recover from an economic recession, there simply aren’t enough resources to expend on the recruitment of gifted and passionate new teachers. In the realm of education, this task has inadvertently fallen upon Teach For America because of its stellar recruitment. Because so much attention has turned to how public education and the economy can be improved, Teach For America has become a hot topic

in conversations about education reform and government spending. Opinions about Teach For America range from gratitude and whole-hearted support to scathing criticism and vicious condemnations of the organization and its impact on educational reform, the infrastructure of individual school systems/districts, tenured teachers, and, most importantly, on the students themselves. Yet, every year thousands of graduates from America's top colleges and universities undergo a lengthy application process with hopes of being selected for the two-year commitment to teach in the nation's most struggling public schools.

A Brief History of Teach For America

"I don't think anyone in the country has done more over the past 15 to 20 years than Wendy Kopp to identify the talents and characteristics that lead to great teaching." Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, October 2011

Teach For America began as the undergraduate thesis project of Princeton senior Wendy Kopp in 1989. Modeled after the Peace Corps, Teach America, as it was originally named, was conceived as a service organization that would recruit the nation's top college graduates into a teaching corps in an effort to bring some of the passion, resourcefulness, and ingenuity of young people into the realm of education rather than into fields such as law and finance. Kopp proposed that if a teaching corps could build up the same air of prestige that the internships on Wall Street had, it would attract many of these hardworking ingénues to the field of education, believing that their talents could be used toward the goal of narrowing the achievement gap between poor students and their middle and upper class counterparts. In her 2001 memoir she writes,

I had a sudden idea: *Why didn't this country have a national teacher corps of top*

> *recent college graduates who would commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools?* A teacher corps would provide another option to the two-year corporate training programs and grad schools. It would speak to all of us college seniors who were searching for something meaningful to do with our lives. We would jump at the chance to be part of something that brought thousands of our peers together to address the inequities in pour country and to assume immediate and full responsibility for the education of a class of students. (Kopp 6)

Several months after proposing this idea to her thesis committee at Princeton, Kopp began putting the plan into action—securing loans and grants to initially fund the project and recruiting friends from Princeton for her staff by the summer of 1989. So, with $26,000, a donated New York office on Forty-Fourth and Madison, and a staff of four other new college grads, Kopp began defining the mission of Teach For America, which builds on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech, that also frames Kopp's 2001 memoir: "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education."

TFA's mission is pretty straightforward: to ensure that "one day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education" (Kopp vii). The varied and complex factors that contribute to educational inequity in the U.S. are not acknowledged in this mission statement, which could be attributed to the huge scale of Kopp's vision and her 'no room for failure' attitude. Twenty-one years after its initial conception, Teach For America attracted over 46,000 applicants, of which only 4,500 were accepted into the 2010 Corps (Winerip). With its emphasis on results and providing

the support to prove these results, Teach For America quantifies everything that is quantifiable. Each year's round of corps member applications is no exception. The TFA website states:

> Since 1990, nearly 33,000 leaders have joined Teach For America to help move us closer to that vision. As corps members and alumni, they have reached more than 3 million students across 43 urban and rural communities, founded dozens of high-performing schools, boldly led school districts and charter management organizations, and helped pass groundbreaking education legislation. In the 2011-12 school year, more than 9,000 corps members will teach 600,000 students while nearly 24,000 alumni will continue to deepen their impact as educational leaders and advocates. [. . .] In 2011, our organization was named one of *Fortune* magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work For. ("Our Organization")

In addition to bringing in tens of thousands of applications each year, TFA has also perfected the art of attracting candidates from the nation's top schools. TFA's website provides a breakdown of the 2011 applicant pool, boasting that 5 percent of the senior classes at 130 universities applied to TFA. Of the senior class at Spellman College, 27 percent applied to TFA, while Harvard contributed 18 percent of its senior class to the TFA applicant pool; according to these same 2011 TFA statistics, 16 percent of Duke seniors, 14 percent of Morehouse seniors, 9 percent of University of Virginia seniors, and 8 percent of University of Michigan at Ann Arbor seniors all applied to Teach For America, sending the message that TFA has become the institution Wendy Kopp originally envisioned: an elite teaching corps that recruits young people from America's

top universities to the field of teaching. All of these statistics contribute to an image of Teach For America as one of the most prestigious service organizations in the country—showing how far TFA has come in the twenty years since it was first launched.

Teach For America Teacher Training

Once accepted, corps members must pass several content area exams, conduct two observations of TFA teachers in a nearby region, and complete preliminary work that introduces them to concepts they will learn more about once they begin their student teaching several months later. After these tasks are completed, corps members attend a week-long orientation to their region known as "Induction." During induction, corps members attend interviews at their prospective schools, meet all of the TFA staff who will be providing support for them throughout their two-year commitment, and look for a place to live. After induction, corps members travel to "Institute," which is essentially teacher boot camp. As of 2012, there were a total of nine TFA institutes spread across the country—each serving three to six different TFA regions and lasting five weeks. Most corps members experience being a teacher for the first time at Institute, where they endure grueling daily schedules—with most work days lasting from 6:00 A.M. to around 10:00 P.M. During this time, corps members attend workshops that attempt to cram semesters of education classes into just five weeks, and do their student teaching collaboratively, with four corps members assigned to a class. After Institute ends, corps members have about two weeks to plan and prepare their classrooms for their very own students ("2012").

Teach For America corps members are trained using a framework known as

"Teaching as Leadership," which characterizes teaching as an extension of leadership strategies, which are thought to be more familiar to corps members—most of whom held leadership positions in college before joining Teach For America. TFA's website states,

> The key to success as a teacher is strong leadership. Through years of studying our corps members' performance and student progress, we have learned that our best teachers are successful because they use the strategies used by great leaders in all circumstances. This philosophy is the basis for the Teaching As Leadership framework, the foundation for how we train and support corps members. Corps members are introduced to this framework at institute, and learn to master these principles throughout their two years in the classroom.

The Teaching As Leadership framework is an interesting feature of TFA training, as it imparts a very different view about teaching to TFA corps members than what most traditional education students would be taught—boiling down what makes a good teacher to just six characteristics, which Steven Farr, the author of *Teaching As Leadership* (2010), found to be consistent traits among successful TFA teachers. These traits include: setting big goals, investing students and their families in these goals, planning purposefully, executing effectively, continually increasing effectiveness, and working relentlessly to see these goals through. This model seems to function as a kind of 'Cliff's Notes' go-to guide that TFA corps members can reference in the face of any problem that arises in the classroom. For, due to the short amount of time these corps members have to take in all the vital information that will help prepare them for managing their own classrooms, a condensed and versatile guide acts as a lifeline to these new teachers.

The relative brevity of pre-service training at Institute is an important issue and I will explore the role it plays in corps members' attitudes about teaching. The brief period of time devoted to pre-service teacher training draws the greatest criticism of Teach For America. While traditionally certified teachers usually undergo one to two s years of coursework and student teaching, TFA teachers have only five weeks to fit in as much coursework and usually a semester or more of student teaching experience as humanly possible, oftentimes putting in fifteen-hour days, five days a week ("2012 Institute Schedule"). Critics of TFA's training model have likened it to the notion of providing five weeks of training to clueless college grads, giving them scalpels, and then setting them loose on the ailing masses, as these fresh-faced idealists go off into the world with a desire to help others in the name of Heal For America. Diane Ravitch explains,

> In 2009, a surgeon proposed in *The Wall Street Journal* that medicine needed something similar to TFA, which he called 'Heal for America.' After a brief training period, the members of his HFA would be qualified to advise patients about diet, hygiene, and exercise; they would know how to take patients' pulse, temperature, and blood pressure; they would tell them the correct dosages of prescribed medicines. But, he warned, members of HFA should never be allowed to substitute for physicians, physicians' assistants, or registered nurses. TFA, however, does not share the doctor's understanding of the importance of deep training and experience. (Ravitch)

Critics of TFA's training model, like Ravitch, point out that due to TFA's five-week training model, the organization appears to subscribe to the belief that good teachers are

born, not made, which can foster unrealistic expectations in inexperienced corps members. David Wakelyn, a former TFA corps member himself, articulates:

> The TFA leadership doesn't believe that there's an expert body of knowledge that takes time to develop, thereby upholding the notion that great teachers are born, not made. Rather than being an ally with the forces who seek to improve teaching as a profession, it has been an antagonist. That's a shame. A real moment—to take a stab at improving the conditions of training—has been lost here. (qtd. in Ness 37)

The question over whether teachers are born or made was the subject of a popular *New York Times* article by Elizabeth Green, who explains,

> When [former teacher and principal] Doug Lemov conducted his own search for those magical ingredients [that make a teacher], he noticed something about most successful teachers that he hadn't expected to find: what looked like natural-born genius was often deliberate technique in disguise. 'Stand still when you're giving directions,' a teacher at a Boston school told him. In other words, don't do two things at once. Lemov tried it, and suddenly, he had to ask students to take out their homework only once. It was the tiniest decision, but what was teaching if not a series of bite-size moves just like that? (Green)

Because TFA's teacher training is compacted into just five weeks, there is little room for corps members to learn and develop skills such as those Green points out, which contributes to TFA's reputation as an organization that believes good teachers are born rather than made. This perceived sense of superiority that TFA corps members,

traditionally-licensed teachers, and education professionals take away from TFA's approach to teacher training is further clarified by Cameron McCarthy, one of the first to publish on TFA's teacher training, "In this idealistic arrogance, Teach For America seemed to want to hack the teacher training process down to the bare essentials, to show the fluff in traditional credential programs. At its inception, Teach For America presented itself to practitioners as arrogant" (Ness 35-6). This perception some educators hold of TFA teachers being arrogant has played a role in the education community's conclusion that TFA does not represent the interests of traditionally-certified teachers and, in fact, poses a threat to these teachers' jobs and to the schools where they work.

The Politicization of Teach For America

Because TFA has become an influential force in education reform, there is no shortage of critics of the organization, who range from celebrities to educational reform activists, to ordinary teachers. One notorious celebrity critic of TFA is Matt Damon, whose mother, Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Ed.D., wrote a letter to the President of the National Education Association (NEA), upon learning she and Damon had been nominated for the Friend of Education Award:

> *Recently, I read the opinion piece you wrote with Wendy Kopp in* USA Today *and was upset and confused by your collaboration with Teach for America. I am a life long teacher educator. I believe that one of the first things we must do to improve our nation's schools is to extend, strengthen, and support teacher preparation. I am very familiar with TFA and believe that its short-term, minimal training of teachers undermines teacher quality and harms children who too often get an*

inadequate education with its teachers. (qtd. in Phillips)

The extent of Carlsson-Paige's animosity toward TFA's approach to teacher preparation is so great that, in her view, for NEA's President even to be affiliated with Wendy Kopp represents a betrayal of teachers' and students' best interests.

Another very vocal opponent of TFA, who is a kind of celebrity within the education reform community, acting as Assistant Secretary of Education in the early 1990s, authoring nearly a dozen books, and holding a professorship in New York University's College of Education, is Diane Ravitch. Ravitch is one of the most vocal opponents of the amount of leverage Teach For America has gained in the realm of educational reform policy ("Diane Ravitch"). In a 2011 *Washington Post* article entitled, "The Problem with Teach For America," Ravitch argues that:

> Perhaps unintentionally, TFA's success has stifled any national discussion about how to build a profession of well-educated, well-prepared, experienced educators who view teaching as a career rather than an experience. The alums of TFA are now taking their places in Congress, state legislatures, Wall Street, and the other corridors of power in public and private sectors. Will they recognize the need for a genuine national solution, modeled on the progress made in other nations, or will they simply continue to expand TFA's belief in the virtue of a revolving door of bright young people? The future of the teaching profession hinges on the answer to that question.

Here, Ravitch emphasizes the danger that the country faces if TFA continues to have the same degree of political clout it has steadily gained in the twenty years since its

inception. She believes that TFA is so good at marketing itself and that so many people have bought into it as a solution to the problems with public education in America, that there is no room for a dialogue to explore alternatives besides TFA that could bolster student achievement and improve the educational opportunities for all children in the U.S., but don't follow TFA's recruiting or training methods.

While most teachers do not have the wide audience that Ravitch and Carlsson-Paige have, the blogosphere provides an avenue for their views on the influence of TFA on public education. One of these teacher-bloggers is James Boutin, who writes in his blog, "An Urban Teacher's Education,"

> I'd argue that the narrative being spun (by the media, organizations like TFA and KIPP [Knowledge is Power Program], and Hollywood) certainly serves a purpose, but it's not improving education. I'd also argue that it's destructive. If we, as a country, allow ourselves to buy into this delusion, we will continue to make ill-informed decisions about ways to improve quality education for all children.

Here, Boutin articulates just what this debate is about—if voters, politicians, and the Department of Education get swept up in this inspirational, yet largely fictional and oversimplified narrative, allowing an *ideal* of what great teaching looks like to influence *policy*, then they run the risk of potentially destroying the futures of those who are most affected by these policies—children.

Because participants in the dialogue on what should be done to improve the quality of public education are speaking on behalf of those who do not have a say in the matter—the children themselves—the nature of these exchanges is extremely emotional,

as teachers, politicians, reform activists, and parents weigh in on what measures should be taken to ensure that all children in America have access to an excellent education. With emotions running so high over this issue, the conversation on Teach For America has taken shape around the most extreme positions—with the most vehement supporters and critics of TFA making the most widely-heard arguments. Voices that could contribute valuable insight about what is or is not working in classrooms across the country are largely silenced because there is little room in media sound bytes for views that are more complex than fitting into either the 'pro' or 'con' side of the Teach For America debate. Teach For America teachers are pressured by the way this conversation is set up—as a debate with two opposing sides—to either laud the program or lambast it, leaving little room for more nuanced discussion about what would best serve children in public schools.

With so much attention being paid to either Teach For America's most vocal opponents including Diane Ravitch, or to its strongest advocates such as Wendy Kopp, I am interested in looking at what *Teach For America teachers* have to say about education reform. More attention should be paid to the perspectives of those who are 'teaching for America,' and one of the most accessible forums where TFA corps members voice their concerns and experiences is the Teach For Us blogging network. There is a marked absence of TFA teachers' *authentic* voices in this conversation, as too often, the corps member perspectives that are included in the media are limited to testimonials of transformational change in the classroom, which TFA uses for their promotional recruitment materials.

Teach For Us is an unmoderated blogging network where the blogs of hundreds of TFA teachers are organized by region, as well as by grade level and subject area. The site also includes a search bar that allows visitors to search for any key words or phrases much like a simple Google search. Teach For Us provides unique insight into the TFA experience from the inside, because it is made up of the *authentic* voices of TFA teachers, which I believe have largely been left out of conversations about Teach For America's role in educational reform. While Teach For Us is an affiliate of Teach For America, it became its own independent organization in 2008. The home page on the Teach For Us site explains its purpose:

> We connect Teach For America teachers and alumni with each other for support and provides a place for them to share their stories with the world. Each day we're providing a window into classrooms across the country as seen through the eyes of real teachers… written in their own words. [. . .] Teach For Us is the network connecting Teach For America corps members and alumni who share their stories about ensuring an excellent education for all children.

