

## Lessons of a First-Year Teacher

Molly Ness

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MOLLY NESS is a second-year teacher at Roosevelt Middle School, Oakland, Calif.

*It seems taboo to question one's commitment to Teach For America and to one's students. But, in fact, Ms. Ness confesses to questioning her commitment nearly every day.*

When I graduated from college, I joined Teach For America and so committed the next two years of my life to teaching in one of the nation's most underresourced school districts. Now part of the AmeriCorps service program, Teach For America has a clear mission: to give every child — regardless of race, ethnicity, background, or religion — the opportunity to attain an excellent education. Founded a decade ago, Teach For America places more than 800 college graduates every year in impoverished school districts in such urban areas as Baltimore, Los Angeles, and New York City and in such rural areas as the Mississippi Delta and the Rio Grande Valley. Teach For America teachers fill vacancies in districts that suffer from teacher shortages, most often taking the most challenging placements in the most difficult schools.

Corps members go through an intensive five-week training program before they are placed in schools. In that training, they focus on theories of education, holding children to high expectations, practical ways of becoming an effective teacher, and leveling the playing field for students who lack the educational opportunities that children from better backgrounds take for granted. Corps members are

hired directly by school districts, and many complete state credentialing programs during their two years of service. Upon the completion of their two-year commitment, more than 60% of corps members continue teaching, while the others change paths and move on to graduate schools or to other forms of employment.

In my first year of teaching, I was assigned to Roosevelt Middle School in East Oakland, California, an extremely overcrowded school with an annual teacher retention rate of just 60%. The student body is 50% Asian, 25% Latino, and 25% African American. Roosevelt is located in a rough area that is notorious for drug use, and gangs are an ever-present force. Most of my students were not native speakers of English. Indeed, in that first year, my students spoke 10 languages, including Arabic, Cambodian, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Chinese. Many were recent immigrants, and I was expected to teach them conversational and written English, as well as the state-mandated social studies curriculum.

Although I had been told before I began my Teach For America commitment that I was about to experience a harsher reality than anything I had previously known, I still believed that teaching was a 9-to-3 job and that I could leave my work at school and keep my personal and professional lives totally separate. I thought I could bring my students into my classroom, shut the door, and leave the problems of their inner-city community outside. I believed that I could instill the love of learning in my students and that they would somehow be able to forget all the turmoil they faced in their lives.

I vowed that my passion and enthusiasm for my children and for teaching would never diminish. I would never allow myself to suffer emotionally, as many first-year teachers do. I would stay positive and avoid the disillusionment

that so many teachers feel. I would enter my classroom every day with the same energy and passion I started with in September. It wouldn't matter if it was a gloomy Thursday in late October or if I had been battling the flu for two weeks. I would never become the "worksheet teacher." Rather than slide grammar worksheets under my students' noses, I would have them build the pyramids out of sugar cubes. I set high expectations not only for my students, but for myself as well.

In one swift transformation, I graduated from college, packed my belongings, and drove across the country to start life anew in an entirely unfamiliar environment, without the comforts of family, friends, and home. It was an exciting adventure at first — relocating, getting my first real job, and having the responsibilities of adult life.

But by early November, the excitement had worn off, and the reality had begun to sink in. I was living in a new city, far from my home and with no connections to my past. Maintaining a positive learning environment in an otherwise depressing place was an endless challenge: the constant planning, the discipline, the paperwork, the headaches of the district bureaucracy. I felt underappreciated by my administration and abused by my students. I would come home from school, sit on my couch, and think, "I can't go back tomorrow." I felt drained. And gradually I felt that I was letting my students down; nothing I was doing in my classroom could ever be enough to make life fair for them. I was becoming the worksheet teacher that I swore I would never be. I felt that I had lost myself in this process of trying to serve my students. And so I started asking the really hard questions, about myself, about my life, and about my commitment.

OFTEN I feel that Teach For America is too eager to dismiss the frustrations we teachers inevitably feel about our lives and our jobs. It sometimes seems as if I am just supposed to grin and bear it through the two years. Then I can pause to reflect on my experience and say, "That was an impossibly difficult experience, but I am a richer person because of it."

Given the passion and dedication of most corps members, it seems taboo to question your commitment to Teach For America and to your students. But, in fact, I question my commitment nearly every day. I have a vivid memory of calling a friend in Los Angeles, a corps member placed in Compton, to ask, "Will you quit with me?" At first I thought that doubting my commitment made me a bad person, that some omniscient Teach For America presence was frowning down on me. In fact, maybe all this questioning of my commitment is actually a positive force that makes me push to achieve more in my classroom.

When I went home for the winter break that first year, I wasn't sure exactly what to tell my friends and family

about my Teach For America experience. Should I focus on the good or the bad of teaching? Should I tell them how I teach 97 students who speak little or no English? Should I tell them how there are never enough markers or scissors or even textbooks to go around? Should I tell them of my 12-year-old student who is now serving time in juvenile hall for armed robbery? Or maybe I should tell them about my 13-year-old student who cannot spell dog because he is a victim of social promotion.

Slowly I realized that I was mouthing platitudes that were simply untrue to the experience. I could barely make sense of the tension of opposites I felt in my life: Did I want to quit and get out, or did I want to devote all my life and energy to the vision of Teach For America? How should I characterize the way I felt, cynicism or optimism? Should I dwell on the bad experiences or dismiss them in light of the positive ones?

I began to reflect on my initial impressions of teaching. I remembered feeling overwhelmed on first entering the classroom. How would I even begin to teach these children English and social studies? More important, how could I teach them that education could be their way out of poverty and into a better future? How could I teach them to be upstanding citizens and to practice civility in their everyday lives? How could I teach them conflict resolution, responsibility, and self-respect? When I told my father about my worries, he told me, "Do your best. You have been handed an unrealistic situation. All that anybody can ask you to do is your best. Don't beat yourself up over what you cannot accomplish."

For a long time, I believed my father's advice. I believed that I did face an unrealistic situation at Roosevelt Middle School. I believed that it was unrealistic to think that a first-year teacher could handle such a difficult placement, in such an underresourced school, with so little support.

But after a while, I came to realize that my father had it backwards. My situation was realistic — and that was exactly the problem. Far too many of our nation's children attend overcrowded schools like Roosevelt that cannot provide adequate materials, instruction, or attention. Too many of our children receive a subpar education, which seems to ensure that the cycle of poverty will not soon be broken. Too many teachers are thrown into classrooms with minimal support. In such circumstances, teachers do not receive enough concrete incentives to make teaching a lifelong profession. Our best teachers are often lost before they even start to achieve success in the classroom. It is no secret that teachers are overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated; I am living proof of that.

Upon completing my first year of teaching, I struggled to make sense of the lessons that I had learned. I truly believe that I have learned more about the world in a year of teaching than I did in several years of college.

I have learned that children are unbelievably resilient. My students have been handed immeasurable challenges and have tackled them with the courage, grace, and strength that many adults fail to demonstrate. I have learned how to make personal sacrifices for the sake of a greater good. I have learned that many people in the world today would rather let schools in places like Oakland be forgotten than try to solve the problems head-on. I have learned that it is rather easy to be idealistic in

thoughts and words, but much harder to keep that idealism alive in actions every day. I have realized that not enough people in our society today devote their lives, their energy, and their souls to making this world a little better than they found it. I have learned the meaning and value of humility. And last, I have learned that I am only one person, but my power as a teacher will extend further than I could ever have guessed.