



How "Teach For America" Affects the Training and Effectiveness of Classroom Instructors

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School reform is a popular idea in the United States, and one of the most prominent efforts is the program known as "Teach for America," which seeks to revolutionize how U.S. communities select, train, and place teachers. Given the program's rapid growth and the increased attention it has attracted from researchers and policymakers, it is time to take an overall look at its impact on the U.S. teaching profession. Many researchers – and even some alumni of the program – have raised serious questions about its impact on teacher training, morale, and effectiveness.

History and Mission

The founder and Chair of the Board of Teach for America is Wendy Kopp, whose 1989 undergraduate thesis at Princeton University declared on the opening page that American schools are hurt by a "lack of qualified teachers." The program she launched in 1990 has since become one of the nation's leading alternative routes into the classroom. Teach for America has placed more than 33,000 mostly white, affluent corps members – as its teachers are called – in schools attended by students who are predominantly nonwhite, poor urban dwellers. Corps members commit to teach for two years; some stay longer, but many quit sooner.

Researchers have learned that student academic achievement is mainly shaped by conditions in families and communities, so reforms focused only inside schools cannot address most educational deficiencies. Nevertheless, effective teachers do matter, and Teach for America insists that its corps members embrace a sense of hyper-accountability for reducing social inequities. Its Academic Impact Model asserts that teachers are the root cause of student achievement or failure. This prompts corps members to focus primarily on boosting students' test performance, and it can result in teacher disillusionment and burnout when test results fall short.

Funding for Teach for America comes in part from the federal government, which has designated it as an AmeriCorps organization. Resources also come from philanthropic donors, such as the Walton, Gates, and Broad foundations, and from fees paid by school districts. The program accepts that most of its teachers will move on after short stays in the classroom and hopes that their classroom experiences will inform their later careers and views about educational reform.

The Costs of Abbreviated Teacher Preparation

Abbreviated teacher training is Teach for America's most notable – and contested – feature. Traditionally, new teachers have been certified only after completing more than 1,200 hours of preparatory education, with more than half the time spent in classrooms as supervised student teachers. In sharp contrast, Teach for America places new instructors after a five-week crash orientation that includes only 125 hours of instruction and just 18 hours of practice in classroom settings very different from those in which the new corps members will soon find themselves.

Previous research suggests that novice teachers often struggle and improve only through experience and further professional training. But Teach for America believes that college graduates can be ready to teach after a short, intensive orientation. The program does not see teaching as a profession that requires the same kind of extensive training and skills as other major professions. Teach for America presumes that any college graduate with brief preparation can do just as well – if not better – than traditionally trained teachers.

School districts coping with funding shortages may find this shortcut quite appealing. There is growing evidence that Teach for America corps members are being deployed instead of traditionally certified veteran teachers in districts such as Atlanta, Chicago, Las Vegas, and Newark, which thereby save money they would otherwise have to spend on salaries, pensions, and insurance over the course of long teacher careers. The question is whether the turn to two-year teacher stints and high turnover will result in setbacks for students

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and long-term problems for districts that may not be worth saving a few dollars on regularly trained and retained teachers.

Research on Teach for America's effectiveness has not reached definitive conclusions. Most studies find that corps members fare no better than other novice or emergency teachers. Yet a handful of studies, some commissioned by Teach for America itself, have found that some corps members perform slightly better than other teachers, particularly in math instruction. For example, a recent study by Mathematica concluded that high school math students of corps members experienced 2.6 additional months of learning. This study had shortcomings, however. The measures used may be misleading and, certainly, the participants are not typical, because most corps members do not teach high school math.

The Larger Impact

As it has expanded over the past two decades, Teach for America's function has shifted from supplying alternatively certified instructors to alleviate local teacher shortages to, in effect, pitting corps members against traditionally certified teachers in competition for open jobs in many of the nation's schools. What is more, Teach for America has expanded its mission beyond the classroom. Many program alumni work in prestigious professional, managerial, or financial positions, and Teach for America has started to take an active role in facilitating alumni involvement in educational policymaking. The program's Principal Pipeline seeks to place alumni as school principals, and Teach for America has launched a nonprofit called Leadership for Educational Equity to assist alums with political campaigns.

An interesting question, then, is what lasting effect alumni of Teach for America will have as they become politicians, policymakers, and privileged citizens who seek to reshape the nation's educational policies. To date, alums elected to office have championed charter schools, vouchers, merit-pay for teachers, and, of course, alternative forms of teacher certification. Program supporters have demonstrated their clout by successfully pushing to have corps members designated by the federal government as "highly qualified" teachers, so that parents do not have to be told when their children are taught by these short-timers rather than certified teachers.

Indeed, whatever the longer-term impact turns out to be, Teach for America's most significant accomplishment so far has been to question the need for trained teachers. This widely touted program embodies – and champions – the startling proposition that teaching America's least privileged students should be seen more as a form of temporary community service than as a life-long calling and professionally skilled career.