Teach For Us is not owned by Teach For America, but is recognized by the organization, which provides a link to Teach For Us on the TFA website. All Teach For Us bloggers are anonymous in that they are only identified by a screen name of their choosing. Obtaining a Teach For Us account requires that the author's blog be tied to their Teach For America email address to ensure that only current and former TFA corps members blog through this site. Yet, bloggers' email addresses are not made public, and only serve as a means of contact for the Teach For Us site to share notifications with the blogger.

Bloggers have as much anonymity as they want to have—depending on the specifics of the details they share in their Teach For Us "About Me" profile and in their posts.

Purpose of This Study

My personal interest in this topic stems from my own Teach For America application process. I first heard about Teach For America during my senior year of college but didn't apply until two years later in my second year of graduate school. Throughout the application process I read the blog posts of current Teach For America teachers on the TFA affiliate site Teach For Us, hoping to gain a sense of what the organization was looking for in potential corps members and a more accurate portrait of what life as a Teach For America teacher was really like. These blogs were a tremendous resource, especially after I was accepted as a 2012 Teach For America corps member in November 2011. The dozens of blogs I read encapsulated the same excitement, awe, and humility I felt after learning TFA had accepted me. In an effort to gauge what struggles I might encounter in the coming months as a TFA teacher, I followed the progression of the most frequent bloggers—witnessing how these corps members progressed as teachers throughout their Teach For America two-year journey.

These blogs have an appeal wider than just to those who are interested in TFA, because they document how young people reconcile their ideals with reality. Through Teach For Us, bloggers are given a forum to document their very quick growing up process, as they pass into worlds they have never before inhabited. Many of them grapple with problems they have been fortunate enough to never have had to experience on their own—poverty and all its many features: drug abuse, sexual violence, hunger,

homelessness, gang violence, and mental illness. Recognizing how easy it is to hold ideals about improving education and ending the cycle of poverty when coming from a life of relative affluence, I was curious how day-to-day experiences in and out of the classroom altered these corps members' ideals, if at all. Thus, I began this project in hopes of uncovering how these new teachers' expectations matched up with their lived experiences once they entered their own classrooms.

Before beginning this project, I had assumed that the vast majority of Teach For Us blog entries written before corps members began teaching would exude naïve optimism. I assumed that following the progression of these blogs would show corps members experiencing a rude awakening from their initial expectations of classroom triumphs à la *Freedom Writers* or *Dangerous Minds*, once they actually began teaching in the nation's most struggling primary and secondary schools. Of course, what I found when I started to look at a wider variety of blogs was much richer and more complex than my initial impression.

I am interested in the small fraction of the thousands of applicants who are accepted to teach in the poorest schools in the nearly 50 different TFA regions across America, and specifically, the few who chronicle their experiences via blogs. Teach For America's affiliate blogging network, Teach For Us, allows readers a window into the highs and lows of going into one of the most difficult fields imaginable with passion and determination substituting for extensive and exhaustive training. This thesis will focus on Teach For America teachers and their views, concerns, and emotions, rather than coming down on one side or the other of this highly politicized debate. Ultimately, the goal of

this project is to identify and analyze trends in the attitudes and concerns about teaching before and then during teaching service, voiced in the blog entries of fifteen Teach For America teachers, inserting these findings into a larger discussion about Teach For America's role in improving public education.

Research Questions

1. What motivates Teach For America corps members to join TFA?
2. What are Teach For America teachers' concerns about teaching before they enter the classroom?
3. Do Teach For America teachers' views on teaching and TFA change after they begin teaching, and if so, in what ways do they change?

Organization

In an effort to uncover what the Teach For America teachers themselves think, feel, and experience, I examine fifteen different blogs on the Teach For Us network. The particular blogs I draw from for this project come from five different regions: greater New Orleans, which was one of the five original TFA regions established in 1990; Baltimore, which was established in 1992; Metro Atlanta, which was established in 2000; Memphis, which was established in 2006; and Detroit, which was established in 2010 ("Our Organization History"). I follow the development of fifteen different blogs, starting from the very first posts and ending during the first year of teaching. In this project I will present my findings on the expectations, anxieties, and attitudes of Teach For America teachers before they begin teaching, and will then discuss whether their attitudes about the work of teaching, Teach For America, and themselves as teachers change once they

begin teaching in their own classrooms.

I will provide a review of the points of commentary on Teach For America in Chapter Two, exploring the perspectives that education scholar Linda Darling-Hammond, the National Education Association, and various independent studies provide on whether TFA is helping or hurting public schools. Chapter Three summarizes the organization of my research—explaining my research process and methods. The findings of this study are presented in two main parts—both within Chapter Four. The first part discusses the trends in Teach For Us bloggers' expectations and concerns of teaching before they begin enter the classroom. The second part discusses whether the overall views of Teach For Us bloggers on teaching change after they begin teaching, and if so, what these changes are. Lastly, Chapter Five contains my conclusions and sums up my study.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Controversy has never been a stranger to Teach For America, which has garnered criticism from education scholars since its early days. In 1994, educator Linda Darling-Hammond published "Who Will Speak for the Children," a critique arguing that Teach For America teachers pose a threat to the academic success of their students. Darling-Hammond has been one of the key figures in education reform in the past several decades. According to her faculty profile on Stanford University's School of Education website, where she is a professor,

> From 1994-2001, she served as executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future . . . whose 1996 report, "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future," led to sweeping policy changes affecting teaching and teacher education. In 2006, this report was named one of the most influential affecting U.S. education and Darling-Hammond was named one of the nation's ten most influential people affecting educational policy over the last decade. ("Linda Darling-Hammond")

Darling-Hammond's 1994 article previewed what the teaching community's official stance on Teach For America would be for the next two decades, as nearly twenty years later, the largest teachers' union in America, the National Education Association, still voices the same complaints that appear in Darling-Hammond's 1994 article. Ever since then, educators have been trying to determine how effective Teach For America teachers are compared to "traditional" teachers, conducting numerous quantitative studies on student achievement in both TFA and non-TFA classrooms. This chapter will explore a

small sample of this literature—first looking at the issues Darling-Hammond brings up in the original article that sparked so much controversy, then discussing the results of three different quantitative studies on TFA teacher effectiveness, and finally providing a summary of the main sources grounded in qualitative methods that explore the development of Teach For America teachers throughout their TFA experience.

There is a considerable amount of literature on Teach For America as an organization, yet publications on TFA teachers themselves is limited. In comparison to the sheer volume of scholarship on Teach For America as a force in American public education, there are relatively few works that focus exclusively on the experiences of the Teach For America teachers themselves. Of these sparse publications about corps members as separate entities from the organization to which they belong, are Molly Ness's *Lessons to Learn: Voices from the Front Lines of Teach For America* (2004), Donna Foote's *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach For America* (2008), and Barbara Torre Veltri's *Learning on Other People's Kids: Becoming a Teach For America Teacher* (2010), which provide this very underrepresented and seldom investigated perspective of the Teach For America teacher.

"Who Will Speak For The Children?"

Probably the most vocal opponent of Teach For America and the teachers it places in the country's most desperate schools is Linda Darling-Hammond, whose 1994 *Phi Delta Kappan* article, "Who Will Speak for the Children? How Teach for America Hurts Urban Schools and Students," lists her grievances with Teach For America. Darling-Hammond's primary qualms with the organization stem from its privileged

position in relation to the communities it serves and the ineffectiveness and apparent self-righteousness of its corps members, for she explains, “In the ‘best case’ scenario, TFAers believe that they will surpass the accomplishments of those obviously incompetent teachers already in the classroom. In the worst case, they see their efforts as ‘better than nothing,’ which is what the alternative is viewed as being” (Darling-Hammond 24). Darling-Hammond focuses her critiques on those TFA teachers coming from privileged communities and believes that these TFA teachers are ultimately harmful to the communities where they teach because of their lack of investment in these communities. Darling-Hammond also accuses Teach For America of losing sight of what is best for the children in the schools where TFA teachers are placed. She explains, “The absence of [TFA’s] concern for the children is coupled with an apparent disdain for the effort it takes to become knowledgeable about how to teach children well. Perhaps this disdain is reinforced by the unequal social status of TFA recruits and their students” (23). Darling-Hammond suggests that TFA teachers are self-serving in their desire to teach in areas of poverty, arguing:

> Who in fact is TFA for? A frankly missionary program, TFA has recruiters and advocates who have focused much of their attention on the advantaged college graduates for whom TFA serves as something useful to do on their way to their ‘real jobs’ in law, medicine, or business, rather than on the young people who will be the students of those advantaged college graduates in urban and rural class rooms. The TFAers are told that they are ‘the best and the brightest,’ that they will save the cities and their poor students with their youthful idealism. Because

> of their innate superiority, they don't need—or can't be bothered with—extensive preparation for teaching. (Darling-Hammond 23)

She emphasizes the sometimes destructive after-effects of TFA teachers on the schools where they taught, stating, “In many places, parents, other teachers, and district administrators are angry about the chaos TFA recruits have left behind when they couldn't handle the job” (22). These accusations against TFA and the college graduates who sign on with the organization had staying power, persisting long after this article was published in 1994. Darling-Hammond’s article ended up having an enormous impact on how TFA would be received by those in the education community for years to come, which is evident by the vast number of articles lambasting TFA that cite “Who Will Speak for the Children.” However, TFA supporters did not remain silent at this time, despite the number of publications criticizing TFA.

One such defender of TFA is Sara Mosle, a former New York City Teach For America corps member, who went on to write for *The New York Times* explains, “I taught for three years in New York as a charter member of Teach for America and had my own run-ins with the union. . . This fall, my daughter will be attending public school, and I’ll be teaching at a private, reform-minded urban academy in New Jersey.” (“Steve Brill’s”) Mosle responds to Darling-Hammond’s critique of Teach For America, questioning the article’s validity and credibility. She writes,

> What's galling about Hammond’s arguments to someone like me—I entered teaching through Teach for America and have taught for three years in public schools in Upper Manhattan—is their utter remove from the realities of the

> classroom. Hammond insists that the program has been a colossal failure. Her evidence, such as it is, is almost entirely from secondary sources, which she has culled for examples that support her thesis. She offers no indication of ever having visited a TFAer's classroom. (Mosle 14)

Mosle objects to Darling-Hammond's critique of TFA because she believes Darling-Hammond is distanced from any real Teach For America teachers. Mosle is critical of Darling-Hammond's reliance on secondary sources because this suggests that Darling-Hammond did not investigate TFA teachers herself. She suggests that if Darling-Hammond had actually visited the classrooms of TFA teachers, her opinion of TFA might differ. While Darling-Hammond does not cite any personal visits to TFA teachers' classrooms when explaining her critical stance on TFA, she does cite discussions with Wendy Kopp, which suggests that "Who Will Speak for the Children" is more of an attack on TFA as an organization than on the TFA teachers themselves. In fact, at the end of the article, Darling-Hammond states, "It is clear from the evidence that TFA is bad policy and bad education. It is bad for the recruits because they are ill-prepared. They are denied the knowledge and skills they need, and many who might have become good teachers are instead discouraged from staying in the profession" (33). To be fair to Darling-Hammond, in this excerpt she does express sympathy for TFA teachers, framing them as victims of the institutional problems with Teach For America. Thus, while Mosle makes a legitimate point that Darling-Hammond might have talked about TFA teachers differently had she visited TFA classrooms, ultimately the target of this article is the Teach For America organization, not so much the teachers themselves.

Wendy Kopp's reaction to Darling-Hammond's article was similar to that of Mosle, which is unsurprising given that Kopp is the primary target of this article. In her 2001 memoir, Kopp recalls, "I began to dissect Darling-Hammond's argument and to draft a response for circulation among our supporters. In doing so, I grew all the more amazed that Darling-Hammond's article could pass the research standards of the *Phi Delta Kappan*" (98). Kopp explains that Darling-Hammond cites information found in a Newsday article that had been written only a week after TFA had first placed its first teachers in the classroom in September 1990 (Kopp 98). Kopp further explains that the article Darling-Hammond cites "had quoted [the TFA teachers'] principal, Katherine Soloman: 'I'm so pleased with these little ones, with their enthusiasm, their commitment. . . . They want to do so much that it shows all over them. I have to get them out of the school at the end of the day—they won't leave'" (Kopp 98). Another example Kopp gives of false information in Darling-Hammond's 1994 article is attributing quotations inaccurately. Kopp writes,

> At another point, Darling-Hammond quoted the deputy chancellor of the New York City school system, Beverly Hall, recalling that 'the candidates were so poorly prepared that a number had to be let go—but not before they had undermined the education of the children they were assigned to teach.' How could this be? Dr. Hall had been a strong supporter of Teach For America. When we called to ask if she had made this statement, she told me that she had not. (She later became the superintendant of the Newark Unified School District and then of the Atlanta Public Schools, and in both positions she brought Teach For America

into her district.) (98-99)

Kopp mentions in her memoir that she sought advice from TFA supporters in the education community as to how she should respond to Darling-Hammond, and was advised to "lie low" (99). Ultimately, she wrote a letter to the editor of the *Phi Delta Kappan* explaining the inaccuracies in Darling-Hammond's piece, to which Darling-Hammond replied back to in the same issue of the journal. Kopp states that she did not meet with Darling-Hammond at this time because she was afraid it would only "provide more fodder for her diatribes" (Kopp 100). This back and forth between Darling-Hammond and her supporters within the education community, including NEA, and Kopp and her supporters like Sara Mosle, has continued ever since "Who Will Speak for the Children" was published in 1994.

This critique by Linda Darling-Hammond was one of the first scholarly publications attacking TFA, and it nearly destroyed the organization. Because Darling-Hammond is such a highly-regarded within the education community, and because her critique of TFA appeared in such a prominent journal, TFA's investors began calling Kopp, questioning how sound of an investment they were making. Donna Foote explains in *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach For America*, "The assault hurt Kopp personally and Teach For America publicly. Funding, always an issue, became even more precarious. Some supporters got the jitters" (33). Not only did Darling-Hammond bring the flaws of TFA to the attention of her fellow teacher educators, but her article also captured the attention of TFA's investors, who were taking a gamble on the organization in the first place, given that TFA was built on lofty goals and was so young.

In a chapter of her memoir *One Day all Children* entitled "The Dark Years," Wendy Kopp recalls the bleak future TFA faced at this time, due to the article's influence on investors, who threatened to abandon the organization after reading Darling-Hammond's article. Kopp writes, "I had assumed that the article was so over the top that no one would take it seriously. I was wrong. Funders called for reassurances and answers to questions that Darling-Hammond had raised. For years afterward, every article about us in the national media would quote Linda Darling-Hammond" (100). The article's influence on how scholars would come to view TFA was enormous. A simple Google Scholar search indicates ninety-nine sources that cite this article, ranging in date from shortly after Darling-Hammond published it to as recently as 2012. This one article colored how TFA would come to be viewed by the scholarly community.

