

Differing Views of Teach For America: Where Does the Controversy Lie?

Caroline Birdrow

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Abstract

Founded by Wendy Kopp in 1990, Teach For America has gained both supporters and critics along its way to becoming a nation-wide movement towards achieving educational equity. In an effort to understand the controversy surrounding TFA, this paper will provide background information on TFA and examine the rhetoric and measures of various parties involved in the debate. This information will aid in identifying the source of the controversy as TFA's true identity. If the organization presents itself as a social justice endeavor (which it does), it will be measured by others as such. What the data indicate, however, is that TFA is masked by a thin social justice agenda, beneath which are its true characteristics.

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Dr. Kelly Brotzman

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Caroline Birdrow  
Professor Brotzman  
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*“One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education.”*

*Wendy Kopp*

As of 2014, the United States boasted a gross domestic product (GDP) of over 17 billion U.S. dollars (“GDP at Market Prices”). However, in the prosperous “land of the free and the home of the brave,” 46.7 million Americans were experiencing poverty during the same year, and 15.5 million of them were children under the age of 18 (“The Lyrics”; DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 12, 14). These children may suffer from food insecurity, a lack of housing, and other income-related disparities.

What is more, the poverty they experience has the power to shape their education and future life outcomes. The median household income of families whose children attend public schools is much lower than that of families whose children are enrolled in private schools (Coley and Baker 27). This indicates a level of income-based segregation (Coley and Baker 25-29). Additionally, nearly a quarter of public school students went to schools categorized as high-poverty, and this categorization is based off of free or reduced-price lunch eligibility (Kena et al. 110). Therefore, children in poverty tend to go to public schools at a higher rate than their wealthier peers, and many typically were surrounded by students from similar backgrounds.

Sean Reardon, whose work focuses on education and educational equity, found that students from low- and high-income backgrounds also are separated by an achievement gap. This gap has grown by about 40% over the past 30 years and even exceeds those based on race.

The trend follows students, as four-year colleges do not demonstrate high enrollment rates for students from low-income families (“Reardon”; Reardon 53).

With these numbers and research, it is clear that Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty” is not finished and that there is considerable work remaining (“The War on Poverty”). This work will entail more than providing individuals with basic necessities and redistributing income. In order to tackle the educational and other complex implications of poverty, the nation must utilize an approach founded in capability. Amartya Sen defines capability as “reflect[ing] the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection” (“Capability and Well-Being” 31). Sen describes functionings as “parts of the state of a person – in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life” and claims that “quality of life [is] to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings” (“Capability and Well-Being” 31). Thus, Sen’s approach not only focuses on resources, but also the capability of translating those resources into functionings of value and a high level of well-being (“Poverty and Affluence” 107, 110-111). On this note, receiving an excellent education both promotes capability and is a sort of functioning.

One effort to promote children’s capabilities in the context of education and to close the achievement gap has been initiated by Teach For America (TFA). TFA is “a national teacher corps of recent college graduates who ... commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools” (*One Day, All Children* 5). Wendy Kopp used her undergraduate senior thesis to research and organize her idea for the national teacher corps and was able to launch the organization one year after her graduation from Princeton University in 1989 (*One Day, All Children* 3-4,8-9,47-48). A 25-year-old program, TFA has gained both supporters and critics along its way to becoming a nation-wide movement.

Given the increasing presence of TFA in the public education system and the ever-increasing disparities among low and high-income students, it is worth the time to understand the growing controversy surrounding TFA. In an effort to locate the source of disagreement, this paper first will examine each of TFA's priorities and instances in which TFA's mission does not align with its practice. This information will aid in identifying the source of the controversy as TFA's true identity. The organization presents itself as a social justice endeavor, but its own discourse, rhetoric, and metrics (along with the view of others) indicates that TFA is masked by a thin social justice agenda, beneath which are its true characteristics.

### **Spectacular Growth**

Since its beginning, TFA has focused on being a large organization, capable of garnering attention and expanding both its size and reach. Wendy Kopp claimed that TFA could not start the first year with less than five hundred corps members; "Only a monumental launch would convey the urgency and national importance of [this] effort" (*One Day, All Children* 10). Available data demonstrates an upward trend and continuing prioritization of this growth, with the size of the incoming corps increasing from 2,417 in 2006 to 4,100 in 2015. The total size of the corps has risen from 4,400 in 2006 to 8,600 in 2015. Now, there are 50,000 alumni and corps members altogether (*2006 Annual Report*; "Annual Report"). When TFA started, it placed teachers in 6 regions and has spread to 52 regions ("Annual Report"). Expansion always is part of TFA's rhetoric and discourse, and Wendy Kopp's speech at TFA's recent 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit even is laden with language about its miraculous development ("The Long Game").

While TFA celebrates this growth, many do not see its value. For instance, the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice funded "Teach For America: A Review of the

Evidence” aims to review the existing research on 6 key factors, two of which are the number of corps members and placement regions and TFA’s placement of corps members in districts experiencing teacher shortages (Heilig and Jez 2-4). Based off of the research available, it was concluded that TFA’s numbers and reach are growing but that “TFA has begun placing teachers not in positions lacking qualified candidates, but in slots previously held by veteran teachers – that is, in districts using layoffs to ease budget problems” (Heilig and Jez 4).

Others have echoed this view, as can be examined in a compilation of counter-narratives of TFA alumni edited by T. Jameson Brewer and Kathleen deMarrais. The editors introduce the book’s contents by describing the transition of TFA’s mission from “seemingly humble and benign aspirations of contributing to the [teaching] profession to seeking outright control of the profession” (Brewer and deMarrais 2). They also explain that Teach for America has moved “away from rhetoric about teacher shortages to an argument that the 145 hours of training corps members receive ... is superior to the traditional 4-year college degree and student teaching semester” (Brewer and deMarrais 1-2).

