

**Title: What is the Effect of Teaching in Underserved Schools on Beliefs About Education Inequality and Reform? Evidence from Teach for America**

**First and second choice of conference section:**

1. Effects of education policies
2. Research Methods

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**Background:** What insights into education policy can we gain from individuals who teach in underserved schools? We take the case of Teach for America (TFA), and ask whether teaching in low-income communities alters individuals' beliefs about education inequality and effective education reform strategies. Leveraging the fact that TFA admission is a discontinuous function of an applicant's selection score, we conduct a regression discontinuity analysis of an original survey of over 32,000 applicants to the 2007-2015 TFA cohorts.

**Research Question:** We assess whether TFA participation alters individuals' perceptions of a) what contributes to income-based differences in educational achievement and b) where we should focus our efforts to achieve educational equity.

**Setting:** We match TFA administrative data to applicants' responses to an original, online survey. The administrative data includes demographic information and selection scores for all TFA applicants. The survey data contains a series of questions on the causes of income-based achievement gaps, as well as the promise of education policies intended to increase achievement for low-income students.

**Subjects:** Our main analysis sample consists of the 91,752 individuals who applied to TFA between 2007 and 2013, and advanced to the final stage of the TFA admissions process. We omit the 2014 and 2015 cohort applicants from the core analysis sample, as TFA participants in these cohorts would not have finished their TFA participation at the time our survey was administered. Per TFA's selection criteria, these are applicants with a strong academic track record and demonstrated leadership skills.

**Intervention:** The treatment is participation in TFA. TFA is a prominent civilian national service program, and considered a large, alternative teacher preparation provider (TPP), supplying more teachers to low-income communities than any other TPP in the country. TFA is unique from other TPPs for its selectivity, program duration, and organizational mission. Specifically, TFA recruits high-achieving college graduates to teach for two years in low-income schools across the United States. Nearly 60,000 current and former teachers have participated in TFA, and more than ten million American schoolchildren have been taught by a TFA teacher. In the average TFA placement school, over 80% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 90% of students are racial or ethnic minorities.

**Research Design:** We use a 2SLS/fuzzy regression-discontinuity design. The probability an individual participates in TFA is a discontinuous function of the applicant's admission score. We leverage this discontinuity as an instrument for TFA participation. We estimate the causal effect of TFA on the education policy preferences of the marginal admit using a local linear regression with cohort fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the admission score level. Our results are not sensitive to the choice of bandwidth or kernel.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** The analysis of this study is based upon two sources: TFA administrative data on the 2007-2015 TFA applicant pool and an original survey. TFA provided the administrative data for this study. We collected the online survey data between October 2015 and March 2016. 27% (n=24,938) of the sample started the survey and 21% (n=19,332) completed the survey in its entirety. Testing for common threats to identification, we find no

manipulation of the running variable, no differential attrition (e.g., response rates of TFA participants and non-participants are continuous at the admission cutoff), and no discontinuities in observable characteristics between treatment and control groups at the cutoff.

**Findings:** We find that teaching in underserved schools reduces the belief that low-income students themselves (or their families) are to blame for income-based differences in educational achievement. Rather, TFA participants apportion blame for income-based achievement gaps to larger societal inequities. When evaluating a number of education reform strategies, TFA participants are no more likely to believe that current politically-charged policy levers – including school choice policies, the Common Core standards, teacher merit pay, and teachers’ unions – can effectively reduce these inequalities. Instead, TFA participants are more optimistic about teachers’ potential to foster student learning, and are more supportive of investments in early childhood education and wraparound services for low-income children. Interestingly, TFA participation also elicits greater optimism that the achievement gap is a solvable problem.

**Limitations:** TFA teachers comprise only a fraction of the population of teachers working in low-income schools, and to that end, our causal estimates pertain to a unique, but non-trivial, subset of teachers who have worked directly with students and families in underserved communities. As the views of TFA teachers may differ from non-TFA teachers working in similar schools, we also examine how the perspectives of TFA teachers differ from non-TFA teachers in our sample. Though we only have exogenous variation in participants who enter teaching through TFA, our sample includes 5,000 non-TFA teachers. Preliminary evidence suggests these results are not limited to TFA teachers, but extend to teachers in low-income schools more broadly. Moreover, even if the TFA teaching experience is distinct from other types of teaching experiences and the applicants to TFA are distinct from applicants to other programs that supply teachers to US schools, studying the effects of TFA is important. As TFA is the largest alternative TPP program supplying teachers to low income schools, and as TFA’s alumni are very visible in education leadership -- more founders and top leaders of entrepreneurial education organizations started their careers with TFA than any other organization (Hess, et. al 2011) – assessing the effects of TFA on participant beliefs on education inequality and reform remains an important exercise.