Echoes of Darling-Hammond's charges against TFA are still resounding so many years later—indicating that criticisms of the organization have persisted since the early 1990s. Like Darling-Hammond, the National Education Association (NEA) also criticizes the training that TFA provides its corps members and its poor teacher retention rates. NEA, the largest teacher union in the U.S., officially denounced Teach For America for these very reasons, claiming on its website that, "Teach for America does not include a sufficiently rigorous teacher preparation program, nor does it yield retention rates that warrant a federal investment in the program" ("NEA Positions"). Yet, Sara Mosle challenges these claims that Teach For America teachers receive little training and leave teaching after their two-year commitment is up by pointing out that this is a systemic problem plaguing public education in general—not just TFA. In her 1994 response to

Darling-Hammond she writes,

> 70 percent of TFA's charter members completed their two-year commitment, and 60 percent went on to teach a third year. The rates have only gotten better. Among the 1992 corps, 84 percent completed their two years. Yet, according to the United Federation of Teachers, nearly 20 percent of all teachers citywide quit after their *first* year. . .What's more, many of the credentials accepted by the city [of New York, presumably] are far more dubious than those offered by TFA. The city doesn't care where you get your education credits—as long as you receive the requisite number. Consequently, many teachers take correspondence courses or equivalency exams to get their credentials. (14)

Yet, regardless of whether Teach For America supporters like Mosle ever sway NEA on the issues of TFA's teacher training and retention rates compared to those of non-TFA teachers, the teacher union makes it clear that it will not support TFA unless one thing can be guaranteed—that new TFA teachers will never take the jobs of veteran teachers.

This is the biggest issue NEA has with TFA, and the union primarily takes issue with the political clout that TFA has earned over the years, fearing for the future of teacher bargaining power, especially in the anti-union climate that has developed in many states such as Wisconsin and Ohio in the past several years. NEA believes that because Teach For America has captured the attention of politicians who influence education policy, the organization poses a real threat to the traditionally trained teachers who are employed in public schools across the country. Much of the union-generated literature on Teach For America accuses TFA teachers—whom NEA points out come in with no

training in education—of stealing the jobs of credentialed teachers because of contracts many school districts have with TFA. NEA's website explains: "NEA will publicly oppose Teach for America (TFA) contracts when they are used in Districts where there is no teacher shortage or when Districts use TFA agreements to reduce teacher costs, silence union voices, or as a vehicle to bust unions" ("New Business Items"). Based on the statements from NEA, until TFA officials can convince NEA that the jobs of its union members and other traditionally certified teachers are not in jeopardy of being taken by less experienced Teach For America corps members, NEA will likely never back TFA. This means that TFA teachers are liable to be on the receiving end of hostility from those within the education community, potentially creating an added source of stress as they make the transition into a new career and strive to be effective teachers. Support from colleagues is a vital resource for new teachers, and if faculty members perceive TFA teachers as potential threats, this source of support would not be available to these new teachers.

Teach For America's response to these accusations of stealing jobs from teachers and "busting" teacher unions hearkens back to Mosle and Kopp's defenses of TFA back in 1994, stating that the information critics use to condemn TFA is not accurate. Stephen Sawchuk, a writer for *Education Week*, explains that while TFA did not extensively respond to NEA's charges publically, it did send a lengthy email to current and former corps members in July 2011, responding to NEA's statement. Sawchuk sums it up as stating that Teach For America teachers: "do not displace other teachers but rather compete for vacant positions." As these passages demonstrate, the conversation

surrounding Teach For America has become such a back-and-forth 'he said, she said' kind of debate that deciphering the truth about TFA's impact on public education is extremely confusing and difficult. Thus, researchers have conducted various studies on the academic growth or achievement of students of TFA teachers versus that of non-TFA teachers.

Studies on TFA Teacher Effectiveness

Wendy Kopp and Sara Mosle's claims that critics like Darling-Hammond and NEA condemn TFA on the basis of inaccurate data demonstrate the need for objective facts on how effective Teach For America teachers really are. The question over whether TFA corps members ultimately do more harm than good remains unanswered, as this back-and-forth exchange between teacher educators and TFA supporters has been going on for over twenty years at this point, making it difficult for those outside of politics and the academy to know who to believe and which information is really reliable.

In general, making definitive conclusions about teacher effectiveness and quantifying how children learn is nearly impossible. The root of real learning is not something that is able to be isolated to a single teacher, and because the process of learning is so much more complex than standardized tests allow for, gauging teacher effectiveness based on student achievement is never fully reliable. Yet, measuring the effectiveness of Teach For America teachers is even more difficult because this issue is so hotly contested and highly divisive. Thus, identifying results that are reliable becomes confusing due to the complex nature of determining teacher effectiveness in the first place. Making generalizations about the findings on TFA teachers' effectiveness is

difficult because the primary studies on this issue make contradictory conclusions about how effective TFA teachers are in comparison to non-TFA teachers.

One of the most frequently cited studies on TFA teacher effectiveness is that of Decker, Mayer, and Glazerman (2004), which evaluated the academic progress of students in TFA teachers' classrooms in Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Delta during the 2002-2003 school year compared to that of students of non-TFA teachers from the same schools and grade level (Decker et al. xii). The final sample "included 17 schools, 100 classrooms, and nearly 2,000 students" (Decker et al. xii). Overall, the findings from this study were positive. The students of TFA teachers scored slightly higher in math than the students of non-TFA teachers, rising from the 14th percentile in math at the beginning of the school year to the 17th percentile at the end of the school year, compared to non-TFA students, who began and finished the school year in the 15th percentile (Decker et al. xiv). TFA latched on to these findings, "trumpet[ing] the Mathematica study results on its website and in national press releases" (Foote 200). Journalist Donna Foote explains that "TFA fans and foes alike lauded the study's design, widely regarded as the gold standard in research" (200). In reading, however, the students of TFA teachers earned the same scores as students of non-TFA teachers. The report states, "TFA teachers did not have an impact on average reading achievement. Students in TFA and control classrooms experienced the same growth rate in reading achievement—an increase equivalent to one percentile" (Decker et al. xv). As this excerpt reveals, Decker et al. found that overall, while the differences in TFA teachers and non-TFA teachers may not be vast, the results are favorable for TFA.

However, one notable difference between TFA teachers and non-TFA teachers that the study discusses is the differences in their racial and ethnic backgrounds. According to the study, 67.4 percent of the TFA teacher participants identified as white, while only 10.6 percent of non-TFA teacher participants identified as white. The percentage of TFA and non-TFA teachers who identified as African American was almost completely inverted, with 15.9 percent of TFA teachers and 76.1 percent of non-TFA teachers identifying as African American (Decker et al. 12). Since the organization's founding, TFA teachers have been under fire because so many of them come from relatively privileged backgrounds, often hailing from Ivy League universities. In fact, this study states that 70 percent of TFA CMs earned a Bachelor's degree from a 'most highly competitive or very competitive' college, compared with 2.4 percent of non-TFA teachers, a fact that might very well contribute to problems in the classroom (Decker et al. 17). Decker et al. suggest that this difference in the two groups of teachers' backgrounds reflect the structure of Teach For America, noting:

> Our sample of TFA teachers is broadly representative of TFA corps members nationwide. For example, 69 percent of our sample and 76 percent of the 2000–2002 TFA corps were female. Our sample was 67 percent white, 16 percent black and 6 percent Hispanic, while the national TFA corps was 64 percent white, 18 percent black, and 6 percent Hispanic. Seventy percent of our TFA corps members, versus 80 percent nationally in the 2000 2002 cohorts, graduated from colleges that were 'most competitive,' 'highly competitive,' or 'very competitive.' (16)

These racial differences between the TFA teachers and non-TFA teachers reveal a potentially significant difference in the two groups of teachers' abilities to relate to their students. This relates to my study in that it suggests that some corps members may not be prepared for the grave situations many of their students likely face as the result of severe poverty.

While the Decker et al. study is one of the most frequently cited studies on TFA teacher effectiveness, there have been numerous other studies conducted with this same focus, such as that conducted by Raymond et al. This study found that while TFA teachers have a more positive impact on student achievement than non-TFA teachers, this difference is slight. This longitudinal study tracked the differences in the achievement of TFA students versus those of non-TFA students from 1996-2000 in Houston also concluded that TFA teachers had a positive impact on their students, but noted that this difference was statistically insignificant. This study found that:

> On average, the impact of having a TFA teacher was always positive. The size of the effect varied depending on which grades, subjects and peer groups were used for the analysis. The results look strongest in mathematics where strong comparative results were obtained in both elementary and middle school. Results in reading were also positive, but the magnitudes of impact were smaller. The differences between the average TFA teacher and the average non-TFA teacher, while always positive, are generally not statistically significant. […] While recognizing the inevitable variations among teachers, whether TFA or non-TFA, TFA teachers as a group show less variation in quality than teachers entering from

different routes. (Raymond et al xxii)

While the conclusions of the Raymond et al. study were similar to those of the Decker et al. study, in that both found TFA teachers to be more effective than non-TFA teachers, the weight each study gives to these findings differs. Raymond et al. conclude that this difference was not statistically significant, while Decker et al. do not qualify their positive findings.

There have been a number of other studies conducted on how effective TFA teachers are compared to non-TFA teachers, yet there is not a consistent finding among these studies. Some, like the 2004 study conducted by Decker et al., found that the students of TFA teachers tended to score higher in math than the students of non-TFA teachers. Yet, other studies found the opposite. For example, the results of a study led by Linda Darling-Hammond Stanford University, "Does Teacher Preparation Matter?" differed from those of the Decker et al. study. To further complicate the task of determining which set of findings are reliable and which should be discounted, Linda Darling-Hammond came out with a study on the effectiveness of TFA teachers in 2004. Unlike Decker et al. and Raymond et al., Darling-Hammond's findings revealed the negative impact TFA teachers had on their students' academic achievement. The ultimate conclusion of Darling-Hammond's study was that "Teach For America Teachers' effectiveness appears strongly related to the preparation they have received for teaching;" the findings hold that, "certified teachers consistently produce significantly stronger student achievement gains than do uncertified teachers. Alternatively certified teachers are also generally less effective than certified teachers" (Darling-Hammond et al. 1). The

contradictory findings among these several studies only add fuel to the debate over whether TFA is ultimately a positive or negative force in the realm of public education, as there is no definitive proof that TFA teachers as a whole are more or less effective than traditionally-certified teachers. The dissidence among these various findings further supports the notion that the voices of Teach For America teachers themselves must be given entry into the discussion on what improvements need to be made in education reform.

TFA Teachers in Their Own Words

Because there is no one consistent finding among studies on the effectiveness of Teach For America teachers, turning to works that provide a more narrative approach to researching the motives of TFA teachers for joining, how well they are trained, and how long they anticipate staying in the field of teaching, offers a useful perspective. There have been a number of books published about Teach For America, but few of them focus exclusively on the experiences and attitudes of TFA teachers specifically. Through my own research I could only find three such works that present the experiences and thoughts of TFA teachers in both a wide-ranging and narrative way. These works include: *Lessons to Learn: Voices from the Front Lines of Teach For America* (2004), *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach For America* (2008), and *Learning on Other People's Kids: Becoming a Teach For America Teacher* (2010), which all document the attitudes and experiences of TFA teachers during their two-year teaching commitments. These three works are the most exhaustive accounts of the experiences of TFA teachers (as of the time this thesis was completed), but each provides a markedly different perspective.

Relentless Pursuit, which follows five corps members during their first year of service, emphasizes the resilience and perseverance of TFA teachers—detailing how they overcome teaching in a community with a long history of violence. *Learning on Other People's Kids* is much less uplifting and showcases the problems with TFA—drawing from the negative experiences former TFA teachers share with her. Finally, *Lessons to Learn* is written by a former TFA teacher, and provides the most comprehensive analysis of all the full Teach For America experience—from acceptance through the end of the two-year commitment.

Relentless Pursuit, written by journalist Donna Foote, closely follows the lives of five TFA corps members who teach at Locke High School in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. The book provides an in-depth account of how each of these five corps members handles being thrown into one of the toughest school districts in the country. The four stories that Foote intertwines all emphasize the hardships of taking on the challenge of Teach For America—from the violence and physical danger in which the young TFA teachers often found themselves, to the seemingly impossible goal of achieving 80 percent student mastery in their very first year of teaching. Foote's conclusion is that in order for TFA teachers to help their students overcome the extreme deprivation of resources in their communities, they must maintain a dogged, relentless pursuit of a specific goal—which in this instance was 80 percent student mastery of the material.

The TFA teachers Foote describes were completely unprepared for the dangerous environment in which they would be teaching. Foote writes,

> But a white, middle-class college graduate's idea of 'safe' didn't necessarily correspond to a Locke ninth-grader's understanding of the word. Over the summer, when a fellow corps member gave her students the safe classroom speech, the kids laughed. 'Look behind you, Miss,' commanded one student. 'How can you say this is a safe place?' the teacher turned around. There was a bullet hole in the window. Later in the summer, [corps members] learned—only after the threat had passed—how potentially dangerous teaching at Locke could be. One morning, a student had come to school with a sawed-off shotgun hidden in a guitar case. Another student informed the front office, and a mad scramble was on to locate the gunman (gunchild?) before he could do any damage. (66)

The TFA corps members Foote describes came primarily from a suburban, middle class background and, unlike many of their students, had never come in contact with street violence. Her research reveals that Teach For America teachers have the added challenge of not only having to become acclimated to teaching, but to an entirely different cultural environment, as well.

Another compilation of corps member voices is that which Barbara Torre Veltri, a teacher educator and professor at Northern Arizona University, provides: *Learning on Other People's Kids*: Becoming a Teach For America Teacher (2010). Veltri primarily concentrates on the problems TFA poses, and how the organization negatively affects corps members. She takes a different approach than that of Donna Foote, since she interviewed different TFA teachers over a span of ten years, whereas Foote followed only five corps members for one year. In the preface of *Learning on Other People's Kids*,

Veltri writes, “This work is a collection of temporal narratives and voices, including my own. I have a perspective, as does each person quoted herein. The scenarios, encounters, and realities that I witnessed firsthand are presented in a rich narrative account at the onset of each chapter” (xiv-xv). While Veltri does provide a variety of viewpoints on TFA’s impact on public education, she tends to include more negative opinions of TFA than positive. Yet, she is not necessarily critical or accusing of the TFA teachers themselves, but is more critical of the way TFA recruits, trains, and supports TFA teachers throughout their two-year commitment.

Veltri provides the voices of corps members who are very much fed up with Teach For America, but not necessarily with teaching. Many of the TFA teachers she includes in this book explain that Teach For America often acts as an obstacle to their goal of being the best teachers they can be. One such corps member explains:

> ‘I just don’t agree with some of the TFA ways. Personally, I’m not in it for Teach For America! I’m in it for myself and for my students. So that’s what frustrates me. I’m not here for you. So, you helped me get [to] this place. I’m going to do what I have to do, to make sure you’re not down my back about stupid things. I’m not here to do this for you [TFA]! And, to be quite honest, I feel that’s a lot of people’s opinions.’ (74)

While Veltri does have a critical stance on TFA as an organization, her critique is supported with the accounts provided by the current and former TFA teachers whom she interviewed throughout a ten-year period (79). She may be critical of TFA, but her loyalties appear to lie with teachers—be they “traditional” or Teach For America recruits.