Derrick Houck, a Philadelphia corps member from 2010-2012 featured in Brewer and deMarrais’ book, comments on the role of isolation in TFA’s approach. In doing this, Houck explains how TFA frames itself during bouts with critics. What he found when he attended TFA conferences was that TFA characterized critics as those who had no real understanding or passion for the movement. The critics were being inactive; at least TFA was doing something. (Brewer and deMarrais 174). According to Houck, in addition to not acknowledging the efforts of others, TFA also does not listen to what its community partners have to say about achieving educational equity (Brewer and deMarrais 175-176). Michael J. Steudeman, a Greater New Orleans corps member from 2010-2012, also is included in this compilation and recalls that TFA

does not consider differing teaching techniques or theories and often silences the voices of veteran non-TFA teachers (Brewer and deMarrais 50-52).

Therefore, TFA successfully has grown, but its progress has not been well-received by all of the communities it serves. TFA seeks to “enlist, develop, and mobilize as many as possible of our nation’s most promising future leaders to grow and strengthen the movement for educational equity and excellence” (“Our Mission”). However, it must achieve this goal in partnership with communities so as to not trump over them and, rather, to empower them to create sustainable change.

### **Increasingly Diverse Corps**

Another one of TFA’s objectives is to recruit a diverse group of individuals to enter classrooms across the country. As with the growth initiative, this desire for diversity was part of Kopp’s original plan for the organization and has persisted. Kopp recognized a need to include teachers who could identify with students and their communities on the basis of race and socioeconomic status. She saw these individuals as role models for students (*One Day, All Children* 21). In order to gauge its success in this area, TFA measures the % of new corps members of color and the % of corps members who were the recipients of Pell Grants. The former has grown from 27.5% in 2006 to 49% in 2015. The latter was 24% in 2006 and 47% in 2015 (*2006 Annual Report*; “Annual Report”).

Furthermore, TFA has launched several initiatives to address diversity among its students and teachers: African American Community, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Diverse Learner, Early Childhood Education, Latino Community, LGBTQ Community, Military Veterans, Native Alliance, and STEM (“Our Initiatives”). TFA also seeks to work with teachers

who have DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) status. TFA admits individuals with DACA status so that they can work as teachers and not worry about deportation (“Asian American and Pacific Islander Initiative” and “Latino Community Initiative”). These initiatives either focus on mobilizing teachers who identify with a particular group or on effectively teaching students in each group (or both).

The current CEO of TFA, Elisa Villanueva Beard, also spoke at TFA’s 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit, exclaiming at one point that TFA is “a community that is Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Humanist, and Atheist and so much more. (And, as we were surprised to learn when planning this summit, a full third of us are gluten-free.)” (Beard). Beard, a member of the Latino community, also expresses her commitment to diversity and her gratitude for what TFA has done to positively change education in her hometown in the Rio Grande Valley (“Annual Report”).

In spite of the progress TFA thinks it has made, many critics see the organization’s focus on diversity as superficial and inadequate. Some note the lack of personal support and guidance for the corps members of minority groups, etc. that TFA so fervently recruits. For instance, Summer Pennell, a lesbian corps member from 2009-2011 featured by Brewer and deMarrais, was selected to teach in an area where there seemed to be only a very small LGBTQ community. Her criticisms of TFA include its unarticulated stance on LGBTQ rights, placement of teachers without regard for what regions will be best for them, and inability to support teachers who are targets of discrimination (Brewer and deMarrais 132-137). While TFA started an LGBTQ initiative since then, it is rather shallow. The initiative involves providing resources for supporting LGBTQ students and fostering tolerance in classrooms. Only in one section does it

discuss “Employment Protection Laws,” and TFA seems to offer no support to teachers who identify as being part of the LGBTQ community (“LGBTQ Community Initiative”).

Terrenda White focuses on yet another discrepancy between TFA’s diversity benchmarks and their results. White states that “a strong commitment to teacher diversity requires attention not only to recruitment ... but also to policies shaping the organization where ToCs [Teachers of Color] work” (White 26). TFA claims to be apolitical, but according to White, the organization supports or accepts policies that have detrimental effects on ToCs. Some of these policies involve closing schools that serve and employ individuals of color, firing ToCs more often than their white peers, and opening charter schools which have low rates of employment of ToCs (qtd. in White 26). In addition, ToCs often find themselves voiceless in politics that affect their classrooms and experience racial segregation in regards to their employment opportunities (qtd. in White 27). White explains that “TFA’s diversity initiative functions narrowly as a politics of representation” which “commodifies diversity as an appeal to corporate donors” (28).

Furthermore, TFA hopes to attract teachers from low-income backgrounds, but regions such as that of South Louisiana require new corps members to pay for two Praxis exams each of which cost anywhere from \$50 to \$170 (“Test and Service Fees”). TFA does provide some transitional aid to eligible corps members in order to cover moving and travel expenses, as well as testing costs (“Financial Help”). However, this aid is not given out until the start of summer training, after many expenses would have arisen.

Amanda Machado, a former Bay Area corps member, also claims that income was an issue and that it marked the difference between her and some fellow corps members. She explicitly claims that TFA is not to blame for this, but states that she left the teaching profession



to pursue a more fruitful option. Machado wanted to be able to support herself and her family and did not have the means to continuing teaching for the love of it. As a daughter of hard-working immigrants, she also wanted to make her family proud and do the most she could with her degree from Brown University (Machado). Again, Machado does not fault TFA, but the organization should better accommodate teachers like her so as to keep them in the education system.

