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"The problem is bigger than us": Grappling with educational inequity in TeachFirst New Zealand

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Research on Teach for All must address the lived experiences of the participants.
- Neoliberalism presents challenges for participants, specifically individualism.
- TeachFirst participants need opportunities to grapple with social inequality.

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ABSTRACT

This article utilizes phenomenological research approaches to trace the experiences of participants within TeachFirst New Zealand (TFNZ), a member of the global network, Teach for All, as they grapple with their role in addressing educational inequality on a national scale. Specifically, I argue that TFNZ participants struggled within and against "thin equity" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016) explanations of persistent inequality by focusing on how they (1) understand their role as individual teachers working in an educational system marked by a history of colonization and systemic racism, and (2) grapple with the ability of an individual teacher to effect lasting change.

Teach for America has spent the past two decades attempting to rectify longstanding educational inequities in impoverished rural and urban communities across the United States by placing elite college graduates in high-poverty schools after a 5-week summer training period (Crawford-Garrett, 2013; La Londe, Brewer, & Lubienski, 2015). With an expanding focus on leadership, Teach for America has also worked at the policy level to foster macro-level educational change by supporting the deregulation of teacher preparation, promoting high-stakes accountability measures, and advocating for the privatization of public education (Lahann & Reagan, 2011; White, 2016). Perhaps most strikingly, Teach for America has contributed to the now widely-accepted notion that an individual teacher is the single most important factor in overcoming the achievement gap— a discourse that critics argue can obscure more complex and multi-dimensional understandings of inequality (Brewer & Matsui, 2015).

These perspectives on school reform and commensurate beliefs about teachers and teaching are no longer just a U.S. phenomenon as neoliberal educational models gain global traction (Apple, 2006; Zeichner, 2010). In particular, Teach for All, established in 2007 as part of the Clinton Global Initiative works "to expand educational opportunities across nations by enlisting their most promising future leaders in the effort" and currently manages Teach for America-style programs in 40 countries. Despite the vastly different localized contexts in which Teach for All operates, the organization is underpinned by concerns about teacher quality, namely the notion that "improving education means improving teachers" (Paine & Zeichner, 2012, pp. 571–2).

Despite its rapid expansion, little research has been conducted on Teach for All programs; in particular, little is known about how Teach for All participants understand and explain their purposes for joining the program, how the Teach for All mission is enacted in poor and marginalized communities abroad, and how certain ideologies and discourses translate (or not) across contrastive settings.

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Building upon my domestic work with Teach for America (Crawford-Garrett, 2013), I spent six months researching the experiences of participants in TeachFirst New Zealand (TFNZ), which is now preparing its fifth cohort of teachers. The vast majority of participants (almost all of whom are New Zealand European) teach in high poverty schools comprised of a significant percentage of Maori or Pasifika youth and, like Teach for America corps members, are tasked with addressing the inequitable educational outcomes that persist between New Zealand European and Maori and Pasifika populations.

In this article, I argue that TFNZ participants struggled within and against "thin equity" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016) explanations of persistent inequality, which are hallmarks of neoliberal reforms worldwide. Specifically, I focus on how they (1) understand their role as individual teachers working in a complex, educational system marked by a history of colonization and systemic racism, (2) grapple with the ability of an individual teacher to effect lasting change, and (3) navigate these tensions in their daily work with students.

1. Literature review

Teachers, both in the U.S. and across the globe, find themselves at the nexus of a troubling duality. While on the one hand, they are extolled as the key element in shaping students' educational prospects, on the other, they are shamed and blamed for persistent school "failure" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Edwards, 2014). This paradox is indicative of what Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) name "thin equity" explanations for longstanding educational inequality: "When policies work from a thin equity perspective, the assumption is that school factors, particularly teachers, are the major source of educational inequality and that access to good teachers is the solution to the equity problem" (p. 4). Organizations like Teach for America (and other localized initiatives within the Teach for All network) recruit participants on the premise that high-quality teachers have the capacity to remedy persistent and complex educational issues as they are tasked with equalizing achievement outcomes for historically-marginalized youth (Crawford-Garrett, 2013).