Veltri characterizes TFA teachers as being used as pawns for TFA's larger goals, stating, "Corps members, surrounded by their smiling, predominately brown-faced students, look good in photographs. The images and success statements heighten TFA's reputation, expansion efforts, and financial goals" (Veltri 184). Regardless of Veltri's political stance on Teach For America, she provides an in-depth exploration of TFA teachers' accounts of their experiences in Teach For America.

The final compilation of corps member concerns and experiences that I encountered in my research is Molly Ness's *Lessons to Learn: Voices from the Frontlines of Teach For America* (2004). Molly Ness, herself a 1999 corps member placed in Oakland, California, "conducted 154 interviews with Teach For America corps members. . . from all regions, years, and placements," as well as with "staff, and alumni, as well as people from outside the corps—education professors, researchers, reporters, parents, students, principals, and superintendents" (xiv). Like Veltri, the breadth of Ness's study is wider than that of Foote, as she interviewed hundreds of current and former corps members.

With so much controversy within the education community over the incompetence of TFA teachers and the harm they pose to students, there is a surprisingly small body of literature explaining what drives corps members to sign up to teach in the country's neediest schools in the first place. Determining why corps members join TFA is important in determining their initial views on and expectations of the field of teaching—findings that could potentially improve public education reform efforts, in terms of attracting the best-suited young people to the teaching field. Ness asked corps members

what their main reasons for joining TFA were, and she found four main reasons why soon-to-be college grads seem to be compelled to join TFA: a strong belief in bringing about social justice in America, a desire to provide educational opportunity to students who are ordinarily not given any, an easier pathway into teaching than entering into an education graduate program on their own, and a strong sense of idealism—to which the TFA mission appeals. Ness explains that an interest in social justice motivates many corps members to sign on with TFA:

> Though Teach For America corps members are not volunteers, there is a strong link to public service efforts in the minds of corps members. The altruistic corps member sees Teach For America as a means to being about social justice. Take, for instance, Caitlin Wittig (1997, Rio Grande Valley), who viewed Teach For America as 'a political way to be proactive about social justice.' (21)

In addition to this desire to be proactive in the effort to make America a more socially just society, Ness found that many corps members had either extremely positive or extremely negative experiences in their own schooling and either wanted to recreate the classrooms that inspired them as young students, or to provide disadvantaged students, whose backgrounds mirrored their own, a more positive and supportive learning environment. Ness cites 2002 Baltimore corps member Mike Garcia as an example of this type of corps member, stating,

> Just as his teachers made him excited for school, Mike tried to do the same for his students. "These kids look up to us as teachers. Every time I tell a student 'Good

> job' or 'Keep it up,' they get the message that they are smart, that they can succeed. Too often encouraging words, constant praise and rewards are taken for granted. (24)

Along with wanting to give back to the world of education, many TFA corps members join because they want an easier foray into the world of teaching, so that they have real experience in the classroom before they make the kind of commitment that a traditional licensure program requires. Ness writes, "In a day and age where teaching requires jumping over obstacles of confusing and credentialing programs and expensive coursework, Teach For America smoothes the pathway into the classroom" (26). Ness cites Sarah Fang, a 1996 Phoenix corps member, as an example of this type of corps member. In Ness's book, Fang states, "TFA was a non-committal way into the profession. It gave me the chance to try teaching and to decide where to go from there" (26). Finally, Ness describes the corps member who joins TFA because of his or her passion for its mission, explaining that,

> Much of Teach For America's appeal comes in its being a widespread movement, effecting change in classrooms nationwide, as revealed by Wendy Eberhart (2000, North Carolina): 'Coming out of Brown University, I knew I wanted to teach. I was drawn to Teach For America because I liked the idea of being a part of this broader movement that went beyond the walls of my individual classroom.' (Ness 27)

Through these excerpts from Ness's interviews with corps members, the reader gains a general idea of the main reasons TFA teachers claim they are drawn to the organization

in the first place.

Barbara Torre Veltri's categories for why corps members stated they joined TFA are similar to Ness's, differing only slightly in terms of the emphasis on looking to TFA as a solution to post-graduation career concerns. She explains that corps members joined TFA for four main reasons: "a quick entrée into teaching (21), "pragmatic considerations (financial and personal)" (22), "altruistic motivation" (26), and "lifelong educational aspirations" (28). In terms of pragmatic considerations, Veltri found that corps members often joined because they Veltri found that of the corps members who joined TFA out of altruistic motivations, two groups emerged: TFA teachers who came from "working-class or even underclass socioeconomic backgrounds and felt compelled to provide services to children whose backgrounds in some ways mirrored their own" (27). "The other group," she states, "consisted of applicants from middle-upper class families who viewed Teach For America like the Peace Corps—as domestic community service" (27). Veltri states, "Fewer than 10% of TFA participants [in her study] ever considered teaching as a career" (28). The wide variety of reasons why the corps members whom Ness interviewed joined Teach For America demonstrates that making sweeping generalities about corps members' motives denies the complexity and variety within such a large group of individuals. While members of the education community denounce TFA teachers as resume-builders only passing through, the only way to truly determine what is working and what needs improvement in education reform is to go to the very source, as Ness and Veltri do, and which I attempt to do in my study.

What I am hoping to contribute that is absent from the existing accounts of TFA corps members' experiences and concerns is a perspective that has largely been unexplored—Teach For America teachers writing to and for one another. I am not conducting interviews with TFA teachers like Foote, Veltri, and Ness, and the TFA teachers from my sample do not share their thoughts bearing my project in mind. While Molly Ness is a former TFA teacher interviewing other current and former TFA teachers, the participants in her project presumably knew she would be compiling their responses into a book—possibly, whether on a conscious or subconscious level, affecting their level of candidness as well as the tone and language they use to describe their experiences in Teach For America. Thus, I hope to capture a perspective that Ness, Veltri, and Foote do not provide, analyzing a forum in which TFA corps members are speaking to one another, imagining and often directly addressing an audience of fellow Teach For America teachers, as well as friends and family members. Although TFA teacher-bloggers are aware that their blogs are public, they seem to write largely with a readership of family members, friends, and fellow TFA teachers in mind—providing an angle that has not been as explored as often as gaining insight into corps member experience through conducting interviews.

While researchers such as Decker, Mayer, and Glazerman; Darling-Hammond, Holzman, Gatlin, and Heilig; and Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque have conducted studies on TFA teachers, many of their findings contradict one another. Decker et al. found that TFA teachers were as effective as "traditional" teachers, oftentimes even slightly more effective than non-TFA teachers in terms of their students' math scores (xiv). Similarly,

Raymond et al. found that the TFA teachers were consistent in producing positive student gains, yet these gains were not statistically significant (xxii). Darling-Hammond et al., on the other hand, found that the students of "traditional" teachers consistently experienced more "achievement gains" than those of TFA teachers who had not received their teaching certification (1). In addition to these studies, those active in the education community such as Linda Darling-Hammond and NEA have voiced criticism of Teach For America's brief teacher training and poor teacher retention rates. While, founder and CEO of TFA, Wendy Kopp, and TFA corps member-turned-journalist Sara Mosle suggest that if these critics of TFA visited the classrooms of TFA teachers, their perspectives on the organization would likely become more positive. All of these voices in the conversation on Teach For America either criticize or defend TFA at a more organizational level. Discussions of Teach For America teachers themselves, rather than Teach For America as an organization, are much more difficult to find. Donna Foote, Barbara Torre Veltri, and Molly Ness provide a much more neglected perspective on what Teach For America is doing that is working and what it needs to improve on—that of current and former Teach For America teachers themselves. These first-hand accounts of what "teaching for America" really looks like provide glimpses into the TFA experience from a first-time teacher's perspective. Unlike Foote, Veltri, and Ness, however, my findings do not come from interviews with TFA teachers, but instead come from their writing. I seek to add to the literature providing first-hand accounts of TFA teachers' experiences by exploring corps members' blog entries from their acceptance into TFA until they have gained classroom experience.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Throughout my own application process and acceptance to Teach For America, I frequently referenced the blogs written by current corps members to get an idea of what life as a Teach For America teacher was really like. In these blogs I saw glimpses into the debate over whether TFA is more helpful or harmful to public schools—a conversation I had not been aware of prior to reading blogs on the Teach For Us site. The more I investigated the controversies swirling around this organization, the more I began to realize that outside voices dominated this conversation, meaning that those with the most first-hand knowledge of what goes on inside a TFA corps member-led classroom—TFA corps members—were largely being left out of the conversation. Many powerful and influential figures like Wendy Kopp were speaking for them, and it seemed important for the conversation to make room for Teach For America teachers to share their insights and experiences if Teach For America were to remain such a powerful force in educational reform. As mentioned in the review of relevant literature, there is a notable dearth of literature that presents the concerns of corps members currently in the classroom. This project sought to compile a small sample of corps members' feelings and attitudes before they begin teaching—identifying recurring trends among blog entries on Teach For Us, and answering whether or not these attitudes changed after corps members had gained teaching experience. This chapter explains why I chose to analyze Teach For Us blogs specifically, how I conducted the research, why I chose the particular fifteen blogs that I examined for this project, and how I went about analyzing the blogs.

Research Design

In order to answer my research questions, I needed to compile and analyze corps members' accounts of their TFA experiences prior to and during teaching. I chose to analyze corps member blog entries on Teach For Us, as TFA teacher writing had not been really been explored, with the bulk of literature on TFA teachers is largely comprised of interviews with corps members. The blogs on Teach For Us were especially useful to answering my research questions because this site acts as a built-in network, where TFA corps members read one another's posts. Only TFA corps members can comment on blog posts, as well, and bloggers write with this audience in mind. Corps member bloggers gear their blogs mainly toward an audience of fellow corps members, which many bloggers talk about. As one blogger explains, "This blog, twitter, and the internet in general have given me a chance to link up to hundreds of other teachers who are feeling the same way I am, or have some important resources and advice to share" (Bethany). Teach For Us acts as a community in which Teach For America corps members can virtually gather and discuss issues important to them with relative anonymity. As of January 2012, I counted a total of 1,270 blogs on the Teach For Us site. Given the number of corps member blogs on Teac For Us, this site is a one-stop shop for accessing over one thousands different TFA corps members' views about Teach For America and teaching in general.

Another feature of Teach For Us that was conducive to my project was its user-friendliness. Blog entries are organized by region as well as by subject and grade level, allowing readers easy access to blogs that discuss similar experiences. Teach For Us also

provides a search bar, allowing users to search for keywords, which was a useful tool when conducting my research, as it allowed me to identify trends without having to sift through hundreds of entries. The site also archives each blogger's entries in a fairly accessible way. When selecting a particular blogger, users can view entries from the most recent to the oldest by scrolling down and clicking on the 'Previous' button. On the sidebar, users can also view the teacher blogger's basic information including placement region and grade/subject level, and can view more detailed information by clicking on the 'About Me' tab, which allows bloggers to provide a brief statement about themselves or their blog.

Population

I chose bloggers who represented an even distribution of grade levels, regions, and cohorts. (Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 provide the breakdowns of blogger grade level, region, and cohort distributions.) I chose bloggers from Teach For America placement regions that were similar to each other. I did not want the bloggers I would be analyzing to come from extremely isolated rural locations, such as Appalachia or the Mississippi Delta, as well as extremely urban cities such as New York or Washington D.C, simply because of the limited scope of this project. I felt it was important to choose bloggers who teach in settings that were somewhat similar to each other so that I could isolate several trends in the attitudes of these first-year Teach For America teachers. Thus, the bloggers in my sample come from five different mid-sized cities: Baltimore, Detroit, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Memphis. By looking at bloggers teaching in relatively similar settings I was trying to assemble a sample whose school cultures might be similar

to a certain extent. As, again, a teacher placed in a school in rural Mississippi would likely encounter different problems than a teacher in a more urban school in Memphis; even though geographically they are not that distant, the culture of the schools would likely be different due to the urban/rural discrepancy.

In terms of the size of my sample, I wanted to strike a balance between being thorough and limited in my scope. I wanted to be able to get a sense of the personality of each blogger, but still look at a variety of different points of view. Therefore, I decided to examine fifteen blogs because it was a manageable size for the scope of the project, while still allowing for a variety of experiences among bloggers. Once I chose the five TFA regions I would limit my search to, I used the Teach For Us site's regional search tool, looking through all the blog entries posted between 2008 and 2011 from each of my five chosen cities. I selected the specific blogs I would analyze based on posting frequency. Thus, the bloggers in this study represent three different cohorts: the 2009, 2010, and 2011 TFA Corps.

In an effort to protect bloggers' privacy to a certain extent, I assigned each blogger a pseudonym, as even though these blogs are technically published in that they are accessible on the internet, I wanted to maintain blogger anonymity since I did not receive explicit permission from these bloggers to use their words in this thesis. I assigned randomly selected names to bloggers, disregarding gender, meaning that some male bloggers were given female names and vice versa. Each of the fifteen bloggers I chose to follow began blogging the spring before they started their Teach For America journey and continued throughout their student teaching that summer at Institute until

they had taught for at least a few weeks the following fall. This allowed me to witness whether or not any changes occurred between learning of their acceptance to TFA and beginning the work of teaching at a low performing school.