Perhaps equally striking as the limited support of racial and socioeconomic diversity is the encouraged conformity of thought, practice, and expression throughout TFA. To illustrate, Summer Pennell remembers thinking that TFA was cult-like, chanting at its weekly pep rallies and carrying “matching TFA [lunch] bags” (Brewer and deMarrais 133). Similarly, Derrick Houck describes the surveys on which he and other corps members had not responded positively enough. They apparently were asked to attend either one-on-one meetings or larger group discussions as a follow-up to the surveys. Houck did not feel that these interventions were used to address his concerns and fix problems but rather to quiet opposition (Brewer and deMarrais 172-173).

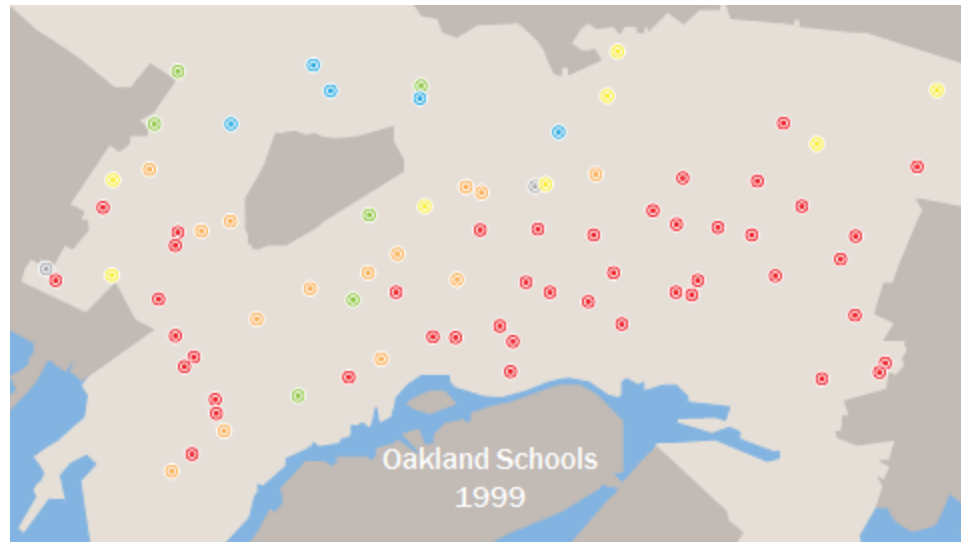
In general, many corps members report that they felt there was a model to which they had to conform. For instance, Steudeman notes that the “one-size-fits-all pedagogy” of Teach For America is overly “formulaic” (Brewer and deMarrais 49). From his experience at the training, he learned that there only was one way to teach and one way to manage a classroom (Brewer and deMarrais 47-54). Thus, after his two years in the corps, Steudeman became a corps member advisor and worked with new members at the summer training. His goal was to enhance and add depth to the training but felt that he ran into barriers with TFA in terms of accepted principles and ideas (Brewer and deMarrais 47, 52).

Some TFA alumni in Brewer and deMarrais' book also describe how they were asked to present TFA. To illustrate, Houck writes about the coaching he received from TFA for a newspaper interview. In answering pointed questions about the short length of corps members' commitments, he was asked to say that he "was doing everything in [his] power ... to be the best teacher" (Brewer and deMarrais 170). This demonstrates a belief present in much of TFA's rhetoric: it only takes grit to be great. There is a clear focus on training corps members to speak the correct lingo, and only that lingo.

TFA's disregard for criticism and outside opinions, supposed singular view of pedagogy, and rehearsed image contradicts its commitment to diversity. Equally as important as ethnic/racial and socioeconomic diversity is diversity of ideas, methods, and overall representation of the organization. If diversity is not promoted in this manner, TFA cannot actually grow into a sustained movement responsive to the social justice issues in education it claims to help tackle. TFA must stop quieting disagreement and inserting its own rhetoric.

### **Student Gains**

What drives TFA is its goal of eliminating educational inequity and, therefore, producing student gains in academic performance. Accordingly, at the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit, Kopp displayed two maps of Oakland, California:



Kopp explained that “Until a couple of years ago, California ranked schools based on the Academic Performance Index—failing schools were red, struggling schools were orange and yellow, and as they got better they moved to green and then blue” (“The Long Game”). She went on to claim that TFA has helped change many of those red, orange, and yellow circles to green and blue ones in the years between 1999 and 2013. While she acknowledges that TFA has

not done this alone, it is not clear how she can conclude that the organization even contributed (“The Long Game”). She lacks the hard data to support that claim.

In fact, the published data of TFA’s impact on student performance is very limited in general. In its annual reports from a five-year growth plan from 2006-2010, TFA only provides one internal metric of student achievement. The organization calls this metric the “significant gains” system and introduced it in 2007. It scores a corps member’s effectiveness based on undetermined, limited, solid, or significant gains (*2007 Annual Report*). Qualification for the higher categories of solid or significant gains is based off of academic growth (measured in years) of students, achievement of grade level benchmarks, and/or decreases in the achievement gap as tracked by standardized test scores (*2008 Annual Report*).

Following this measure, TFA reports that in 2007 the “% of first-year corps members who effect significant gains” was 18 percent, and the percentage of second-year corps members who did the same was 32 percent. For the combined categories of solid or significant gains in 2007, 37 percent of first-year corps members and 51 percent of second-year corps members qualified. 2010 saw an increase in these percentages and a similar pattern, with second-year TFA corps members demonstrating higher gains than first-year members. However, again note that this is the only hard data regarding corps member progress and student achievement that is provided in the annual reports for TFA’s five-year plan.

