

EDUCATION

The Teach For America Bait and Switch: From 'You'll Be Making a Difference' to 'You're Making Excuses'

Idealistic young people are lured by TFA's promises. But what happens once they're placed in classrooms has left some alums questioning the organization's approach.

By [Jessica Millen](#) / [AlterNet](#) | August 18, 2015, 3:00 AM GMT

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Editor's note: In the decade and a half of its existence, Teach For America has trained upwards of 50,000 individuals to enter classrooms nationwide and "make a difference" in the lives of children -- usually those living in poverty. But the question of how prepared these individuals are to deal with the realities faced by the children they teach and meet their educational needs has long been in question.

In the following excerpt, taken from an essay in the newly published book, [Teach For America Counter-Narratives: Alumni Speak Up and Speak Out](#), one former TFA corps member shares her account of her time with the organization, alleging that TFA both "preyed on [her] naïveté of the lived realities of urban schooling" and "exploited [her] desire to 'make a difference.'" Her disillusionment with the organization and its educational philosophy grew so deep, in fact, that she resigned after just 6 months.

The Bait

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On the urging of a friend and campus recruiter, I applied to join TFA in October of my senior year at the University of Notre Dame. After a multipart interview process, I was accepted into the program's Greater New Orleans region. Soon afterwards, TFA began to effectively use social networks to bolster my desire to join. Former classmates and undergraduate campus recruiters reached out and stressed how wonderful it was that I had gotten into such a selective organization. My interviewer called to congratulate me on a job well done. After being bombarded with so many congratulations, I couldn't help but feel proud that I had passed through such a selective hiring process.

The official TFA recruiter on my campus held events for accepted corps members after each hiring deadline, offering free drinks and appetizers at an on-campus restaurant. I found it strange how much money TFA, a nonprofit organization, spent on us. We wore name tags, ate food, and discussed our excitement about the upcoming school year. Our recruiter, like the other TFA corps members and staff who had reached out to me, stressed the "prestige" of the program and how much TFA would help us in the future. He himself was a former TFA corps member who taught for 3 years before joining the recruiting arm of the organization. I found his enthusiasm for TFA contagious as he pointed out TFA's connections with graduate schools and the numerous opportunities that would be afforded to us post-TFA.

At the time, I was impressed by how many corps members were still involved in public education. According to TFA, more than 775 alumni were in school leadership positions at schools across the country (Teach For America, 2012a). I was glad to hear that TFA wasn't always just used as a stepping stone to more lucrative careers; information on the TFA website boasted that as of August 2013, 78% of alumni from the Greater New Orleans region were still in education (Teach For America, 2012b). I didn't bother to look up the evidence behind TFA's claims. I trusted that the information from this professional organization that seemed to care so much about children was

ethically collected, compiled, and reported. I now know that the organization's assertion that "Teach For America corps members help their students achieve academic gains equal to or larger than teachers from other preparation programs, according to the most recent and rigorous studies on teacher effectiveness" (Teach For America, 2012c) is, at best, extremely misleading. Reviews of the research cited by TFA to back its claims of corps member effectiveness ultimately reveal a less favorable picture; the majority of studies listed by TFA are not peer-reviewed, are problematic, and/or produced mixed results (Kovacs & Slate-Young, 2013; Vasquez Heilig & Jez, 2014).

But taking TFA's claims of effectiveness at face value, I continued to be wooed by the organization. Besides the free events hosted by the campus recruiter, TFA offered additional financial incentives to make the bait even sweeter. I remember gushing to my parents that I would not only receive a full teacher's salary, but also get funding to cover the transitional costs of moving and living during the summer before I began teaching. As an indebted college student, it seemed that, on top of using my skills and education to serve in public education, I was making a solid financial decision in joining TFA. Such tantalizing benefits convinced me that not only was I making a strong move for my future, but I would also be "making a difference" in the lives of low-income and minority students. As a young, well-educated, idealistic student, I took the bait—hook, line and sinker.