Figure 1

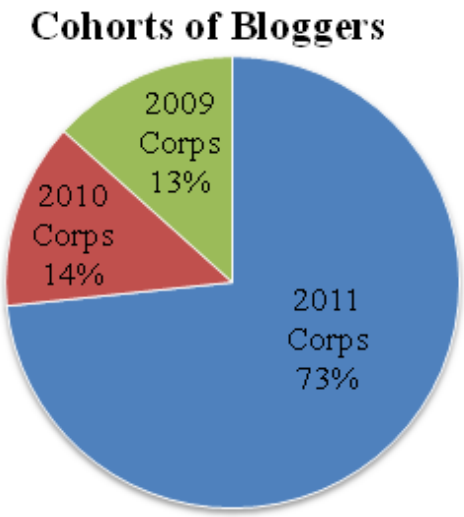


Figure 2

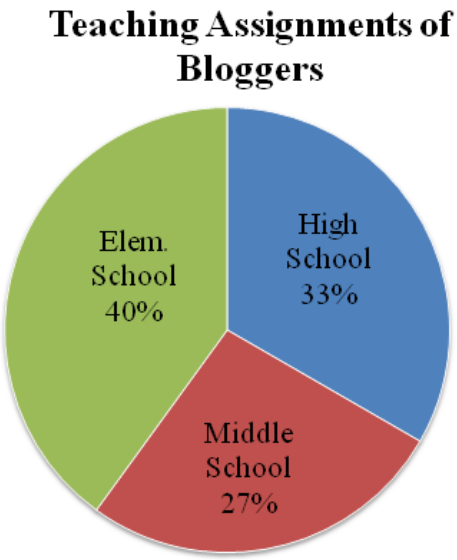
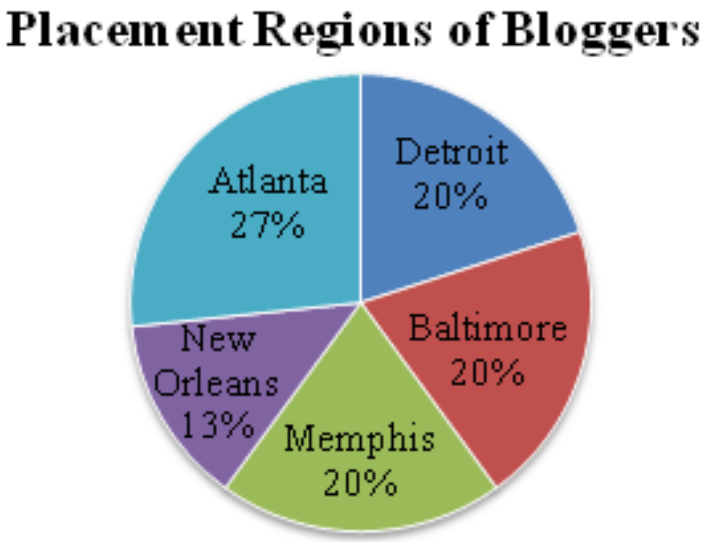


Figure 3



Procedures

After narrowing my sample, I began sifting through the posts of the fifteen bloggers. I grouped the posts by cities—looking at all of the posts from one city before moving on to the next—which helped me keep track of all the blogs. This strategy allowed me to identify any common trends or differences among the blogs on a much more isolated scale—comparing and contrasting the blogs from each region before I looked at the trends in the sample as a whole. I separated my analysis into two parts—pre-service expectations and teaching realities—reading blog posts chronologically. I conducted my analysis in two stages, and identified trends in all of the pre-service blog posts before examining blog entries corps members posted after gaining some teaching experience.

My method of analysis consisted of looking at each blogger's posts chronologically, looking for discussions of excitement, anxiety, or stress corps members had about teaching. I took this approach for both the: "Pre-Service Expectations" and "Teaching Realities" sections of my research. I highlighted any text in which corps members discussed their feelings about teaching, either before or after the school year had begun, copying the text so that I could place it into a separate document. I compiled this research into a Microsoft Word document, lifting text directly from the Teach For Us blogs and pasting it into the document. Initially, I organized the lifted text by blogger screen name and blog title—providing notes to myself of the blogger's placement region and assigned grade level. After compiling all the blog post excerpts into one document, I coded the text thematically, using the highlight tool in Microsoft Word and assigning a

different color to each theme I identified. When compiling my findings for Chapter Four of this thesis, I gave each blogger a code name, using the letter of their placement region and assigning numbers, i.e. the bloggers placed in Memphis were identified by the code names M1, M2, M3, etc. This allowed me to keep track of the blog entries while shaping my two findings sections. Once I had the basic structure of my findings chapter, I randomly assigned pseudonyms to corps members so they could not be identified by region.

Limitations

Due to the fact that I am a 2012 Teach For America corps member, I am not completely objective on this subject; however, in my data analysis practices, I was careful to make sure my findings stemmed purely from the teacher blogs themselves and not my own preconceived notions. I was familiar with Teach For Us before beginning my research, reading blogs from the site in order to help me make my decision to accept TFA's offer. There were some blogs I had formed biases against in this preliminary research into what corps members had to say about the Teach For America experience. Thus, in order to remain as objective as possible when conducting research for this project, I excluded all the blogs I had read previously. The blogs I chose to analyze for this study were entirely unfamiliar to me and were chosen based on my unfamiliarity with them, so that any bias I had formed toward the TFA teachers whose blogs I had read as a "corps member" and not a "researcher" would not enter into this study.

However, obviously, because I will be a Teach For America teacher myself, there are some biases I bring to this study that cannot be avoided. It is likely that I lean in favor

of TFA teachers, possibly empathizing with them more strongly than someone completely removed from Teach For America. Further, because of my position as a TFA teacher, it is likely that I am sensitive to the critiques of Teach For America. While I strived to remain as objective as possible when conducting this study and reviewing the literature related to my study, my connection to the TFA organization does present some limitations to my objectivity. Another potential limitation that stems from my being a TFA corps member doing research on Teach For America is that there is a degree of pressure to suppress any findings that reflect negatively on Teach For America. Yet, the aim of my study is to provide an analysis of what corps members say about TFA, not necessarily what I personally think.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The Teach For Us blogging network is a space for TFA corps members to document their experiences in the classroom, building a virtual sense of camaraderie with those in their same position. Before they even enter the classroom, Teach For Us is a place for many newly accepted corps members to share their excitement about the experiences to come. The fifteen corps members whose blogs I examined for this project came from five different mid-ranged cities: Baltimore, Detroit, Memphis, New Orleans, and Atlanta. They came from different Teach For America cohorts, with two 2009 corps members, two 2010 corps members, and eleven 2011 corps members. They also represent a range of different grade levels and subject areas, with 33 percent assigned to teach high school, 27 percent assigned to middle school, and 40 percent assigned to elementary school.

In the Part One of this chapter, "TFA Teachers' Pre-Service Expectations and Concerns," I explore the perspectives TFA teachers have on teaching before stepping foot into the classroom. I first look at the reasons corps members give for joining Teach For America, and then move on to the sources of their excitement and fears about teaching. In Part Two of my findings, "Teaching Realities Faced by Corps Members," I present TFA teachers' reflections on what the effects of poverty on student achievement looks like in their classrooms. I then discuss the specific problems corps members encounter once they begin teaching, discussing TFA teachers' blog posts about administrative issues such as overpopulated classrooms and teachers' upheaval from the grade levels in which they are originally placed. The most universal problem corps members discuss in their post-

teaching blog entries is trying to maintain good classroom management practices. Corps members frequently cite problems with classroom management, which range in severity from kindergarten temper tantrums to violent brawls and arson. Finally, I examine how corps members say they handle problems they encounter and whether they are able to maintain optimism after they have taught for several months.

Part One: TFA Teachers' Pre-Service Expectations and Concerns

Reasons for Joining TFA

Passion for TFA's Mission

"I feel as though I've been training for this moment all of my life . . . Our children . . . deserve every opportunity they can get and we need to make sure that they are given the tools and the resources necessary to nurture their own potential and realize what they can do in this world." –Tia

Some of the most idealistic and optimistic blog entries in my sample were, perhaps unsurprisingly, written right after many of the bloggers were notified of their acceptance. In these entries, many discuss what teaching and education mean to them and what they hope to accomplish in their time with TFA. Very often these corps members are reflective in these early entries: they look back on their high school and college experiences, writing about what has led them to this point in their lives, and why they wanted to join Teach For America in the first place. These blog entries, written prior to teaching, most often discuss why corps members were drawn to TFA in the first place.

Several themes emerge from these entries posted before corps members had received any TFA training or teaching experience. The teachers discuss what drew them to TFA at first and why they ultimately chose to join. Most of the bloggers view Teach

For America as a way to enact their ideals about creating a more socially just public education system in the United States. For example, Serena explains the importance of putting ideals into action when it comes to education reform:

> It is not enough to *hope* the achievement gap will close. We as a nation have to take action, in the classroom and in the legislatures. It is not enough to *hope* my kids will understand my instructions. I have to be mind-numbingly explicit. It is not enough to *hope* my kids will improve. I have to push them. It is not enough to *hope* I will improve as a teacher. [. . .] I have to continually increase effectiveness. (Serena)

This kind of unyielding dedication to bringing about real change in the public education system in America is echoed by several other bloggers. Dan emphasizes that he envisions himself working toward TFA's mission for the rest of his life:

> The achievement gap statistics for Detroit are simply amazing. Just looking at the numbers, it's easy to see the important roles race and/or socio-economic status play in the level of education a student will attain. I knew coming in this would be difficult, but I already feel truly tied to this mission – a life-long mission – of working towards education equality for all. (Dan)

While bloggers Serena and Dan are both idealistic, they also demonstrate practicality in that they acknowledge the difficulties they will face in striving toward such a lofty goal.

The majority of bloggers seem well aware of stereotypes that depict TFA teachers as naively idealistic kids, and are very cautious about how they discuss their enthusiasm about teaching for TFA. This majority of corps members came across as cautiously

optimistic as if they are afraid to envision a positive experience for fear that it might jinx them. For example, after her first few weeks of student teaching, before the start of the school year, Bethany talks about how much her students like her and how well her mentor teacher says she is doing. Immediately following this, however, she jokes, "Of course I jinxed myself as soon as I typed the above paragraph. Watch, one of my normally well behaved girls is going to try and shank me down during a reading diagnostic test." While this reads as sarcasm, given that her students are seven, which she reveals in a prior post, the somber and defeated tone of this blog entry as a whole indicates that she really *is* hesitant to be positive about her abilities as a teacher for fear that this optimism will soon come crashing down. Colleen also demonstrates this cautious hopefulness, by stating that, "All the blogs and articles I read by people who had dropped out of TFA are what scared me the most. I really don't want to fail." Frequent blogger, Amy, devoted one of her earliest posts entirely to addressing her fears about the criticisms TFA has been charged with—one of which being that so many corps members are spoiled, ignorant, head-in-the-clouds twenty-somethings who have no idea what they are entering into when they join Teach For America, and end up quitting before the end of their two-year commitment. She counters these attacks of TFA stating, "No matter what I read on the internet, I am still devoted, already, to the cause, and I'm not going to change my mind, and I certainly don't see myself 'quitting.' She goes on to state in this same post that she wishes that "joining TFA wasn't so commonly linked to 'martyrdom.'" This excerpt reveals Amy's informed optimism, as she is aware of the charges against TFA, but is still hopeful that she can effect positive change through the

organization. Before stepping into a classroom Amy even goes so far as to voice her concerns over the possibility of being traumatized from her TFA experience, demonstrating a degree of realism that almost shifts to pessimism. She writes,

> While I can appreciate the necessity for self-sacrifice, I am hoping to learn a lot about myself and challenge myself in a way that benefits me, too. Does that sound selfish? Is that a bad attitude? Maybe. While my commitment to the kids is already the force behind my decision to apply for and accept a position at TFA, it'll be nice if I don't come out of the program personally ruined at the same time. (Amy)

These blog posts by Amy, Bethany, Dan, and Serena demonstrate that TFA teachers enter into their two-year commitments with the goal of enacting TFA's mission, but are not blind in their optimism. While most of the TFA teachers appear to be well-informed and not too quick to make definitive statements about all they will accomplish as teachers, the levels of realism and idealism varied from blog to blog.

Desire to Teach

Interestingly enough, the desire to teach is not a frequently cited motivation for joining TFA. In fact, only one of the fifteen bloggers, Colleen, explicitly mentions having a strong desire to do the work of teaching as the primary reason for joining Teach For America. Most bloggers discuss a more general desire to "make a difference" and "close the achievement gap." Colleen is the only corps member who expresses a passion for "teaching," as opposed to other commonly used phrases such as: "making a difference" and "closing the achievement gap." In her first entry after discovering her acceptance into

Teach For America, Colleen writes:

> I'm irrationally excited – I've always wanted to be a high school teacher and now it's actually happening. I think there is something so special about the high school years…something that always stays with you. I now have a football team to cheer for, fine arts to support, and a larger community to be a part of – I can't wait! [. . .] I have had very few jobs in my life that I have loved and I've always worked [. . .] waitressing, grounds keeping, store clerk, nurse's aid, and the list goes on. However, teaching at summer camp for inner city kids for little pay, early hours, all summer was the best job I have ever had. So while TFA may be a 'holding pen' in a sense for me [since I don't know if teaching will be my life's work], I am not doing it to help for another application. (Colleen)

In this excerpt, it seems Colleen views TFA as a vehicle that will allow her to fulfill her ambition to teach. Her primary motive for wanting to join TFA, judging solely from her blog, is to become a high school teacher. Out of my sample, however, joining TFA out of a long-held desire to be a teacher is not the norm. Colleen is the only out of fifteen bloggers who lists a passion for teaching as the reason for accepting TFA's offer, indicating that her viewpoint is the exception rather than the rule among those teachers whose posts I examined.

Passion for Subject Area

A less frequently cited reason corps members give for joining TFA is the desire to share their love of a particular subject with students. Several bloggers mention their desire to get students excited about their major field of study as one of the main factors

that led them to TFA. Two out of the fifteen bloggers mention passion for their college major as a leading factor to their joining TFA. Carmen, of Detroit, explains that her passion for science is what led her to Teach For America; she mentions her desire to improve her skills as a teacher, but only as a footnote to her overarching love of science. Carmen explains:

> I want to share my passion of science with my students. I want them to be confident that they can do well in what is considered a very difficult subject. I want my female students to feel comfortable in a field that is often considered male-dominated, or where males are considered to be naturally better. I want to best use my talents. When I look over my past internships and volunteering, the parts that I have most enjoyed of each have a teaching component. [. . .] I believe Teach For America will provide me with the best opportunity to grow in my teaching abilities and become an effective teacher in the fall. (Carmen)

Another TFA corps member who expresses a similar sentiment—of deciding to join TFA out of a desire to excite others about her field—is Renee. Renee expresses her frustration at being assigned to teach French rather than English—which was her first choice—in her April 1, 2011 entry:

> I've accepted the fact that I won't be teaching English like I had envisioned. Since high school, I've had the desire to bring things like Shakespeare, haikus, and writing composition to my classroom. [. . .] I felt both surprised and disappointed when I was assigned to teach French. [. . .] I wanted to be a *Freedom*

> *Writers*/*Dangerous Minds*/*Dead Poet's Society* type of English teacher. I know I shouldn't kvetch about this. Getting into TFA is a really big deal, and I can (and plan to) change students' lives no matter what I teach. [. . .] But deep down, I still want to instill a love of prose to my class. (Renee)

Although these two bloggers obviously have a desire to teach, their earliest blog posts discuss their love of science, in Carmen's case, and English, in Renee's case, as the primary catalyst for their joining Teach For America.