Another source of related information is the Teach For America National Principal Survey, which in 2007 found that 95 percent of principals felt that corps members were performing as well as or better than teachers with similar experience. Moreover, 61 percent of principals reported that corps members performed better (*2007 Annual Report*). As of 2015, “86

percent [of surveyed principals] said they'd hire a corps member again" and "9 of 10 reported being satisfied with the support TFA provides to corps members" ("Annual Report"). So it seems that TFA tends to describe student achievement or classroom impact in terms of what principals think of corps members. Interestingly, TFA does not publish information, at least transparently, about what broader communities think of its work and progress.

For an organization committed to making sure that "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education," Teach For America fails to satisfactorily report on key factors of student achievement. The information it provides is one-dimensional and not expansive enough to visualize a full picture of its impact. In its annual reports, growth and diversity are represented by several different hard-data measurements, whereas student achievement is recorded with one such metric. Even within the student achievement section of the reports, most of the information focuses on corps members and their development. In each of the other sections, the facts and figures center on corps members. TFA repeats much of its jargon and phrasing to speak highly of the individuals engaged in its program, not the students it reaches. If internal measurements of and data on student achievement are missing or simply are not published, what does that tell the public about the organization?

It also is interesting to note that Teach For America is aware of much of the outside research regarding its organization. In fact, TFA has compiled an entire report entitled "What the Research Says" which includes summaries of studies in four main areas: "instructional impact," "alumni impact," "TFA selection model," and "retention" ("What the Research Says" 1-17). Information on diversity and TFA's growth also is included ("What the Research Says" 2). These main areas are remarkably similar to the key priorities listed in several of TFA's

annual reports (“What the Research Says” 1-17). Additionally, while TFA’s annual reports included limited data on student achievement, their report on outside research cites over twenty studies concerned with “instructional impact” (“What the Research Says” 4-14).

Regardless of TFA’s underreporting and lack of language surrounding the populations it serves, other outside research simply demonstrates that TFA only has had modest success in terms of student achievement.

One such study, “An Evaluation of Teacher Differences and Student Outcomes in Houston, Texas” was performed by CREDO in partnership with TFA in 2001. While CREDO worked with TFA staff to gather the necessary data, this was the first independent study of corps members’ impact on student achievement (Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque xi). What CREDO concluded was that corps members typically demonstrated positive effects on student achievement, with larger gains in mathematics than reading. The researchers also found that corps members showed more positive impacts than other teachers but that, overall, these differences did not exhibit statistical significance. The final finding was that the results among corps members were less varied than those among other teachers (Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque xii-xiii). The research was completed in an effort to combat critics (Raymond, Fletcher, and Luque viii-x), but the data does not indicate that TFA is an indispensable asset to communities, as its progress is minimal.

Another study, “National Evaluation of Teach For America” was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research from 2001-2004. Its purpose was to offer data on whether or not alternative teacher training can reduce teacher shortages while also not lowering student achievement (“National Evaluation”). Similar to the study conducted by CREDO, these

researchers found that students of corps members demonstrated better performance in mathematics than students of other teachers but that no difference was detected in reading achievement. In addition to comparing the students of corps members and other teachers, the researchers also focused on the differences between students of corps members and other teachers who were certified. Findings were similar (“National Evaluation”). Again, these results are unexceptional.

Mentioned earlier, “Teach For America: A Review of the Evidence” reviews research on corps members’ effects on student outcomes (Heilig and Jez 5-8). Based off of the studies available, Heilig and Jez cite research which has found that corps members achieve similar results as other teachers who lack certification or traditional education degrees. It also was seen that more experienced corps members demonstrated reading gains among their students that were comparable to those of other teachers. More experienced corps members also were able to affect larger gains in math than were the other teachers. On the other hand, new corps members do not demonstrate as high impacts on mathematics and reading achievement as do other new teachers who are certified (Heilig and Jez 5-8). Additionally, the report states that all teachers produce better results as they gain experience. Unfortunately, it has been found that TFA teachers have extremely high rates of turnover (Heilig and Jez 8-9).

An even more recent study was performed in 2013 by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. This was “the first large-scale random assignment study of secondary math teachers from” Teach For America (Clark et al. xix). The researchers came to three main conclusions. One of which is that corps members’ students had higher levels of math achievement than did other teachers’ students regardless of the other teachers’ paths to certification (alternative vs.

traditional). New corps members' students performed better than those of other teachers who also were new and who were more experienced. Corps members affected higher student achievement in math than other teachers for both 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> graders and 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders (Clark et al. xxv-xxvi).

These studies show that TFA has had some positive impact, but it has been limited and underreported. A full review of the existing research is beyond the scope of this paper, but TFA's "What the Research Says" and the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice's "Teach For America: A Review of the Evidence" would be informative sources for curious readers to explore further.

Additionally, TFA has been criticized for the manner in which it trains its teachers to conduct this important work. From the beginning of their journey with TFA, many corps members feel unprepared for what is to come in a real-life classroom. Some of them are chosen to teach subjects they never studied during college or with which they have no experience. Michael J. Steudeman, mentioned earlier, retells the story of his time as a corps member advisor when he attempted to train a corps member who would be teaching English. Apparently, this corps member did not have the skills that he would be attempting to impart to his students and had not majored in English (Brewer and deMarrais 49-50). Ian Scott, another alum featured by Brewer and deMarrais, faced a similar challenge, as he was chosen to be a resource specialist teacher but had never really learned how to perform the tasks associated with this job and had majored in political science in college (Brewer and deMarrais 74). Nonetheless, Steudeman's trainee and Scott were both reassured that they possessed the "grit" and leadership skills to become great teachers, regardless of their true expertise or lack thereof (Brewer and deMarrais 50,79).