The "Training"



After a 7-hour drive to TFA's summer training Institute in Atlanta, I was excited to begin. Although I had been warned that Institute could be an overwhelming experience, the intensity of our schedule was still surprising. Breakfast at 5:30 am, followed by a full day at our school sites, a quick dinner, additional training sessions in the

evening, and then trying to complete the next day's lesson plans was the perfect recipe for sleep deprivation, and left little time to process all this new information.

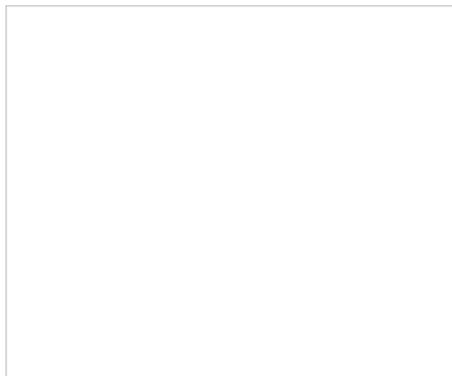
During this training, the organization's "you'll be making a difference" message became more insistent. Each morning, after being bused to our school site in the early morning, we were greeted by our school director. After signing in, we all gathered in our school site's library to begin our morning with an

inspirational video. Over the course of those 5 weeks we watched what seemed to be every single well-known, inspirational education video on YouTube. We saw Kid President's "Pep Talk to Teachers and Students!", listened to Taylor Mali tell us "What Teachers Make," watched Sir Ken Robinson's animation video "Changing Education Paradigms," and many, many more.

Their model was working! At the time, I was inspired and eager to be in the classroom. Here I was, part of this great movement that was going to make a difference! So swept up in the staff members' fervor, I did not stop to think about why we were being shown all these inspirational and emotionally charged messages, or what they would ultimately contribute to my ability to be a competent, caring, and effective teacher.

It didn't end with just morning bursts of "let's change the world." Throughout our training sessions, we were often shown videos of real TFA teachers working in their classrooms. They were always uplifting clips, showing well-behaved students and enthusiastic teachers. We were told they had started just like us at one point in time, although the teachers' educational backgrounds were never divulged. We were never shown any videos of "bad" teachers or teachers who were struggling, nor did we see how teachers deal with students who are challenging behaviorally, or even defiant. And we were certainly never shown how to handle students' physical altercations or emotional breakdowns.

I had expected more hands-on training throughout the program. But with only a half hour to an hour and half in front of students each day, I found that we spent more time talking about how we were going to be make a difference rather than learning how to be effective teachers who could ultimately "make a difference."



In addition to watching inspirational videos, we listened to many TFA staff members give talks about the rewarding nature of teaching. They showed us pictures of themselves and their students and told stories of how they had impacted their students' lives. These peppy speakers were extremely positive, only occasionally using vague

phrasing to describe teaching as "the hardest thing you'll ever do." There was

no delving into why it was the “hardest thing I would ever do.” nor was there space to ask the speakers to elaborate. While I recognize that it might be difficult to convey the specific challenges that come with the first year of teaching, when such uplifting testimony is paired with only examples of successful TFA teachers, it was easy and safe for me to assume that I would soon begin “making a difference” once I entered the classroom on my own.

The “making a difference” message was not limited to our sessions in classroom management and pedagogy. During our training, we attended two huge pep rallies, one at the beginning and one at the end of Institute. As the Atlanta Institute hosted multiple TFA regions, the auditorium was packed. At the opening rally we were greeted by a huge PowerPoint slide declaring “One Day,” highlighting TFA’s mantra that “One day all children will have access to an excellent education.” The title of the evening’s program was “Your Role in the Movement for Educational Equity.” After listening to speakers thank us for undertaking the journey we were about to begin, I felt excited. It seemed like TFA was an organization that was actually making a tangible difference in communities across the United States.

Before the closing pep rally, each school site’s corps members created a chant to be shared with the full assembly. Most corps members had purchased t-shirts for their school sites, and as we filed in to our assigned school site spaces, the chanting began. Huge groups of matching corps members were on their feet, yelling at the top of their lungs the cheers they had written. Soon, the TFA staff running the rally began to moderate the cheering, shouting each school site’s name and encouraging each group to be louder than the rest. After more peppy speakers, a student brass band played the corps members out, matching the same frenzied enthusiasm that the hundreds of young, soon-to-be teachers had displayed. In retrospect, the techniques used at these rallies made it feel more like a multilevel marketing convention than a gathering of thoughtful educators. It is strange that TFA felt the need to use such manipulative methods of drumming up enthusiasm on a group of well-educated individuals already committed to their organization.