This emphasis on teacher quality appeals to both logic and commonsense, a factor which has likely contributed to Teach for All's widespread acceptance as an effective means for addressing educational disparities. Specifically, it is difficult to argue against the recruitment of talented and bright young people who are committed to working in high-poverty schools. Yet as Friedrich, Walter, and Colmenares (2015) note Teach for All also "positions itself as revolutionary [and] subversive of the status quo" (p. 3) by raising doubts about the efficacy of veteran teachers and public education systems more broadly and noting the failure of these entities to address persistent and ongoing crises of underachievement. Despite the multitude of factors impacting the various contexts in which Teach for All works including poverty, racism and colonialism, to name but a few, Teach for All "reduces the crisis in education to the crisis of teachers …. divorcing education from the social milieu" (Vellanki, 2014, p. 29). In doing so, Teach for All relies "on the goodwill of those involved to change what is seen as a problem without an examination of the underlying causes of the issue" (Friedrich, 2014, p. 9).

Equally important to an analysis of Teach for All is the way in which the teacher is constructed. Olmedo, Bailey, and Ball (2013) describe the ideal Teach for All teacher as having a "a remit to not only improve student and school performance, but also, and importantly, to raise the worldly aspirations of disadvantaged children, who are to be 'enterprised' in their image" (p. 495). In an early ethnographic account of Teach for America, Popkewitz (1998) noticed a similar phenomenon. When a teacher spoke of a child's "potential" for example, Popkewitz argued that she was essentially "recasting" a child's negative or pathological qualities and thereby positioning herself as a savior able to draw out and actualize a child's hidden assets and intellect. In this sense the child can never be "normal" or average but remains trapped in what Popkewitz refers to as an "oppositional space" (p. 56).

This dimension of Teach for All becomes more notable in a country like New Zealand in which the majority of teachers identify as Pākehā (NZ European) and middle class yet are disproportionately tasked with teaching students of color in high-poverty contexts and communities. Moreover, the vast majority of participants (though not all) were successful students themselves (and recruited, in part, because of this quality), which often makes understanding their students' resistance to schooling quite challenging. Interestingly, even as Teach for All participants are held up as exemplary educators capable of transforming the lives of students, they consistently report "a poor sense of preparedness, a poor sense of efficacy, poor school-based mentoring, and negative views of others" (Sim, 2010, p. 4), inconsistencies that must be acknowledged by both policymakers and researchers.

2. Theoretical framework

Underpinning global educational initiatives like Teach for All are neoliberal theories and policies which privilege individualism at the expense of the collective good and contribute to "thin equity" explanations of persistent educational inequality. According to Orelus and Malott (2012), "[n]eoliberalism has been the dominant ideological doctrine driving social, political and economic developments in schools and in society for the past 40 years" (p. 65) and consists of policies that support free market expansion while curtailing social programs. Berliner and Biddle (1995) argue that neoliberalism's role in school reform stems from a manufactured sense of crisis that depicts public education from a framework of failure. Sleeter (2008) traces this phenomenon to the 1980's when "neoliberal pressures on education were grounded in the assertion that student achievement was eroding partly because of progressive approaches to teaching and federal interventions to protect minorities" (p. 1948).

In the U.S. and across the globe, discourses of failure, threats to national security and an ongoing fear of lowered international status have fueled reforms that have promoted high-stakes accountability measures as the primary measure of school and student success. One of the consequences of these efforts has been the conceptualization of learning as a series of mechanized and technical tasks that can be easily quantified and replicated (Ravitch, 2014)- a stance that maps neatly onto neoliberal images of K-12 schooling.

Also notable is the way in which the discourse of social justice is adopted by neoliberal reformers who favor technical approaches to teaching that critics claim undermine agency and professionalism (Orelus & Malott, 2012). Thus within the broader umbrella of neoliberalism, the term "social justice education" does not necessarily refer to confronting and dismantling systems of oppression or acknowledging the structural and institutional dimensions of inequality. Rather, it indexes efforts to increase student achievement on mainstream measures, without questioning the limitations, biases or inconsistencies of those measures. For example, Labaree (2010) argues that part of what continues to make Teach for America so compelling to college graduates is their ability to conflate a social justice agenda with individual prestige and corporate-style success. Olmedo et al. (2013) relate this phenomenon to the context of TeachFirst UK noting, "The purpose of the teacher, along with the skills, qualities and the human resources