Because of this belief in grit and passion to get the job done rather than true expertise, the five-week summer training provided to incoming corps members has proved to be rather lacking in both breadth and depth. In his narrative, Steudeman reflects on TFA's belief that one can become a great teacher only by teaching, not by learning. More nuanced study of the teaching practice is left for corps members to do on their own via assigned readings before arriving to the summer training (Brewer and deMarrais 48). Scott seconds Steudeman when he recalls that TFA provides uniform training to all corps members, without consideration of the variety of subjects that corps members will teach (Brewer and deMarrais 79). In reality, "TFA focused more on developing 'leaders' instead of teachers" (Brewer and deMarrais 79).

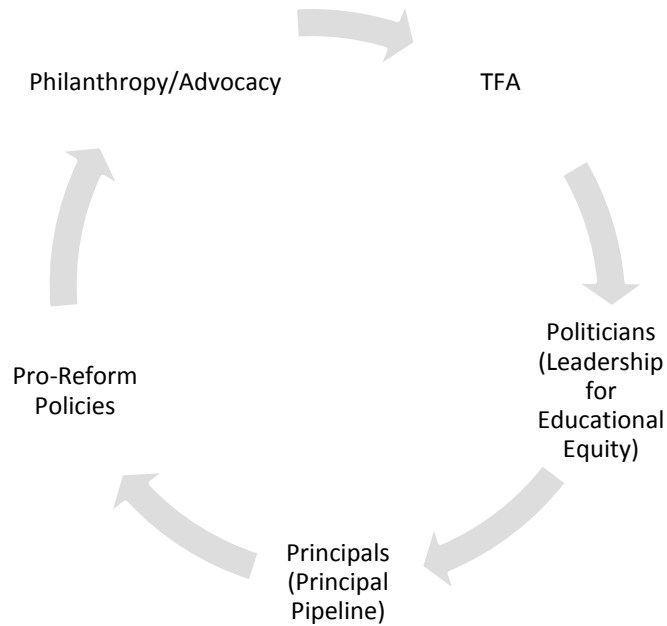
Besides its inadequate training, TFA also has been critiqued in regards to its overall model of working towards student achievement. For instance, Ashlee Anderson explains many of her claims in opposition of TFA, and one that is particularly noteworthy is about the achievement gap. What she argues is that this sort of metric, "although common in popular discourse, ultimately pathologizes students for failing to conform to whitestream standards and curricula that are perpetuated in public schools" (Anderson 40). Therefore, she believes, this metric perpetuates the structures that have contributed to the gap in the first place, as students are stigmatized and held to standards outside of their cultural realms (Anderson 40). Overall, Anderson takes issue with TFA's counterproductive implementation of deficit thinking, the idea that the organization assumes that there is a problem and labels it as such (Anderson 28-41). By acknowledging the strengths and potential of students and their communities, TFA would be able to take students out of the boxes prescribed by societal norms. They would be empowering individuals to resist confinements placed on their achievement. However, TFA fails to do this.

## Alumni Impact

In crafting TFA's model, Kopp imagined that the organization "could produce a change in the very consciousness of our country" (*One Day, All Children* 6); and the program's alumni "would make better decisions because of their experience teaching in public schools" (*One Day, All Children* 6). Accordingly, whenever TFA representatives are asked about the short two-year time commitment of corps members, they typically claim that their alumni go on to pursue career paths connected to making positive change in the education system.

Thus, in reporting on the varied paths of its alumni, TFA focuses on their engagement in political leadership, school leadership, and social entrepreneurship. In 2006, five alumni held elective office, and this number increased to 45 in 2010. Zero alumni in 2006 were social entrepreneurs, but by 2010, there were eight. School leaders among alumni in 2006 numbered 191, and in 2010 there were 554 (*2006 Annual Report; 2010 Annual Report*). Of 50,000 alumni and current corps members in 2015, over 20,000 were teachers, 325 were involved in advocacy and policy, and 280 were leaders in the school system. 95 held elected positions, 125 were leaders of unions, and 1,010 partook in school leadership ("Annual Report").

However, this spotlight on alumni is remarkably similar to TFA's focus on growth and sparked Brewer and deMarrais' belief that TFA is taking control of the education system at every level (2). Here is a replication of their "TFA Circle of Influence":



The Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice’s “Teach For America: A Review of the Evidence” also focuses on the broader impact of corps members (Heilig and Jez 9-10). This review cites one study as having found that civic engagement is fairly low among TFA alumni. The writers do acknowledge that only one study has come to this conclusion and note that, in general, a considerable number of corps members go on to hold significant positions after their two-year commitment (Heilig and Jez 9-10). Nonetheless, that conclusion points to yet another possible discrepancy between TFA’s mission and actual work.

### **Is Teach For America a Social Justice Endeavor?**

Clearly, TFA advocates for growth of and increased diversity within its corps, impact on student achievement, and development of influential alumni. Even more apparent, many individuals and researchers have found that TFA does not live up to its own expectations or goes about its work in a manner that is counterproductive. Given this inconsistency between goals and results, TFA either is extremely inefficient or is not the type of organization it claims to be.

As a 25-year-old program that has garnered a great deal of support and attention as it continues to grow, the former option is doubtful. Rather, it would seem that TFA actually is not a true and fully formed social justice endeavor.