The Switch

After those 5 weeks of training, I was alone in a classroom with 27 eight- and nine-year-olds. I had no idea what to do with the rigorous and inflexible curriculum modalities that dictated what I taught and when. There was nothing in our training that indicated our teaching lives would be so scripted and controlled. Moreover, I was confused by strict administrative policies that were completely developmentally inappropriate; for instance, my third graders were

allowed only 20 minutes of recess, once a week. Again, there was no mention of what to do when school-wide policies were completely incongruent with what I knew at this point to be developmentally appropriate practices.

Trying to balance the demands and expectations of both my school and TFA was challenging, especially when both parties were extremely focused on data and standardized testing to the detriment of what my young students needed. This made it difficult for me to realize my vision of schooling. While I understood the necessity of assessment and its usefulness in gauging how much students know, and therefore in future lesson planning, both my school and TFA's focus on testing overshadowed my legitimate concerns for students' emotional and social well-being and academic growth beyond what could be measured in omnipresent assessments. I had to prepare my students for weekly and quarterly testing, on top of looming state-mandated tests that would also measure my success as a teacher. The pressure from both the state and district to raise student test scores manifested in my administration's extreme concern with test scores and maximizing instructional time not only in specific subjects but also to specific isolated skill sets, always to the detriment of exploring other important areas of elementary education, such as exposure to culture, creative and scientific thinking, music, and art.

Armed only with TFA's strictly behaviorist methods of classroom management, I was unprepared for many of the issues I faced, and my classroom quickly spiraled out of control. From my 5 weeks of training, I was knowledgeable only about behaviorist management methods that focused on giving clear directions, narrating student behavior when they were following directions, and then giving consequences to those students not complying. These management methods were presented as best practices during our training; no other alternatives were mentioned.

After attempting to use TFA's preferred classroom management system in my own classroom, I realized that the behaviorist theory of management was not working for my students or for me. When I expressed these feelings to TFA staff members, however, my concerns were ignored and brushed aside. In one meeting with my real-time coach from TFA, who had 4 years of teaching experience, I expressed how uncomfortable I was with forcing my students to remain seated all the time. My coach insisted that students learn best when they are seated. He then noticed that, according to the scripted conversation template from TFA, we had gone over the allotted time for this portion of our meeting. Rather than continuing a conversation that could have helped me understand TFA's position, he decided that following the prescribed

conversation model was more important and ended the discussion. Looking back, it is easy to see why I felt that I was not being supported or listened to by TFA staff. Suddenly, I found myself hearing a different story than the one I was told during the application and training process. Now, instead of “making a difference,” I was told I was “making excuses,” by not believing in myself enough and not being the leader of my classroom.

I met with my TFA manager of teacher leadership development (MTLD) every so often for a check-in. It is interesting to note here that corps members are “managed” by TFA, as if they were commodities, rather than “guided” or “mentored.” At one of these meetings, my MTLD told me she wanted me to have lunch with all my students, so that I could work on “building relationships.” I had already begun to have lunch with small groups of students occasionally, but I was having trouble finding the time to eat with students every day, given the other demands on my time as a new educator. When I brought up what I thought were legitimate concerns—the fact that I had only 25 minutes for lunch, which included dropping off/picking up my students at the cafeteria, and that my administration had concerns about me “rewarding” students who often were not following school rules (eating with students was seen as a reward, not simply a good practice to develop relationships)—my TFA manager told me, “I’m hearing a lot of excuses from you.”

In addition to telling me that I was making excuses, my manager also said that I did not believe in myself enough. As a confident young woman who had had a successful experience at Institute, where I was told, “Your students are going to be so lucky to have you” and “You’re doing so well,” I knew I could be an excellent teacher. I believed in my students and their potential, and had a wealth of knowledge about education, children, and learning, largely from my undergraduate studies. My end-of-Institute award was for “believing in your students.” To be told I didn’t believe in my students or myself was insulting, and not the type of support I expected to receive from TFA staff members.

