

‘You Can’t Un-Look at It’

Teach For America CEO Elisa Villanueva Beard Explains the Program’s Effect on Teachers, Including Herself

IN THIS ISSUE OF THE JOURNAL, Katharine M. Conn, Virginia S. Lovison, and Cecilia Hyunjung Mo report on how the Teach For America experience affects teacher-participants. *Education Next* editor Martin West discussed the article with the CEO of Teach For America, Elisa Villanueva Beard.

Martin West: How did your own experience as a TFA corps member affect your beliefs about education?

Elisa Villanueva Beard: I was a 1998 corps member, and I taught in Phoenix. My first day of teaching, right out of college, I had 36 first-graders walk into my door. I had 30 desks, I had no books, and I had no curriculum. And I quickly came to realize that my kids had no letter recognition, and they were part of a bilingual system that truly had no coherence throughout my elementary school. And my school just lacked the basics of what you would expect any child to have that is attending any school—a rigorous curriculum, a clear vision, a conducive learning environment.

One of my students, Jasmine, had these chronic headaches. And for a while I thought maybe she just was trying to get out of work, but what I came to realize is that she had horrific tooth pain because she had a mouth full of cavities. And when I started to ask the rest of my kids about dental hygiene practices, I came to realize my kids didn’t have the basics on dental hygiene, or didn’t have access to dental care. And that was the beginning of me becoming exposed to understanding that my kids are coming to school with so many unmet needs that are just basic needs that every child should have.

And this one afternoon in my first semester of teaching, a veteran teacher came into my classroom and, as we were chatting, she asked me why I worked so hard because she wanted to know if I realized that we were teaching the future prisoners of the state of Arizona, which was incredibly shocking, and obviously disturbing, but really just deepened my own courage of conviction, because that was the backdrop, but what I found is that my children, consistently, would rise to the occasion. They were excellent...

And so, I emerged from my experience really just inspired by my students and my families. I was pretty outraged about what was happening and how lots of a child’s access or opportunity is just driven by where she or he happens to be born and where he or she happens to go to school.



And I think I started to just better understand the complexity of the problem, what’s happening outside of school, in communities where children are living in poverty, and what that means inside of classrooms and whole schools and districts, and the beginning of what it might take to do something about this, and really committed to being part of the solution, and determined to get to the day when, truly, every child does have access to a great education.

MW: The authors examine a series of questions about the sources of educational inequity in the United States. They conclude, “TFA participants are more likely to believe that societal issues, not differences in the actions or values of students from low-income backgrounds, exacerbate income-based differences in achievement.” Why do you think that’s the case?

EVB: I would say, very simply, because that is what you see. You know, you see it for yourself. We actually see this playing out with real people in real classrooms, with real children and families. And so, you really get in the middle of it. This proximity brings insight and understanding of the complex nature of the problem.

MW: Another finding is that the TFA experience doesn’t make corps members more cynical or pessimistic about the challenge of improving education. In fact, alums are more likely than non-participants to agree that it’s possible for all children to attain an excellent education, and less likely to agree that there’s only so much teachers can do to help low-income students succeed. That result must be gratifying, as one could easily imagine the differences going the other way.

EVB: It’s incredible to see that our folks are emerging from this with optimism and hope and a deep belief that the problem is solvable, which is the big objective here as folks enter the work. So much of it is really being able to be with your students and see what they’re capable of, and then doubling down and realizing that there has to be a path forward.

...When you see something, you can’t un-look at it. And you stick with it and do whatever you can to ensure that you do your part to contribute to ensuring all kids get what they deserve.

This is an edited excerpt from an episode of the EdNext Podcast.