**Lack of Vision → Narrow View of Social Structures and Education Issues → Senseless Growth → Repeated Rhetoric and Static Priorities → Building a Brand → Hegemonic Social Entrepreneurship**

*Lack of Vision & Narrow View*

In reflecting on her experience, Wendy Kopp admits to having been “a naïve college student with one big idea” (*One Day, All Children* xii) and claims that “it was a blind faith in the power of the idea that kept [her] going” (*One Day, All Children* 40). What these words and the history of Teach For America reveal is that while Kopp had an idea and the drive to realize her goals, she lacked perspective and experience. More than that, she demonstrated no prior commitment to social justice issues and civic engagement. Thus, Teach For America was inspired by her few observations and leadership in one student organization. This resulted in a vision that was not fully formed and that required her to rely on “grit” to achieve her objectives, just as corps members must in order to become great teachers.

While there are flaws in the development of Kopp’s idea for the national teacher corps, Waddock and Steckler’s research would seem to support her approach. In their report, these researchers refer to a social entrepreneur as “an individual who starts an enterprise that focuses on achieving social or environmental goals” (720). They explain that there are two pathways that lead to social entrepreneurial vision: deliberate and emergent pathways (Waddock and Steckler 719). Both are thought to stem from a desire to change something in society for the

better (Waddock and Steckler 730). On the way to creating that change, those leading a deliberate vision pathway are directed by a purpose. The pathway Waddock and Steckler found to be more common within their sample, the emergent approach, is guided first by action. For each pathway, vision and action eventually contribute to each other (Waddock and Steckler 721-724).

Waddock and Steckler's purpose in conducting this study was to lend more credit to emergent pathway visionaries who typically may be viewed as unsuccessful or unguided. In an attempt to do this, the researchers selected a sample of "23 social entrepreneurs [who] are collectively responsible for opening new lines of thought leadership and establishing a set of institutions..." (Waddock and Steckler 723). It was implied that these individuals are representative of social entrepreneurs more broadly and that they have sparked meaningful change regardless of their varied paths.

While this may be true, Kopp did not just lack vision; she also was not intentional about the substantial changes she sought to make in the education system. Perhaps delving into action immediately can lead to a reliance on grit instead of the principles that guide meaningful interaction with individuals and communities. Even if action is founded in those principles, the social entrepreneur could lose sight of them along the way, as action becomes more necessary and demanding.

Even so, Kopp hardly could be labeled as a deliberate visionary, and she does not fully fit the criteria of an emergent visionary either. Her actions were rooted in a beliefs and value of educational equity, but these driving factors were shallow and imprecise given the manner in which she stumbled into them during her college career. Coming from a privileged background

herself, it makes sense that Kopp did not truly understand the extremely complex social structures within which students in under resourced schools find themselves (*One Day, All Children* 4-5). Along similar lines, Teju Cole writes that “There are serious problems of governance, of infrastructure, of democracy, and of law and order. These problems are neither simple in themselves nor are they reducible to slogans. Such problems are both intricate and intensely local” (Cole). Kopp relied on what Cole and many others call the White Savior Industrial Complex which entails the privilege of entering communities with the intent of changing them. Cole characterizes the convenience and superficiality of such efforts by claiming that “The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening” (Cole). Cole argues that in order to work with other communities, one must be humble and empower the members take an active role in the work (Cole).

Beyond a vision pathway, researchers have found that social entrepreneurs usually possess a certain set of skills: “(1) establishing and managing complex relationships with multiple stakeholders, (2) educating the target customer group and inducing behavior change, (3) measuring and articulating social impact, (4) co-creating the product or service with multiple stakeholders, (5) developing solutions that address the root cause of a social problem, (6) developing a financial model that supports the venture’s social mission, and (7) prioritizing social and financial returns” (Mueller, Chambers, and Neck 312-313). Rather than evaluating Kopp in regards to these skills, this paper will examine TFA’s overall success with each.

(1) and (4)

In the research from which this list of skills was drawn, stakeholders are defined as program/product beneficiaries, non-profit organizations, for-profit organizations, and suppliers. While a variety of stakeholders were included in the development of TFA, Kopp's recollection of the process and TFA's annual reports show an absence of community input and only some teacher feedback. The counter-narratives of critics support this, as well. TFA convinced school districts to take corps members and surveys principals' satisfaction with said members. However, schools, veteran teachers, corps members as a whole, students, and broader communities are not given a clear voice and avenue for contributing to TFA's work.

(3) and (5)

Because Kopp had not been deeply and sufficiently committed to social justice work as an undergraduate, she did not appear to understand or foresee the true social impact of Teach For America. Again, she even claims to have been guided by "blind faith" (40). Unfortunately, "blind faith" (40) will not be enough to comprehend and tackle the extremely complex social structures alluded to earlier. Unfortunately, quality teachers will not solve the inequities present in education and society, at large. There are a myriad of other issues facing students and their communities, and a few good teachers who stay for a short time in the profession will not change that. Kopp blindly pursued one single idea and did not demonstrate a nuanced approach to a delicate situation.

(7)

Lastly, TFA's annual reports cause one to wonder if the organization does prioritize social returns. As described before, there the metrics of these academic returns for students are limited and potentially underreported (if internal statistics exist).