Pre-Teaching Excitement

"Someone please tell me how just 4 months ago I was the student & now I'm the teacher." –Dan

Establishing the reasons why corps members join Teach For America is useful in understanding how these new college graduates view the work of teaching before stepping into the classroom, as it provides context for how they conceptualize the work of teaching. What are the most common pre-service concerns and fears among these TFA bloggers? Is their general attitude about teaching one of excitement or anxiety? How do the reasons corps members joined Teach For America inform their ideas about teaching? Most of the early blog posts from my sample express a mixture of excitement and fear when it comes to teaching. Bloggers such as Julie voice excitement about being able to create change in the world by impacting the lives of their students every day. Julie's excitement about teaching, documented the day before the first day of school, demonstrates the same belief in TFA's mission that leads many corps members to join TFA in the first place, as previously discussed. She explains:

> On the eve of my first day of teaching, I can't believe how prepared and ready I

> am to change lives! I'm excited to meet all my new students, get to know them and their parents, and help them set goals that really push them to the highest level of rigor. I don't know how I got from feeling so overwhelmed in June when induction started to feeling so confident and positive today, but I can only hope that the lessons I've learned about ownership, relentlessness, and asset-based thinking will carry me through the tough times that are sure to surface this year. (Julie)

Serena, mentioned earlier in this chapter as a corps member who joined TFA out of a desire to work for social justice, displays this same excitement tied to TFA's mission:

> First off, for those who haven't heard me shouting from the rooftops [. . .] I AM SO EXCITED TO TEACH KINDERGARTENERS. You can tell because I just typed like half a sentence in all caps. [. . .] I am excited about Kinder[garten] for one major reason: I get to set the precedent for their whole educational experience. I get to set the bar for what they should expect from school, from a teacher, and most importantly, from themselves. None of my kids will come to me with a history of failure, of negative school experiences, a terrible behavior record, or low self-efficacy. It is my task and my privilege to make sure none of them leave with any of those things either. (Serena)

Bloggers who expressed excitement just before beginning their two-year teaching stints explain that, like Serena and Julie, they look forward to enacting their belief in Teach For America's mission through their work in the classroom.

Anxieties about Teaching

"I must do my best to close the achievement gap, and right now, I'm not sure if I can do that. I have put my confidence in TFA as an organization to turn me from a college student into an effective teacher, and I hope that for my students, TFA will stick to its end of the deal." –Lamar

Bloggers often express excitement about beginning their Teach For America experience prior to starting teaching. Yet, corps members also use their blogs to discuss their fear and anxiety about teaching for the first time. Corps members express anxiety over whether students will like and respect them as teachers, fears about classroom management, and express a generalized anxiety about the immense responsibility they have in educating twenty-five to thirty children (and even more for high school teachers). Even Nina, who actually had classroom experience prior to accepting TFA's offer expresses trepidations about beginning her TFA commitment and of potentially failing her students,

> I can't imagine how I'd feel if I were going into TFA straight out of college, or had never stepped foot in a classroom. I already feel like I'm going to heave and I'm not necessarily a stranger to teaching. It'll still be my first time to teach in my own classroom. It'll be my first time to have a limited number of students on a roster, versus teaching 7 different classes a day to different faces in different places. I am thankful for the experiences that I've had teaching Life Skills and other curricula but I'm still scared to death… because it's all so overwhelming.

Here Nina points out that for recent college graduates who have little job experience, let alone teaching experience, being thrown into a classroom in the lowest performing schools in the country would be absolutely terrifying.

The youth and inexperience of so many incoming corps members, compounded with the immense sense of responsibility that stems from seeing themselves as members of a movement seem to contribute the most to anxieties TFA teachers voice in their blogs. From its inception, Wendy Kopp envisioned Teach For America as a massive, large-scale movement, originally estimating a starting budget of 2.5 million dollars and a corps of five hundred teachers at its *launch* (Kopp 10). Kopp's approach of setting high expectations and not accepting anything that falls short of these expectations is integral to the philosophy of Teach For America. Single-mindedly tackling the achievement gap by doing whatever it takes to raise student test scores is the TFA approach, and TFA teachers are expected to enact this approach—taking full responsibility if students do not succeed, and not making any excuses for their students, regardless of the circumstances they may face.

Teach For America teachers view themselves as members of a collective group—a movement—and they feel pressure not to fail their students perhaps even more acutely than if they felt their jobs were confined to their own individual classrooms. Because these new teachers view themselves as members of Teach For America first and foremost, they perhaps feel even more pressure to succeed than traditionally certified teachers. The immense sense of responsibility on the shoulders of new TFA teachers is a major contributor to the anxieties so many of them voice in their blog posts on Teach For Us. The bloggers within my sample mention how they view themselves as part of a greater movement. One corps member explains, "The chance that this city could be a proof point for this whole movement is at the same time exhilarating and overwhelming.

I feel like some days I am carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders and other days that I couldn't carry even the best group of students across the finish line" (Summer). Another corps member, Bethany, reflects upon her experience at Atlanta's Institute, asserting how she views her role as a soon-to-be teacher as being part of a larger movement: "As I leave Atlanta I definitely feel a part of a movement that has the potential to change the education landscape" (Bethany). This overwhelming sense of responsibility plays a major role in the anxieties corps members such as Julie and Anne express. Julie discusses her anxiety over the responsibility of being a Teach For America teacher stating, "When they unlocked my classroom's door, and I stepped inside, I felt the warm rush of excitement leave my body, and it was replaced with a cold, paralyzing tingle: fear. My classroom was filled with dusty odds and ends because it was a storage room the year before, and it contained thirty desks. My mind reeled to think of those desks filled with wriggling bodies" (Julie). The thought of thirty wriggling bodies containing thirty little brains that she alone is responsible for shaping for the duration of the school year is panic-inducing for Julie. This acute sense of responsibility heightened by TFA's emphasis on corps members contributing to a movement much larger than their individual classrooms is further explained by another corps member:

> . . . I refuse to let my insecurities get in the way. This is so much bigger than me. It may sound naive, but I know that I will be successful in the classroom. I have faith that TFA's training process will get me ready. And if not, I have veteran teachers I can contact that would be happy to give me advice. The bottom line: It's not about me. It's about the 20 little humans that I will be responsible for on a

daily basis. (Anne)

Anne sums up the viewpoint of many of the bloggers on Teach For Us, which is that the job of teaching is about doing everything within one's power to make sure students are able to reach their potential, and is more of a lifestyle than a mere profession, since the hours do not define when the work is done. This notion of living the life of a teacher, as opposed to living one's own life and being a teacher on the side, coincides with thinking of teaching in terms of furthering the goals of a larger movement. While many corps members are "insecure" (Anne) or filled with "fear" (Julie) about beginning the work of teaching, their views of themselves as members of a "movement" weighs heavily on them. These corps members' views of themselves as members of a 'movement' heightens their awareness of the responsibility they carry—acting both as a source of comfort and a source of anxiety, since the stakes are so high, in that many corps members may feel that not only are their students counting on them to teach well, but the entire Teach For America organization is counting on them as well.

Concerns about Classroom Management

In addition to voicing fears that might be more specific to teachers within Teach For America, many of the bloggers expressed fears that are likely more common among new teachers—concerns about classroom management. Such concerns were a frequent topic of discussion in blog entries. For example, Colleen voices fears about successfully being able to maintain control in the classroom:

> All the blogs and articles I read by people who had dropped out of TFA are what scared me the most. I really don't want to fail. What if I can't discipline my kids?

> What if I can't handle having no social life and working 80 hour weeks? Yes, people who quit wrote they just couldn't handle 80-120 hour weeks… I'd like to point out that a week has 168 hours in it and I like to sleep and watch my occasional T.V. show. (Colleen)

This post touches on several concerns many straight-out-of-college corps members have about being a TFA teacher: worries over not having a semblance of a life outside of teaching, and fears of not being able to harness control over one's students. The latter is a recurring theme among Teach For Us blog posts, perhaps because these bloggers are so young and have not assumed positions of authority before. Dan voices his eagerness to dive into theories of classroom management a mere *two months* before he would begin teaching his own class:

> What will my kids think of me? Will I be able to fill the entire time period I'm given to teach my lesson? Will I teach it effectively? Ugh, I guess I have a lot to do! We also started working on classroom management today…this is one subject I'm very excited for. I think that working on my classroom management skills will be essential to my success as a teacher next year in Detroit!

While Dan expresses enthusiasm rather than anxiety over being able to manage his classroom, his post reveals a lot about the pressures on TFA corps members. The fact that he does not begin learning classroom management skills until two months before he would be teaching on his own demonstrates just how stressful being a TFA teacher is, due to the time constraints and fast-paced nature of pre-service training.

Another aspect of TFA teachers' anxieties about classroom management is the

fear of being disliked or disrespected by students. Renee, a Detroit corps member, expresses her desire to be well-liked by all her students:

> Although it's inevitable, I don't want any of my students to feel about my classroom the way I felt toward many of mine growing up. I want to be 'nice' and I want my classroom to be 'fun.' I don't have any illusions; I know there will be times when the students don't feel like coming to my class, or feel like I'm being too hard on them, or whatever. I'm not trying to be the Mary Poppins of Detroit. I'm just saying that it would be nice if I could be. (Renee)

She goes on to voice her fears over being seen as boring and not authoritative by her students: "I'm scared out of my wits! What if I'm boring? (my biggest fear) What if I can't manage my classroom well? [. . .] What if my colleagues or principal despise me?" (Renee). While corps members like Renee voice concerns about not being liked by students or being boring, Amy expresses fear over her ability to garner respect from her students just based on her physical appearance:

> I graduated high school a year early, and so am even younger than I might be otherwise. And I'm entering into TFA right after having graduated college this spring. Basically, one of my main worries about potentially having older students is that they would somehow know that I was only a couple (if that) years older than most of them. I'm going to be 21 when I start teaching. [. . .] Maybe that doesn't matter, but it might wound my own sense of my legitimacy as their authority figure. It's not that I think my age really matters all that much, but, as a woman, and someone new to the teaching game, I don't want yet another thing

making me feel somehow inadequate. (Amy)

Amy is the only blogger who gives voice to this specific anxiety of being seen as young and therefore not authoritative, despite the fact that the majority of the bloggers are coming directly out of college and are twenty-two years old when they begin teaching.

Summary of TFA Teachers' Pre-Service Expectations and Concerns

Corps members express feelings that range from excitement to anxiety in their blogs before they begin teaching. These pre-service entries are reflective, and often discuss why TFA teachers joined Teach For America and what they hope to accomplish as TFA teachers. The reasons for joining vary from a strong belief in TFA's mission, a desire to teach, and a passion for a given subject or field. Some corps members view themselves as part of a larger movement, rather than as isolated individuals, which seems to feed into anxieties they have about their ability to carry out the mission of Teach For America, due to the added level of responsibility and pressure they feel as members of a movement. The greatest concern bloggers have prior to teaching is managing their classrooms. Corps members feel unsure of whether they will be able to command authority in the classroom and whether students will abide by their policies.

Part Two: Teaching Realities Faced by Corps Members

The Achievement Gap—Up Close and Personal

"It breaks my heart every day how behind my students are." –Marcus

How do corps members talk about teaching after they have been in the classroom for several months? Are they still optimistic? Do their attitudes about Teach For America's mission or about the work of teaching significantly change? After entering the classroom, most bloggers do not abandon the optimism and enthusiasm they expressed before they began teaching. Few corps members undergo a detectable shift from optimist to defeated teaching burn out. Most corps members maintain an overall optimistic perspective, even in the face of challenges in the classroom, such as school violence, overpopulated classes, feelings of isolation, and managing a classroom while lacking the sufficient training and know-how. Of the fifteen bloggers, only one voices the desire to quit Teach For America, and ultimately decides against doing so, which indicates that these TFA teachers were just as committed to the cause of Teach For America several months into their teaching stint, as they claimed to be at the very start of their TFA journey. While every corps member discusses the difficulties and struggles of being a first-time teacher in an urban school, the majority of corps members maintain a hopeful outlook on their students and the teaching profession. For, with every problem they discuss, they make a concerted effort to include something positive about teaching, whether that means sharing a funny anecdote about a student or bragging on student improvement. The problems that come up the most often in blog posts once corps members start teaching involve deficiencies in students' education and classroom

management.

After the first few weeks of the school year, the teachers' blog posts tend to explore a theme they mentioned prior to service—the gaping deficiencies in urban students' education, which I discussed in the previous section of this chapter. While numerous corps members stated in their pre-service posts that they joined TFA out of a desire to narrow the achievement gap, it is clear they did not fully realize at that time just what the achievement gap actually looked like in the classroom. In their posts after they began teaching, corps members express shock over the level at which their students are performing—which is often three or four grade levels behind where they are expected to be academically. The despair TFA teachers reveal over trying to overcome such enormous deficiencies can be summed up by Marcus's concise statement, "It breaks my heart every day how behind my students are." Marcus, Julie, and Serena seem to have the most difficulty in trying to bring their students' performance up to grade level, and frequently blog about this process. Marcus explains how upset he is by the daily evidence of how his students have been failed by public education:

> Sometimes their deficiency in math kills me to the point of wanting to cry (I had to teach rounding to a 10th grader in after-school tutoring on Thursday…), but I will never give [my students] the satisfaction of driving me to the point of tears if I can help it. Mastery for my first two units was pretty low, especially for my geometry students, and it made me incredibly angry. Angry at myself for many, many things, among them poor alignment between my lessons and my unit assessment and insufficient formative assessments, and angry at my students for

> many, many things, including not asking for help, not completing homework (or merely, as I suspect, copying wrong answers off of each other), and not showing up to class on time—or at all. (Marcus)

Marcus expresses mixed emotions about the low level at which his students are performing: despair and frustration toward the system, anger directed at his own shortcomings, and anger toward students who show little personal investment in their own education. Serena, too, grapples with how to handle how behind her students are, and admits:

> I was so frustrated because my kids were so far behind and all I could see was how far we needed to go that I was forgetting to see the incremental progress we were making. I felt like I was running repeatedly into a brick wall, headfirst, because I cared so much and was trying so hard and still just not succeeding.

Serena takes ownership of her students' achievement or lack thereof, equating her students' success with her success as a teacher. She also describes her students' achievement using words like "we," indicating that she views the success of her students and her success as a teacher intertwined. Finally, Julie, a third grade teacher, expands on her own struggles teaching students who are four grade levels behind in reading. However, she embodies a proactive and optimistic attitude that many TFA teachers reveal in their blog posts on struggles in the classroom:

> Some of my kids are reading at a pre-k or kindergarten level in the third grade. I'm not really sure where to start in terms of getting them caught up. Fortunately, I'm consulting the expert literacy specialist tomorrow so hopefully she'll be able

to help. Although I'm exhausted and overwhelmed, I'm preparing for tomorrow with my background knowledge from today. I think it will be an even more successful day! I hope my fellow CMs had fruitful days as well! Keep it up!

Julie frames this very devastating situation, of her students being years behind in school, in a very optimistic light, by emphasizing the resources she does have and the steps she can take to help her students reach grade level standards. This emphasis on being proactive and taking advantage of every resource available demonstrates Julie's commitment to maintaining a positive outlook, even when facing the seemingly impossible task of cramming four years' worth of material and development into one year. While many TFA teachers voice despair and anger over what they see as the disservice the public education system has done to their students, the optimism and determination to narrow the achievement gap which they expressed before beginning teaching, is still intact, even after they are confronted with what the achievement gap actually looks like up close and personal.

