Teach For America: An Analysis of the Ethical Conflict Embedded in a Program of National Service

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Teach For America is a national service initiative started in 1989 by Wendy Kopp as her senior year project at Princeton University (Teach For America, 2006). Beginning that year, Kopp cobbled together a small group of individuals who would begin the recruitment and funding drives necessary to initiate the program. Teach For America set out to place recent college graduates in high-poverty urban and rural educational settings throughout the United States. The next year, Teach For America placed its first group of 500 recruits in six regions throughout the country. In 2005, the program boasted a recruitment class of 17,000 students eager to commit to a two year placement (Brooks, 2005). In some cases, more than ten percent of the graduating classes from schools such as Harvard, Dartmouth and The University of Michigan applied to participate in the program.

The response to this initiative has been polarized. The question of who will teach our most vulnerable learners is a pivotal ethical and policy issue. On the one hand, the program places bright, energized volunteers from top colleges and universities into some of the most difficult schools in the nation. On the other hand, most of the recruits enter Teach For America having completed only the most rudimentary teacher preparation coursework, and most have no record of interest in sustained careers in public education.

Teach For America detractors draw evidence from a rich educational literature that confirms the relationship between adequate teacher preparation and strong student performance (Ballou & Podgursky, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002). These studies have had a dramatic and far-reaching impact on the nation's pedagogical as well as the political landscape. Such studies have shaped teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities nationwide. They have also provided a strong empirical basis for the Highly Qualified Teacher component of No Child Left Behind (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2003). Teach For America detractors have drawn on this literature in studying the impact of Teach For America teachers, and present persuasive evidence that the program under-serves the students it seeks to help (Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Thoughtful analyses of student performance data support the notion that students in Teach For America programs are outperformed by students taught by educationally prepared and appropriately credentialed teachers (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Vazquez Heilig, 2005).

Supporters of Teach For America have been highly critical of the research methodology of program critics, and name a variety of benefits associated with the program (Goldhaber, 2005; Podgursky, 2005). First and foremost, the program participants truly represent the best and brightest of our universities. There is an underlying belief that the intelligence and energy that these individuals carry with them will inspire both the students they teach and the colleagues with whom they teach. Supporters have raised the argument that the schools in which Teach For America participants are placed are the most difficult schools to staff. They posit that staffing these schools with Teach For America volunteers is far superior to letting them suffer the consequences of the teacher shortages that persist. Finally, supporters note that the Teach For America program provides a hopeful and inspiring example of national service. As David Gergen of the Boston Globe writes, "What Teach for America suggests is a period of giving back to the country when you are young creates citizens for life. Universal national service is an idea whose time is here" (Gergen, 2005).

From a professional ethics perspective, emergent themes contribute to the policy implications of Teach For America. The ethics of justice and care challenge our schools to find solutions that provide a balance as we strive to meet the needs of a diverse society (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005). The ethics of care provides a very direct link between the operation of our educational institutions and focus on the needs of students. "The first job of the schools is to care for our children" (Noddings, 1992). The intersection of the ethics of care and the ethic of the profession could not be clearer. Ethical guidelines from the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the American Association of School Administrators, and the Association of School Business Officials all begin with the admonition that the school leader shall, "…make the well being of students the fundamental value in all decision making and actions." For members of the teaching profession, the "Commitment to the Student" is one of two pillars of the ethical framework of the National Educators Association.

The research on Teach For America is thoughtful and well developed, but remains contradictory and controversial. The popularity of the Teach For America initiative, coupled with an extraordinary marketing machine provide this grass-roots program with enormous appeal. At the same time, the students served by Teach For America participants demonstrate some of the most challenging learning needs in the nation. Their political powerbase and advocacy structures are weak. There is great practical urgency but little political motivation for providing them with teachers of the highest quality.

Ultimately, this is where the ethical and policy implications of this controversy become most clear. If we know that teacher preparation impacts how students learn, and we know that students in high poverty settings present the greatest instructional challenges, we have an obligation to control the systems that allow our neediest students to be taught by the least prepared teachers. Ultimately the dialog is not so much about Teach For America. Teach for America provides a popular and energizing patch to a system with a fundamental weakness. Ultimately, our policy makers need to correct that weakness and improve the controls over how teachers are assigned to schools.

Because the assignment of teachers is generally subject to the rules of collective bargaining, because high poverty schools are seldom the most attractive placement for teachers, and because veteran teachers can generally assert their seniority rights to teach in settings that they prefer, teaching positions in high poverty settings are often filled by the least experienced, and sometimes the least prepared teachers (Levin, Mulhern, & Schunck, 2005; Riley, Fusano, Munk, & Peterson, 2002). Because of these realities, efforts to repair the system of teacher assignment will require negotiation. In

some cases, those negotiations will only be successful with accompanying policy, legislative and fiscal leverage. Such changes can only take place in an environment of honest academic inquiry that leads to more thorough understanding by our practitioners, our leaders –both educational and political-- and our communities. Only with thorough analysis and informed dialog will our educational institutions find ways to break out of the paradigms that allow our most vulnerable learners to be taught by our least prepared teachers.

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