### *Senseless Growth*

This lack of vision and understanding of social issues has led to senseless growth of the organization. Kopp was focused on making TFA into a large and noticeable movement, which has been demonstrated by the multitude of measures used to track and report on TFA's growth. The question is: Has this growth been necessary to achieve TFA's goals? TFA sees itself as the only solution to educational inequity and as in control of that solution. If the objective is to create a sustainable movement, the organization should be focused on empowering communities to do this work instead of solely doing it for them. Teach school districts how to recruit the best and brightest teachers. TFA supporters would argue that the program is contributing to sustainable change by inspiring alumni to focus on educational issues within the contexts of their careers after participating in TFA. However, this embodies a focus on encouraging outsiders to come into a community to "fix" its problems instead of letting its actual members take charge.

### *Repeated Rhetoric and Static Priorities*

At this point, one might ask if the short-sidedness of one individual could exact such large effects and shape the organization in the long run. However, Kopp's fixation on a single, underdeveloped idea has completely infiltrated the organization and is representative of its current state. A look at the repeated rhetoric of TFA including its mantra and its static priorities would lend support to this conclusion. TFA's goals do not appear to have evolved as their



partner communities have changed, and the organization consistently uses the same language to articulate those same goals. This also is reflected in its superficial diversity initiatives, insularity reported by critics, surface-level measurement of student achievement, and very basic corps member professional development. Although Kopp has transferred much of TFA's leadership to others, her naïve and uninformed practices still persist.

### *Building a Brand*

Perhaps these unwavering objectives and limited discourse developed out of a necessity to expand the organization's reach. The message is simple, the language is clear, and the mantra is inspiring and catchy. On the surface, it has shown success and has the ability to garner increased support. The organization is led by charismatic individuals, has a recognizable logo, and demonstrates a tendency to combat criticism in the same manner a business would: acknowledge outside views and then dismiss them for being false. With this, Teach For America has come to resemble a brand name to be built, grown, and managed like a business rather than a true social justice endeavor. Derrick Houck, one of the alumni cited earlier, seconds this idea, as he found this to be true from his experiences in the corps (Brewer and deMarrais 176).

Authentic social initiatives should work toward a time when the problems it first sought to tackle no longer exist. This period would be marked by a decrease in demand for a particular organization's services and by the closing of the organization altogether. Instead, Teach For America seeks to grow and grow, with no signs of stopping. In fact, Teach For America even has expanded efforts in other countries with Teach For All which was co-founded by Wendy Kopp in 2007 ("Teach For All"). Others might justify this growth by explaining that TFA's work is far from being finished, and expansion is necessary before contraction. Nonetheless,

TFA only publicizes plans of growth and never includes any information about long-term goals for turning the work over to the community or not having a need for it at all. Why would a brand builder want to dismantle its work?

Others have noticed and commented on TFA's lack of balance between the social and entrepreneurial aspects of social entrepreneurship, with more weight placed on the latter. For instance, Ellis et al. studied the rhetoric of Teach For All, Teach For America, and some of their related programs that can be found on their websites (60). These researchers had no intention of evaluating TFA's impact but simply sought to understand the language it uses and what those words imply. They concluded that persuasive devices such as pathos, ethos, and logos frequently can be found in the organizations' literature (Ellis et al. 76-77). These rhetorical strategies typically are found in advertisements and marketing schemes and appeal to emotion, logical reasoning, and the reputation of the speaker, respectively. While not necessarily labeling TFA as a brand, they do claim that, "Teach for All is less about teaching than it is about the contemporary importance attached to the particular kind of leadership public services are said to require in order to survive and the forms of capital necessary to fix a society that is said to be broken" (Ellis et al. 77). Some terms they also use to describe TFA are "venture philanthropy" and "neoliberal social entrepreneurship" (Ellis et al. 77, 60). In general, their paper is guided by what they find to be a common idea throughout these organizations – the concept of "teaching other people's children, elsewhere for a while" (Ellis et al. 77).

Ian Scott, one of the alumni whose counter-narrative previously was described, also touched upon this neoliberal agenda of TFA and expands on this idea a bit more than Ellis et al.. At the time he shared his recollections, Scott was an education policy Ph.D. student whose research was focused on what he describes as neoliberal education policies (Brewer and

deMarrais 73). He writes that “neoliberalism is a theory of political economy arguing the fundamental functions of democratic governance are improved when subjected to the free market, which allows private companies to compete to provide important social services” (Brewer and deMarrais 76). Scott explains that this idea began to inform education policy discussions around 1990. He goes on to claim that this leads to support of charter schools, voucher programs, and evaluation of teacher and student performance without regard for larger structural and societal issues. Additionally, he argues that this gives way to schools being treated as experimental settings where educational innovations are tested. He also believes that TFA follows this model of marketizing and privatizing education, based off of where the program locates corps members and who its major donors are (Brewer and deMarrais 76). If TFA sees itself as functioning within such a market, it would make more sense as to why it frames itself, knowingly or not, as a brand rather than a social justice endeavor.

### *Hegemonic Social Entrepreneurship*

“So what if Teach For America is a brand?” one might ask. Does this mean TFA is unjust or wrong? It is true that brands can create sustainable and equitable social change sometimes, but not always. Likewise, social entrepreneurship projects, branded or not, are not always just. For instance, Chell et al. argue that “the relation between social entrepreneurship and ethics needs to be problematized” and that there has not been enough research in this area of social entrepreneurship (Chell et al. 619). Often times, they claim, social is seen as synonymous with ethical, which they believe is an unjustified assumption. Chell et al. cite papers that have contributed to this study of how social entrepreneurship and ethics relate, and two of them will be examined here (Chell et al. 621-623).