Administrative Woes

Another aspect of the achievement gap that TFA teachers don't seem to anticipate prior to teaching is administrative issues that shape the culture of their school. Two such examples of administrative problems that teachers think contribute to the achievement gap and complicate their jobs are overpopulated classes and last-minute teaching assignment changes. It is no secret that schools with higher student-to-teacher ratios face added challenges, making classroom management, time management, and giving students one-on-one attention difficult, if not nearly impossible, for teachers. Around a third of

sampled bloggers express frustration with having large class sizes. Amy, a pre-kindergarten teacher, explained that the number of four year olds she has in her class violates state laws. In this same blog entry she explains:

> I have received at least two new students a day every day of school which has meant that we are basically starting from the bottom with procedures every day. The sheer volume of kids is unreal. My school doesn't do staggered arrival, so by the second day we had enough kids to overwhelm each other (and me). I am literally, just, plain and simple, unprepared for 24 students. (Amy)

An expected class size for a pre-k classroom, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research, is around fifteen to twenty students ("Preschool Class Size"). Amy blogs about having four more students in her pre-k class than the highest cap permitted by her state's law. Tia, an eighth grade Language Arts teacher, discusses her inability to control the class because of the sheer number of students she has. In a blog entry written only four weeks into the school year, she states, "*One of my classes has 43 kids in it.* My homeroom is the only class I am having serious management issues with. Ironically, I have them for an hour in the afternoon, as well. Thankfully, they are not the group of 43" (Tia). While classroom management is one of the most prominent themes in corps member blog entries, corps members like Tia and Amy, whose classrooms are overflowing with students, cite classroom management as *the* most difficult aspect of teaching.

In addition to struggling with overpopulated classes, corps members also cite last-minute grade level changes as a major impediment to their ability to do their job

effectively. Due to the uncertainty of enrollment numbers, several schools reassign TFA teachers to teach different grade levels and subject areas, weeks into the school year. Julie, who is originally assigned to teach third grade, ends up teaching pre-k. She explains in a blog entry posted several weeks into the school year:

> Since the last time I posted I was switched with the pre-k teacher; yup, now [I] teach 4 year-olds. Apparently the other teachers was 'too stern' with the kids and the principal didn't have much faith in me helping the kids pass the [state-mandated test] so she decided to swap us and see what happens. Needless to say the new third grade teacher is not having any more luck than I [had] with behavior issues, but I am luckily loving the little ones! At first I thought that I would hate pre-k, but every day I like it more. We sing, dance, learn to share, count, read, and make patterns together. (Julie)

Although Julie's switch from third grade to pre-k ends up being positive for her, other TFA teachers have a more difficult time adjusting to their new assignment. Andrea, originally hired as a middle school math teacher, is reassigned as a science teacher. She explains, "I actually started out the year teaching 7th grade math, and then I was really bad at controlling the kids so they switched me to 6th grade science (they thought the 6th grade science teacher, also TFA, would be better than me.)" (Andrea). Andrea's grade level and subject area switch is difficult for her because she is largely unfamiliar with how to even begin planning lessons in her new subject area. She writes:

> I've now been with my new students for two days. Two of the classes are tough, two are great, and one is okay. I'm worried about the content part a lot. I spent

two days on procedures and investment stuff and am switching to content on Monday. I was never that into science and I'm not really sure how to plan a science lesson. . . (Andrea)

Overall, nearly half of TFA teachers express frustration over administrative issues such as having their teaching assignments switched—oftentimes after being with their original class(es) for several weeks—and having too many students in a classroom at once.

Classroom Management

"Today was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. My students were out of control. It was mostly my fault. I did not have a good plan for today." –Andrea

The most universal complaint among TFA teachers is, by far, difficulty with classroom management. Every single teacher except one claims to struggle with classroom management at some point throughout their first months of teaching. The problems with classroom management that corps members encounter range from "milder" issues such as dealing with students who walk out of class, to more "severe" issues such as having to break up full-blown violent brawls during class. Nina, who teaches in an elementary school, gives an account of her struggles with maintaining control over one student in particular:

> One of the students, a girl whom I suspect actually might have an un-analyzed anger management issue in a very legit sense, literally just got up and walked out during class – she wasn't even being reprimanded, she just decided she was over it for the day, I guess. Obviously I followed, and she was just in the hallway, hanging out and rolling her eyes, but it was the most frightening feeling I've had so far. I was so upset! I was able to keep myself in check but honestly, I don't

know how. (Nina)

Here Nina reveals that following this student into the hallway elicited "the most frightening feeling" she'd had up to this point, suggesting that above any other fears about teaching she might harbor, she is most afraid of losing control of her students.

In addition to dealing with students who simply refuse to comply with classroom rules by leaving class whenever the mood strikes, Julie, another elementary school teacher, blogs about her difficulty with students who throw temper tantrums during class. She explains:

> Every time I think there have been gains made, it seems like a game of 2 steps forward and 1 step back. For example, one of my students had been behaving so much better, and seemed to really want to improve. When he heard I was getting my master's degree, he quickly updated his big goal to include getting his master's too. Then he kicked a desk and called me a b**** on his way out the door on Thursday. (Julie)

Here Julie is saying that every gain her students make is countered by an even worse lapse in behavior—revealing her utter frustration with her inability to elicit consistent good behavior from her students.

The management issues elementary grade teachers like Nina and Julie grapple with are even more severe for the middle and high school TFA teachers, who often deal with violent students. Nina recalls one particularly bad school day:

> Our school has a violent incident on a daily basis – usually in the middle school, many times in the elementary as well—and the police have become a regular

> presence on our campus. On Thursday morning they arrested three students (three unrelated allegations) prior to the first bell. There was a brawl on the yard in the middle of the day and an incident with a parent of one of my students that was, frankly, traumatizing to witness. (Nina)

Lamar, a high school teacher, recounts a scene similar to that which Nina describes, only two months into the school year:

> Basically, the last class sometimes turns into a zoo, but I have been able to control them the past few days so hopefully I can keep that up. The issue is that in addition to the 6 special ed students (who need constant reminders and extra help and motivation), I have a student who was suspended for getting in some kind of physical altercation with a teacher […] In other exciting news- a student decided to light the paper towel dispenser on fire in the bathroom so we had to evacuate the building. […] Fortunately, no permanent damage was done outside of the bathroom and no one was injured. (Lamar)

A month later, Lamar blogs about a near riot that occurs at his school:

> We evacuated quickly (which means go home to most students), and talking to some teachers I found out that students had lit another paper towel dispenser on fire. […] For whatever reason, students started fighting outside during the evacuation and it turned into multiple fights involving a lot of people. Within a few minutes, 3 fire trucks arrived to help put out the fire, 19 cop cars came to get the crowd under control and stop the fights, and the arson investigation unit arrived to help figure out who started the fire. No one was allowed in the building

> for about two hours, but some students snuck in somehow and more fights broke out inside the school when teachers couldn't get into the building. (Lamar)

While all three incidents described by Lamar and Nina depict violence at school, none were directed at teachers specifically, but toward other students or school property, in the case of the arsons at Lamar's school. Carmen describes a much more frightening situation in which she finds evidence of students seemingly fantasizing about stabbing her. She explains:

> I am the only non-African-American person at my school (students/ teachers/ staff). I've gotten the occasional "racist" comment when disciplining a student. But knowing this is different than seeing it on a note left on my classroom floor today. 'Black vs. White' it said with a picture of a student (without a name) stabbing me (labeled) with a knife. (Carmen)

With this kind of demoralizing discovery of the prevalence of violence among their students, it comes as no surprise that teachers like Carmen, Lamar, and Nina experience depression and feelings of despair during their first year of teaching.

Despair During the First Year

"As one of my more bratty students said a couple of weeks ago, in an attempt to defend her class's poor behavior, 'We haven't made you cry yet.'"—Lamar

Given the multitude of stresses first-year TFA teachers recount, it is not unexpected that most would feel some moments of despair. The underlying cause of this despair, according to their accounts, appears to be a lack of sufficient teacher preparation. Some corps members come right out and explicitly cite this as the reason for the level of difficulty they face, while others merely hint at it. Amy explicitly states that much of her

frustration comes from a lack of preparation. She writes: “I feel so incompetent and unprepared to have the class that I have. I am thankful for my job, but mostly I’m just tired and stressed out. I feel like I’m widening the achievement gap. I feel all those things that you’re ‘supposed’ to feel as a first-year corps member, for sure. it sucks” (Amy). In a separate post, Amy writes, “How do I feel? I feel pretty bad. I don’t feel qualified to be teaching my students at the moment. I feel like I yell a lot. I feel like “mean miss _” comes out a lot more than she should. I feel like my kids aren’t learning. Maybe I’m too hard on myself.” The recurring nature of the complaint of feeling unprepared as a teacher shows just how heavily this problem weighed on Amy. Nina echoes these feelings of being underprepared: “My current difficulty is not entirely self-created, but there’s an element that is. I could be better scheduled with my planning and better executed with my teaching, and those are two things I have no problem admitting but seemingly every problem fixing” (Nina). This internal struggle in which TFA corps members battle against feelings of inadequacy and unpreparedness in an effort to be the best teachers they can be comes up again and again in corps member blogs, as Nina and Amy demonstrate.

Andrea is another corps member who explains how a lack of preparation is the main contributor to her hardships in the classroom, yet she talks about a very specific kind of preparation that most corps members do not discuss—a kind of cultural preparation. She states, “Institute prepares you for about 5% of life as a teacher. Maybe make that 10% because it also prepares you for the lifestyle. I won’t say it wasn’t valuable but you definitely can’t believe that it will prepare you nearly enough. My

school is 99% black, 95% free and reduced lunch" (Andrea). The underlying issue that Andrea does not explicitly articulate but instead implies is her lack of familiarity with the culture of the community in which she teaches. From this blog entry, it seems evident that Andrea feels unprepared for life as a teacher in a poor school district. The fact that she points out that her school is "99% black, 95% free and reduced lunch" indicates that she might have experienced culture shock upon arriving at her school, to an extent, and wishes she could have been prepared for the economic and racial differences between herself and her students and their families.

Although an overwhelming majority of corps members (fourteen of fifteen bloggers) expressed feelings of despair and sometimes even depression, only one actually pondered quitting TFA. Nina had such a difficult time in her first few months of teaching that she seriously considered leaving her job and TFA.

> This last week was my hardest by far and I began to consider (for the first time) in a very real way what it would look like for me to quit. [. . .] It was a plunge that felt really, really depressing to take. It's definitely mortifying considering yourself in a less than positive light: what does it say about me that I'm giving up and going home? Did I try as hard as I could or did I give up when the mountain seemed too high? How much of this current difficulty is self-created and self-sustained? As hard as it is to think about myself with those guiding questions in mind, it's even harder to consider what the honest answers are. (Nina)

While Nina ultimately decides to stay, her serious contemplation of quitting is indicative of the amount of emotional turmoil that TFA corps members experience during their first

year of teaching.

Managing Stress

"But there are good things. I am closer to some of my coworkers than I could've ever imagined." –Nina

Once corps members encounter stress, how do they cope with it? What are their strategies for dealing with the obstacles they face in the classroom? There are two main approaches teachers mention for dealing with problems in the classroom: looking to more experienced colleagues for support and guidance, and maintaining an optimistic attitude toward their work-related problems. Almost half the sampled corps members discussed going to colleagues for help with a teaching-related problem. Lamar, for example, writes:

> I never knew there could be so much drama in the copy room. In general, there is a wide variety of abilities at my schools and that inconsistency makes it even harder for students to make significant academic gains. The other TFA teachers have been extremely supportive and helpful though and I know I will definitely need them as the year goes on." (Lamar)

Lamar is in the minority in suggesting that non-TFA faculty are sources of stress rather than support, and that only their TFA colleagues are supportive. Summer is the only other blogger who shares this experience of receiving no help whatsoever from more experienced non-TFA colleagues:

> I cannot tell if I am being taken advantage of though by one of the other teachers in my building. The person in question is a veteran teacher here and I actually co-teach with him as well. During our period together he doesn't really do much (it is computer math after all and I must admit I am not the pinnacle of activity

during my own computer math section) and he recently has placed the majority burden on me to plan the first field trip of the year. This is fine and a skill I definitely want to develop, but I can't shake the feeling that he is using me a little bit. (Summer)

Summer's experience is an uncommon one within this sample, as her colleague seemed intent on making her job more difficult, which tended not to be the case for most corps members.

Most bloggers who talk about going to a colleague for support talk about the experience positively. Many claim to have received invaluable guidance and support from colleagues. Before meeting the faculty at the schools where they were hired, some corps members were fearful of encountering the kind of unsupportive, passive aggressive colleagues Summer faced and are surprised to find the opposite scenario. Julie recalls her worries about colleague-related drama and how helpful she found her colleagues to be in reality, stating:

> Today was the first day at my new placement school with the whole staff. I had nightmares of condescending veteran teachers, overbearing grade chairs, and a dispassionate principal. I could've have been more wrong. The staff at my school seems to be fun-loving, supportive, and helpful. My grade chair is amazing and promised that she will help me navigate the next few weeks. My principal seems to really care about student achievement and her employees' well- being. I feel a new sense of joy knowing that these are the people I will grow to rely on, confide in, and support. (Julie)

Kindergarten teacher Serena also gave an overwhelmingly positive review of her fellow kindergarten teachers—only having positive things to say about them, stating:

> The other Kinder teachers are really great, all 9 of them (yes, 9!) and have been so helpful, welcoming, and open-hearted. I am excited to learn from them because they are all so different from each other and from me- most are married and have kids or have kids on the way- which is a completely different place in life from me. The para-professional I get to work with is also really experienced and nice, and so far we have been getting along and working really well together. (Serena)

Finally, Tia, a middle school TFA teacher, also gave a glowing review of the faculty at her school:

> My Language Arts colleagues are excellent. I honestly love each one of them. The one next door teaches Gifted […] She's provided me with a TON of resources and she keeps our Department meetings to a refreshingly short schedule. The one across the hall is teaching for the first time in a few years; she used to be a Literacy Coach and she holds her PhD in Reading Instruction. Her energy is infectious, we've grown closer each day and have a great working relationship, and she's taken on the role of "mentor"- and I feel absolutely privileged to work with her. (Tia)

Each of these first-year TFA teachers expresses gratitude for the support they receive from more experienced teachers. Their eagerness to seek out help from their colleagues reveals a proactive approach to problem-solving. Rather than merely sitting back and

ruminating about the hardships they face as new teachers in such challenging environments, the majority of corps members cultivate a proactive and positive mentality when trying to surmount problems in their classrooms and carry out TFA's mission.

