

A Review of *Learning on Other People's Kids: Becoming a Teach For America Teacher*

by Barbara Torre Veltri

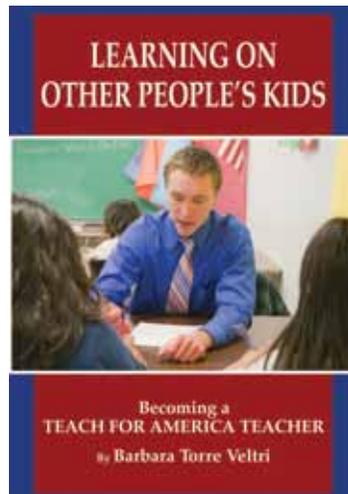
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ON FEBRUARY 12, 2011, Teach For America (TFA) celebrated its 20th anniversary with over 10,000 alumni, current teachers, and organization staff in Washington, DC. Inside the conference, where an all-star panel of the education “reform” world (Rhee, Canada, Klein, Kopp) preached to an enthusiastic choir, it was easy to forget that TFA is not without its share of critics. Indeed, despite being lauded as the gold standard of quality and efficiency in reform circles, TFA remains divisive in the broader education debate and, in too many cases, characterized by simplistic, reductive arguments from parties on either side of the aisle.

Unfortunately, Barbara Torre Veltri’s book, *Learning on Other People’s Kids* (Information Age Publishing, 2010, 284 pp., \$29.99), is ethnographic research that fails to raise the level of discourse on TFA. I found several glaring inaccuracies and gross generalizations in the book, which led me to question the integrity of the research as well as its contribution to the national conversation about TFA. Veltri’s book is actually quite similar to another recent book on TFA, Donna Footé’s 2009 *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach For America*. Footé’s book makes the same mistakes, but with the opposite agenda, lionizing TFA as a panacea instead of critically and evenly examining the organization. The debate around TFA, and on teacher education in general, deserves better than both of these texts.

I am an alumnus of TFA, I have been critical of the organization in the past (Lahann & Mitescu, 2011), and I have spent considerable time in university-based teacher education. My experiences have given me both insider and outsider perspectives, but that also means that I am very sympathetic to any argument that suggests that these two parts of my life not need necessarily be in conflict with one another. My ultimate concern when it comes to research on TFA is that it be as transparent, critical, fair, and nuanced as possible (see as excellent examples of this Popkewitz, 1998; Hopkins, 2008).

The genesis of Veltri’s book, and the source of the vast majority of her data, is within the relationships that Veltri built with TFA corps members over ten years of teaching them at Northern



Arizona University Arizona State University. While I am very critical of her book, it appears from the data she includes that Veltri was a very effective teacher educator who played a pivotal, supporting role in the early careers of a large number of corps members. From these relationships, Veltri gathered extensive qualitative data in the form of observations, interviews, and e-mails, and then supplemented this data with TFA artifacts. These data are absolutely the strongest parts of *Learning to Teach on Other People's Kids*; every chapter is filled with rich selections that chronicle corps members’ challenges teaching and reflecting honestly on their students, their teaching, and their preparation through TFA training.

Veltri identifies five questions about this data:

1. Why do top college graduates apply to Teach For America?
2. How does Teach For America recruit and train its corps?
3. How are recruits socialized into their roles as TFA teachers?
4. How does a TFA teacher learn the complexities of the school, community, and teaching?
5. How do corps members view their work and TFA’s mission in poverty schools?

In any ethnography on TFA, these are important questions to ask. However, there is an overarching sixth question embedded in the text—is TFA good for public education?—the answer to which Veltri compromises with her lack of focus on student learning through either qualitative or quantitative data.

In addition, *Learning to Teach on Other People's Kids* suffers from a number of much more significant problems. First, it contains a shocking number of inaccuracies. Throughout the entire text, Veltri consistently misuses or invents TFA terms and positions (e.g., she calls “program directors” “regional directors”). None of these mistakes, by itself, is that important, but as an informed reader, I expect more care and rigor in an ethnography. Furthermore, almost all of these errors would have been caught by any TFA alumnus, which suggests that none was consulted to read the text for accuracy. Along the same lines, there are a significant number of proofreading errors in the text, from frequent small typos to odd mistakes, such as referring to Memphis as a “rural” region.

Second, Veltri frequently either ignores data that would weaken her critique of TFA or actively misconstrues the truth. In one of the most glaring examples, she asserts what I believe to be a highly questionable explanation for why many corps members teach for a third year:

While 60% of corps members leave upon completion of their 2-year commitment, about one third opt to teach in their district for year three in order to qualify for in-state tuition benefits for law school or other non-education graduate study. (p. 46)

What I take Veltri to mean here is that most, if not all, TFA corps members who stay for a third year are guided by the financial rewards of discounted graduate study. As a TFA alumnus who was not personally guided by the motives Veltri describes—nor was any corps member I know who stayed on past the initial two-year commitment—I question the empirical basis of her generalization. She provides no data to warrant this argument, and there is, to my knowledge, no research on TFA that would support such a claim. At another point (p. 49), she casually mentions that TFA corps members have negative effects on their students, citing only one study (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002) while ignoring competing claims from other rigorous studies (e.g., Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2002). Such omissions make this book read more like argument than research.

Finally, while Veltri's data come almost entirely from a single TFA region over one ten-year period, she generalizes her findings to all of TFA regardless of time or place. This is a serious methodological problem. The lived experiences of TFA corps members vary dramatically by region because the professional development and support they receive from universities and school districts are significantly different. As a TFA corps member in San Jose, I was blessed to have excellent mentor teachers assigned to me by the district; friends in other parts of the country were more or less left to fend for themselves. Also, TFA is a radically different organization now than it was ten years ago. It has much stronger

relationships with higher education than it used to, has an entirely different teacher-education curriculum, and supports its teachers to a much greater degree once they leave the initial training. To casually draw from ten years of data (in fact, exact years are almost never cited in the text) without considering major organizational changes that occur over time strikes me as irresponsible.

In conclusion, Veltri is to be applauded both for being an inspirational mentor to TFA corps members who desperately needed her and for gathering such rich data on their experiences. She also makes a number of important arguments against TFA, such as when she critiques the fact that all corps members receive an annual AmeriCorps service continuing education stipend of \$4,725 when other urban teachers do not. The national conversation around the value of TFA and other alternative teacher-training approaches deserves research that is rigorous, precise, and fair, and *Learning on Other People's Kids* is short on these qualities.

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