The first paper, by Dey and Steyaert, explains that past researchers have assumed that the tendency to be ethical is inherently part of a social entrepreneur's identity. What they instead assert is "that ethics, rather than being a property of the individual, is a practice through which social entrepreneurs engage ... with existing relations of power" (Dey and Steyaert 637). Similarly, TFA, like any other social entrepreneurial enterprise, is not necessarily ethical by virtue of its identity, nature, or mission.

Thus, TFA cannot easily be labeled as just or unjust. Then, does one make the distinction? The other paper cited by Chell et al. may lead to a reasonable answer. In this piece, Smith et al. seek to comprehend and suggest a model for how social entrepreneurs make decisions about scaling their efforts (Smith et al. 677). These researchers identify scaling as the process of expanding upon an organization's work in order to have a greater impact on society. Organizational modes social entrepreneurs can utilize to scale their projects are commonly recognized by researchers as dissemination, affiliation, and branching.

Within the dissemination model, expansion is made extremely open, and information and guidance simply are offered to outside partners who are able to make their own decisions. Affiliation entails the creation of a network in which the involved parties typically agree to use the same brand and adopt certain practices which can be adapted to fit local needs. Branching refers to the fairly closed process of starting new sites of the same organization and having each site abide by a template (Smith et al. 681-682).

Smith et al. explain how an entrepreneur might choose a closed, middle-ground, or open mode of growth by presenting two propositions. The first is that the likelihood of an entrepreneur using a more open mode is directly proportional to the level of moral intensity they

feel is attached to their work (Smith et al. 684). The second is that the entrepreneur's perceived need for control can reverse (perhaps not completely) the outcome of the first proposition, leading to a more closed mode. The researchers argue that this proposition holds whether a social entrepreneur seeks control for ethical purposes or for more personal, egoistic reasons (Smith et al. 685).

In expanding its work, TFA has adopted what Chell and others have identified as a rather "closed" model of branching which is distinct from the more "open" modes of scaling. TFA coordinates local offices in each of its 52 regions, with each region following standard practices and procedures. While these guidelines may be adapted for particular school districts, all TFA regions operate very similarly, and all are managed directly by TFA employees. Smith et al. present the results of Proposition 1 as being mitigated by the outcomes of Proposition 2 and eventually leading to the social entrepreneur's final decision (Smith et al. 684). They do not articulate whether or not a decision itself might reflect past outcomes of each of the propositions, but the ability to reverse their model is implied. Thus, if TFA is utilizing a closed mode of organization, its leaders' desire for control in the public education system must exceed their feelings of moral intensity.

Perhaps the question to consider now is whether or not this desire was unjustly founded or was related to the wish for greater social change. However, John M. Alexander might disagree and claim that the root of the desire does not matter.

Alexander writes about the shortcoming of Amartya Sen's capabilities theory, going on to explain why its implications regarding control must be addressed (Alexander 5). While not

completely against Sen's theory, Alexander argues that Sen does not adequately address freedom and that this is a significant limitation (Alexander 5).

Alexander claims that Sen does recognize the uselessness of the non-interference concept of freedom (Alexander 8). In fact, he explains that Sen sees interference as beneficial if it redistributes resources and fosters capability (Alexander 5-6, 9). Sen's theory would indicate that "a person who is poor ... might, strictly speaking, encounter no interference from the state or fellow citizens, but he or she lacks the required capacities and conditions to live a life of real freedom" (Alexander 9). Nevertheless, according to Alexander, Sen does not go far enough. Alexander cites others who believe that in order to have true capabilities, one cannot be reliant on others for those capabilities. No one should be exercising control of those capabilities (Alexander 10-11). He provides an example of "village or town councils [who] tend to dominate, even when other participants are not so badly off in terms of basic capabilities" (Alexander 12).

Overall, Alexander proposes that freedom, specifically non-dominance, is essential to fostering and realizing true capability for all. If one party is in control of or has dominance over an individual's capabilities, this would be extremely detrimental to that person (Alexander 10-12). Accordingly, Alexander likely would view Kopp's desire for control as inherently harmful to students and communities everywhere, in spite of her true intentions. TFA seeks to expand via a closed organizational mode without clear and reported interaction and cooperation with the communities it serves. TFA might increase opportunities for and foster the capability of its students, but it leaves no room for variation of practice. TFA also does not show any signs of slowing its growth and empowering communities to take over. Therefore, the students and their communities derive their capabilities from TFA who exercises dominance over those

capabilities. TFA, accordingly, could be characterized as hegemonic social entrepreneurship, given that hegemony is defined as the exercise of control over other individuals (Merriam Webster).

## **Conclusion**

While TFA has several faults, this paper is not arguing for the eradication of the program. TFA is twenty five years old and has garnered far too much support to be easily put to a halt. Instead, this paper investigates the nature of the controversy surrounding the organization. Drawing from the available information, the source of the controversy has been found to lie in TFA's noble, but mostly entrepreneurial pursuit that lacks resemblance to a true social justice movement.

Many will ask what the next steps should be. While the answer is beyond the scope of this paper, one small step will entail increasing one's awareness of the issues at hand. Young college graduates, individuals looking to change careers, politicians, researchers, and many others may easily be drawn to what seems to be an inspiring component of a meaningful movement. However, if those individuals do not want to perpetuate inequality and the corresponding destruction of communities, they will consider the implications of the work TFA does. They will steer clear of the convenient patterns put into place by the organization. They will challenge the rhetoric, the commonly held beliefs, and the lack of intentionality.

Perhaps their prodding will gradually change the structure of TFA, making it into the truly momentous and worthwhile project that so many individuals hope for it to be. The fact of the matter is that the education system does face challenges, and TFA has the power to make great change if its leaders listen to the communities and several other leaders surrounding them.

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