TFA staff members repeatedly told me that I was not being the leader of my classroom, in the sense that I did not have strict control over my students’ bodily movements. Within TFA’s model of behavioral control, I was expected to have all of my students sitting in their seats at all times, and to accomplish this particular aspect of classroom management by consistently giving consequences. On an intellectual level, I recognized that giving consequences was a necessary part of their management system. It was not that I was incapable of giving my students consequences; the problem was that my vision of schooling did not include a classroom where the teacher is all-powerful, all-

knowledgeable, and in strict control at all times. What I was beginning to understand was that there was no room in their model for my vision; in fact, my vision was completely contrary to their understanding of how schooling should be conducted and why. TFA's Teaching as Leadership model is based upon the idea that teachers are responsible for everything that happens inside of the classroom, regardless of whether or not you agree with the techniques and content you are being forced to adopt (Farr, 2010).

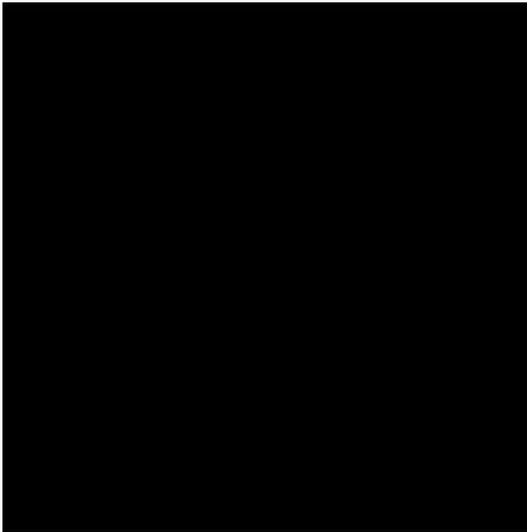
My frustration deepened when TFA staff ignored the fact that there were other factors at work in and out of my classroom that affected student behavior and achievement. I was unable to choose curriculum or what was taught when. TFA's model of behavioral control and TFA staff instructed me to use extremely scripted sets of phrases, limiting my freedom to develop my own style of classroom instruction that suited my unique context. In addition to this, TFA staff ignored the life circumstances of many of my students. I could not change the circumstances that led Jerome to bring a roach-infested notebook to school, or the fact that Peter's mother told him to "get his lick back," meaning that if someone hits him, he should hit back. Whenever I tried to bring up the lived realities of my students' lives and the real challenges they faced, once again, I was told I was "making excuses." Despite my having personal knowledge of my students and their families, my voice and ultimately my potential to use alternative methods and ideas for creating a more learner-centered, productive environment was repeatedly pushed aside, as it contradicted TFA talking points.

In the end, I decided to leave. I could not, in good conscience, continue to work for an organization whose guiding educational philosophy varied so greatly from my own. It was not a decision I made lightly, leaving the very students I was trying to love and teach. But after I decided to leave, there came a small moment when I knew I had made the right choice. As I was waiting on duty for the last of the buses to arrive, Sarah caught my eye. She and her younger brother were role-playing the teacher-student relationship and the words coming out of Sarah's mouth broke my heart: "You're receiving a consequence! You have earned a lunch detention. You get a consequence!" These are the words and phrases she had heard me use repeatedly, again and again, over and over, as I strove to enact my MTL's mandate to give lots of consequences. I had spent 3 months with this child and all I taught her about what it means to be a teacher is that a teacher gives consequences. This was devastating to me, and it was then that I realized that the bait and switch was complete.

For more of this essay, and many other perspectives on the Teach For America experience, you can purchase the complete book of essays [here](#).



Jessica Millen graduated from the University of Notre Dame in 2013, majoring in sociology with a minor in education, schooling, and society. She was a 2013 Teach For America (TFA) corps member in New Orleans, where she taught third grade. She currently works as a preschool teacher in South Bend, Indiana.



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