Optimistic Despite Challenges

"My first year of teaching was amazing! Yes, it certainly was challenging and there were days that I questioned why I ever agreed to do this, but I wouldn't trade my experience for anything." –Dan

The determination to carry out TFA's mission drives corps members to maintain an optimistic outlook, even in the face of school violence, racially-charged hate directed at them, and classrooms overflowing with students. Corps members choose to focus on the positive aspects of their classes, rather than dwell on these negatives. For example, in the very same blog entry where she recounts a school day in which she found a note depicting a student stabbing her, Carmen discusses her students' progress. She writes:

> On a positive note: my 7th grade boys were pumped when I told them that they improved so much on their Unit 2 Test. When showing some kids their test they literally jumped up and down. My 8th grade boys were excited to get some exit slips on the 'science that rocks' wall. Smiley face stickers are awesome. I love my students. (Carmen)

Despite discovering that one of her students had thoughts about stabbing her, Carmen still finds something positive to point out about her students. She does not dwell on the negative students, but instead ends this particular blog post on a positive note—focusing on student gains. Similarly, Nina, recalls an even more violent scenario at her school, but maintains an optimistic attitude. She writes:

> I guess you know you're in the right place when things go terribly but you still want to keep your job. Today my class was completely out of pocket and then my school had two (then four) simultaneous fights break out. My school is K-12, so even though it was secondary schoolers doing the brawling, it was a very chaotic environment for all. It wasn't as bad as it seemed at the time, as is the nature of these sorts of things… or maybe I've just seen far too many fights to be objective. It could've been worse. No one was armed, which is a definite plus when it comes to schoolyard battles, and to my knowledge no one was seriously injured. I did catch an elbow to the face from a student running past me (unintentional on the student's part, I'm positive) but no harm, no foul.

Nina reflects on this violent outbreak at her school, using it to gauge her level of dedication and passion for teaching, rather than allowing it to deter her from continuing or detract from her effort to strive toward TFA's mission of providing all children—regardless of economic status—with an excellent education.

Despite the many challenges corps members faced during their first year of teaching, most viewed their first year as teachers in a positive light—focusing on the progress their students made and the importance of TFA's cause. The most optimistic and positive blogger of the fifteen, Dan, summed up his first year, stating:

> My first year of teaching was amazing! Yes, it certainly was challenging and there were days that I questioned why I ever agreed to do this, but I wouldn't trade my experience for anything. Over the course of the year, I learned so much and I can't wait to begin my 2nd year of teaching. My students are simply

amazing. Each and every single day, they taught me just as much, if not more, than I taught them. I can't wait to get back into my classroom in the fall!

Dan acknowledges the hardships he faced in the classroom, never pretending for a second that this job is not difficult, but ultimately, he chooses to hold on to the positive aspects of his job, rather than dwell on the difficulties that come with teaching. Marcus also sums up his first foray into teaching in a positive light, but hones in on his place in a larger movement—finding comfort in his being one member of a much larger organization. He writes, "Regardless of the day-to-day frustrations, I believe I will always be a cheerleader for Teach For America. The achievement gap is greater than myself, and I just have to remember that the movement for educational equity is worth any speed bumps that teaching tosses my way" (Marcus). The optimism so many corps members exude in these blog entries posted after they have begun teaching and have encountered obstacles, reveal that perhaps their most effective teaching resource is internal and is as simple as their positive attitude toward the students they are committed to teaching.

Summary of Teaching Realities Faced by Corps Members

Corps member attitudes about teaching did change to an extent, once they entered the classroom. Although they maintained the determination and optimism they voiced in pre-service entries, they did discuss issues they had not blogged about prior to teaching. Once they began teaching, corps members blogged about issues they did not mention in their pre-service posts, such as school violence, overpopulated classes, grade level changes, and relationships with colleagues. However, concerns about classroom management remain consistent in blog entries both before and during their teaching

commitments. Only one corps member in this sample blogged about her desire to leave before her two-year commitment ended, but ultimately stayed in the end. Despite the challenges corps members encountered in the classroom, they maintained an optimistic outlook on the field of teaching and on being a TFA teacher.

Before gaining teaching experience, Teach For America teachers are optimistic about their about their ability to make a difference in the lives of children. Yet, at the same time, they demonstrate an awareness of the stereotypes that depict Teach For America teachers as self-righteous and ultimately self-serving, and make an effort to avoid coming across this way. TFA teachers share the reasons they joined Teach For America, which include a commitment to TFA's mission, the desire to teach, and passion for a particular subject area. The most common concerns about teaching that these new teachers voice are linked to classroom management, and these concerns remain once they start teaching. After gaining some classroom experience, Teach For America teachers primarily blog about what the achievement gap actually looks like in their classrooms, and about school violence and daily management issues. More peripheral concerns teachers discuss include overpopulated classrooms and grade level/subject area reassignments. An aspect of teaching many corps members seem pleasantly surprised by is the support their colleagues provide, which helps them tackle these concerns. Ultimately, Teach For America teachers sustain the optimism that dominates their earliest blog posts, continuing to voice their dedication to Teach For America's mission after gaining teaching experience.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

This thesis explores the blogs of fifteen first-year Teach For America teachers in an effort to identify their attitudes towards teaching before and after teaching their own class for the first time. The purpose of this study was to find out what first-year Teach For America teachers say about teaching in the intimate setting of a blogging community. Because the conversation surrounding the future implications of Teach For America's increasingly weighty impact on educational reform in the U.S. is so heated, and so many groups and individuals have such strong opinions on the subject, it is important to add in a crucial perspective that has been largely neglected—that of the Teach For America teacher. Thus, with the intent of opening up the conversation to a group whose voices are often silenced by those who receive more spotlight from the media, I analyzed the themes TFA teachers most frequently wrote about during their first year of service. I grouped my findings into two main sections: blog entries posted before the start of the school year and entries posted during the school year.

TFA teachers demonstrate an array of emotions in their blogs, ranging from excitement to anxiety and fear. Bloggers voiced excitement at the beginning of their TFA journey, when discussing the above reasons that led them to make the two-year commitment to Teach For America. Overall, Teach For Us bloggers gave four main reasons for joining Teach For America, which included: a belief in Teach For America's mission, a more general desire to bring about social justice, a desire to teach, and a passion for a particular subject area. Yet, in addition to demonstrating enthusiasm and

excitement about being in the classroom, corps members also voiced anxieties about teaching. The recurring anxieties among corps members include fears about: students not liking or respecting them, letting down the Teach For America organization, letting down their students by being ineffective teachers, and not being able to maintain effective classroom management.

After corps members had spent time in the classroom, they blogged about issues they encountered while teaching that they had not anticipated. The most frequently mentioned issues they wrote about once they had begun teaching included: the extent of students' low achievement, overpopulated classrooms, having their grade level/subject area changed at the last minute, the importance of relationships with colleagues, and the prevalence of school violence—which is by far the most frequently cited theme in corps member blog posts. Corps members voiced feelings of despair in relation to issues they faced, stating how unprepared they felt in handling many of the problems. Yet, at the same time, corps members also discussed how they feel they are able, at least in some way, to carry out the mission they signed up for. Even though corps members experience moments of despair or insecurity, they still ultimately maintain a positive attitude, which seems to stem from their level of commitment to their students.

Why Do Corps Members Join Teach For America?

As previously mentioned in Part One of Chapter Four, my findings revealed that corps members claim to join Teach For America for one of four main reasons: a desire to enact social justice, a dedication to TFA's mission, a desire to teach, and a passion for a specific subject area. These findings overlap with those of Ness and Veltri, as both

researchers found that a small group of corps members joined TFA because they wanted a quicker route into a teaching career than most traditional teacher certification programs would require. My findings mirror those of Ness with only one exception. Ness found that corps members' reasons for wanting to join TFA fell into several categories, some of which include: a quick entrée into a teaching career, a commitment to social justice, and a belief in Teach For America's mission. The bloggers in my sample only cite one additional reason that Ness did not find—a desire to pass on their passion for a particular subject to their students. Ness did not encounter corps members that claimed to join TFA out of a passion for a particular discipline, and even though only two out of the fifteen corps members in my study fall into this category, I think it is important to include this finding, since it does stray from the previously established literature. My findings differ from those of Veltri in that none of the bloggers in my study cited pragmatic concerns as primary reasons for joining TFA. Veltri describes this category in her findings as including considerations of post-graduation finances (23), and while these considerations might have played a part in the decisions of corps members in my study to join TFA, they do not discuss them in their blog posts.

Feeling Unprepared for Teaching Realities

In the Teach For Us blogs, corps members voice their fears, despair, and insecurities about entering the classroom with only several weeks of training under their belts. To recapitulate one theme brought up in the Part Two of Chapter Four, corps members are more than willing to admit their lack of preparation. Amy candidly admits, "I feel so incompetent and unprepared to have the class that I have. I am thankful for my

job, but mostly I'm just tired and stressed out. I feel like I'm widening the achievement gap," while Andrea expands on this notion: "Institute prepares you for about 5% of life as a teacher. Maybe make that 10% because it also prepares you for the lifestyle. I won't say it wasn't valuable but you definitely can't believe that it will prepare you nearly enough." Statements like these made by corps members in their blogs indicate that corps members do not feel that the training TFA provides corps members at Institute does the job of adequately preparing them for the work of teaching. As mentioned in the Review of Literature in Chapter Two, teacher educators like Linda Darling-Hammond disapprove most strongly of Teach For America's approach to teacher training. My findings support those of Linda Darling-Hammond to an extent. Darling-Hammond et al. concluded that teacher preparation plays a vital role in teacher effectiveness in their 2005 study. While my study focused on TFA teacher attitudes and concerns rather than TFA teacher effectiveness, bloggers in my study voiced frustration and anxiety with feeling unprepared for the work of teaching. The implication of this finding is that becoming a confident teacher takes time and requires experience. Due to the structure of the Teach For America experience and because TFA is an alternative certification program primarily catering to uncertified teachers, there simply is not enough time before the school year begins for these new teachers to experiment with different approaches in the classroom, which results in corps members feeling unprepared.

In addition to expressing that they felt unprepared for life as a TFA teacher due to the brief teacher training that TFA provides, TFA teachers indicate that they were also mentally and emotionally unprepared for the environments where they would be

teaching. The noticeable absence of any discussion of school violence in blog entries posted prior to the start of the school year seems to support the notion that corps members were not mentally or emotionally prepared for the environments where they are assigned to teach. While corps members frequently discussed anxieties concerning classroom management in their pre-service blog posts, not a single blogger expressed worries about school violence. Violence in schools plays a major role in teachers' abilities to do their jobs, and it is interesting to note that corps members do not voice worries over school violence before they enter the classroom as teachers, but frequently blog about it once they have accumulated some experience in the classroom. This finding could be indicative of a certain degree of naiveté, as it suggests that corps members were unaware of the kinds of challenges many urban teachers face in the classroom. The fact that so many bloggers frequently discuss school violence in blog entries posted after they had begun teaching, while none discussed it previously, suggests that it weighed heavily on them and that they were, perhaps, unprepared or unequipped for dealing with it.

As a whole, the fifteen pre-service TFA teachers do not mention fears about teaching in urban environments like Metro Atlanta, Detroit, and Memphis. While school violence is not exclusive to urban schools, as tragedies such as Columbine demonstrate, the prevalence of gangs in the communities where urban students live makes safety a greater worry than at many suburban schools. According to the National Center on Education Statistics, "During the school year 2008-09 there were 1,579 homicides among school-age youth ages 5–18, of which 17 occurred at school" ("Indicators"). The National Center for Victims of Crime goes on to cite that, "Between 1998 and 2003, on average,

teachers were the victims of approximately 183,400 total non-fatal crimes at school, including 118,800 thefts and 64,600 violent crimes (rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault) each year" ("School Crime: K-12"). The National Center for Education Statistics found that "Students are not the only victims of intimidation or violence in schools. Teachers are also subject to threats and physical attacks, and students from their schools sometimes commit these offenses" ("Indicator 5"). Even though the number of reported attacks on teachers has decreased from 12 percent in the 1993-94 school year, to 7 percent in 2007-08 school year, the statistics indicate that threats of violence toward teachers are not exactly uncommon in urban schools ("Indicator 5"). It is fair to assume that the threat of violence in the schools where TFA corps members teach would be a major concern for inexperienced teachers. Thus, the absence of any discussion on this theme in pre-service blog entries indicates a possible naiveté of the problems teachers in urban schools encounter.

Conclusions and Implications

In spite of TFA teachers expressing feelings of being unprepared in terms of their teacher training, their unfamiliarity with the culture of the schools where they are placed, and their overestimations of their students prior education, the fifteen TFA corps members in my study remain optimistic. The persistent optimism they demonstrate in their blogs might very well be the defining feature of the Teach For America teacher. Across the board, TFA teachers maintained an overall optimistic attitude in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, such as teaching material that is oftentimes three or four grade levels above students' understanding, with hardly any teacher training to

fall back on. This persistent optimism might very well be tone of the key traits Teach For America seeks in its corps members. Even with all of the best resources available, the task of preparing the most inexperienced teachers for the country's most challenging public schools is virtually impossible. The key element that appears to sustain corps members throughout the many challenges they encounter is a proactive, optimistic, and perseverant spirit which shines through in their Teach For Us blogs. The teachers I spent time getting to know through their blogs used their optimism as a source of strength that propelled them forward.

Recommendations for Future Research

The bulk of research conducted on Teach For America teachers centers on corps member success. The research is results-driven and seeks to produce numbers that come down on one side or the other—proving that TFA teachers are once and for all effective teachers, or ineffective teachers. The difference between the research approach I took and that of the studies I mention in the review of literature, for example, is that my findings, along with those of Ness, Foote, and Torre Veltri, consist of personal accounts of what goes on in the minds and classrooms of inexperienced teachers, while the studies mentioned in Chapter Two seek to quantify TFA teachers' levels of success in the classroom, comparing these results to those of traditionally-certified teachers. The studies on TFA teacher effectiveness have the potential to shape the public's view of TFA teachers because people tend to accept numbers without much question. Yet, there is no one consistent finding among the studies conducted on TFA teacher effectiveness. Some studies claim that TFA teachers tend to produce higher math scores, some claim they

produce lower scores all-around, some claim that there is no measurable difference in the test scores of TFA teachers' classes and traditionally-certified teachers' classes—therefore making it extremely difficult for someone outside of education or politics to determine whether Teach For America teachers are ultimately beneficial or harmful to public education. Looking at Teach For America teachers from a different perspective altogether by exploring their personal reflections on the difficulties and triumphs of Teaching For America, provides a valuable insight on ways that education reform can be improved.

Contrasting the results-driven approach these studies take with the more narrative approach that I chose to take, following the lead of Ness, Foote, and Veltri, reveals the main problem with the conversation surrounding Teach For America and educational reform in general. Because the studies are not necessarily teacher-centered, but are more results-centered or student-centered, they are not able to reveal how TFA teacher training could be improved, or what new teachers with little experience struggle with the most in their first year of teaching, for example. By examining resources that focus on the human aspect of teaching—like Teach For Us blog entries—in conjunction with those that take a results-centered approach, gaining insight into the strengths and weaknesses of current efforts to reform public education would likely come more easily. Therefore, the need for literature exploring what new, inexperienced teachers like first-year Teach For America corps members, themselves say about what goes on in and outside of the classroom persists. Without it, the field of teaching will continue to be regarded by politicians as a mechanical practice of producing test scores, rather than an art geared toward helping

students reach their potential.

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VITA

Samantha Nicole Holt was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1988. She graduated from Franklin High School in 2006, and then attended The University of Memphis, where she graduated summa cum laude in 2010 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Literature and Philosophy. She will graduate from The University of Tennessee with a Master of Arts Degree in English in May 2012. She is a 2012 Teach For America corps member and will reside in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she is currently assigned to teach kindergarten.