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**“A Problem They Don’t Even Know Exists”: Inequality,  
Poverty, and Invisible Discourses in Teach First New  
Zealand**

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**Abstract:** This research draws on qualitative data collected in Aotearoa New Zealand over a six-month period to examine the ways in which participants in Teach First New Zealand (TFNZ), an affiliate of Teach for All, discuss issues of poverty and educational underachievement in their teaching contexts. Findings from this study suggest that broad discursive patterns tended to prevail among TFNZ participants interviewed. In discussing issues of poverty and educational underachievement, participants privileged personal responsibility, individual agency, and social

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mobility as explanatory frameworks. Participants tended to perceive individuals, families, and communities as responsible for their socioeconomic disadvantage, and few were able to articulate more complex understandings. We found that TFNZ participants had little or no direct experience with poverty or educational inequity prior to entering the scheme and had limited understandings of these phenomena. Despite this, participants shared an almost universal belief that education was the primary means by which disadvantage could be overcome, privileging individualist conceptions of complex social phenomena. As Teach for All expands globally, there is need for empirical work documenting how participants articulate their mission of addressing inequity, how these understandings translate into practice, and the ways in which implicit and explicit educational discourses shape their perspectives on students and communities. This work has added importance as Teach for All actors continue to encourage the movement of alumni into policy and leadership.

**Keywords:** poverty; inequality; underachievement; Teach First New Zealand; Teach for All

### **“Existe un problema que ni siquiera saben”: Desigualdad, pobreza y discursos invisibles en Teach First New Zealand**

**Resumen:** Esta investigación se basa en datos cualitativos recopilados en Aotearoa Nueva Zelanda durante un período de seis meses para examinar las formas en que los participantes en Teach First New Zealand (TFNZ), una afiliada de Teach for All, discuten temas de pobreza y bajo rendimiento educativo en sus contextos de enseñanza. Los resultados de este estudio sugieren que los patrones discursivos amplios tienden a prevalecer entre los participantes de TFNZ entrevistados. Al debatir temas de pobreza y bajo rendimiento educativo, los participantes privilegiaron la responsabilidad personal, la agencia individual y la movilidad social como marcos explicativos. Los participantes tendían a percibir a las personas, familias y comunidades como responsables de su desventaja socioeconómica, y pocos pudieron articular entendimientos más complejos. Descubrimos que los participantes de TFNZ tenían poca o ninguna experiencia directa con la pobreza o la inequidad educativa antes de ingresar al esquema y tenían una comprensión limitada de estos fenómenos. A pesar de esto, los participantes compartieron una creencia casi universal de que la educación era el medio principal por el cual se podían superar las desventajas, privilegiando las concepciones individualistas de fenómenos sociales complejos. A medida que Teach for All se expande a nivel mundial, existe la necesidad de un trabajo empírico que documente cómo los participantes articulan su misión de abordar la inequidad, cómo estos entendimientos se traducen en práctica y las formas en que los discursos educativos implícitos y explícitos configuran sus perspectivas sobre los estudiantes y las comunidades. Este trabajo ha agregado importancia a medida que los actores de Teach for All continúan alentando el movimiento de ex alumnos hacia la política y el liderazgo.

**Palabras clave:** pobreza; desigualdad; bajo rendimiento; Teach First New Zealand; Teach for All

### **“Um problema que eles nem sabem que existe”: Desigualdade, pobreza e discursos invisíveis em Teach First New Zealand**

**Resumo:** Esta pesquisa baseia-se em dados qualitativos coletados em Aotearoa Nova Zelândia durante um período de seis meses para examinar as maneiras pelas quais os participantes do Teach First New Zealand (TFNZ), afiliado do Teach for All, discutem questões de pobreza e desempenho educacional em seus contextos de ensino. Os resultados deste estudo sugerem que padrões discursivos amplos tendem a prevalecer entre os participantes da TFNZ entrevistados. Ao discutir questões de pobreza e insucesso educacional, os participantes privilegiaram a responsabilidade pessoal, a agência individual e a mobilidade social como estruturas explicativas. Os participantes tendiam a perceber indivíduos, famílias e comunidades como responsáveis por suas desvantagens

socioeconômicas, e poucos conseguiram articular entendimentos mais complexos. Descobrimos que os participantes do TFNZ tinham pouca ou nenhuma experiência direta com pobreza ou iniquidade educacional antes de entrar no esquema e tinham entendimentos limitados desses fenômenos. Apesar disso, os participantes compartilhavam uma crença quase universal de que a educação era o principal meio pelo qual a desvantagem poderia ser superada, privilegiando concepções individualistas de fenômenos sociais complexos. À medida que o Teach for All se expande globalmente, há necessidade de um trabalho empírico documentando como os participantes articulam sua missão de abordar a desigualdade, como esses entendimentos se traduzem em prática e as maneiras pelas quais os discursos educacionais implícitos e explícitos moldam suas perspectivas sobre os alunos e as comunidades. Este trabalho acrescentou importância à medida que os atores do Teach for All continuam incentivando o movimento de ex-alunos em políticas e liderança.

**Palavras-chave:** pobreza; desigualdade; desempenho insuficiente; Teach First New Zealand; Teach for All

## Introduction

Founded in 2007 as part of the Clinton Global Initiative, Teach for All (TfAll) represents a network of teacher education organizations operating with charitable or social enterprise status in approximately 50 countries worldwide. With minor differences, TfAll member organizations are modelled on variations of the Teach for America and Teach First (UK) programmes, recruiting high-achieving university graduates as employment-based trainee teachers in high-poverty schools for a period of two-years. Touted as a key intervention aimed at ameliorating a global education crisis (Hargreaves et al., 2001; Sahlberg, 2011), TfAll asserts that placing high-performing candidates into low socioeconomic status (SES) schools will address endemic underachievement and reduce educational inequality. TfAll member organizations also support their participants to enter policy and education leadership positions after serving as teachers, to develop collective leadership with the hope of improving education and expanding opportunity for children worldwide. TfAll offers its participants the opportunity to “do good and do well” (Labaree, 2010) as recruits are typically ambitious, motivated young people seeking a way to contribute to the social good, while also securing career advantages.

As TfAll has expanded in reach and scope over the past decade, the network has faced growing criticism, including claims that it promotes problematic depictions of teachers and teaching (Crawford-Garrett, 2017, 2018; Horn, 2016; Kavanagh & Dunn, 2013; Kopp, 2014; Price & McConney, 2013; Zeichner, 2010), imposes global discourses on to local communities (Adhikary & Lingard, 2017; Ellis et al., 2016; Thomas & Lefebvre, 2017), facilitates privatization of teacher education and certification (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017), and negatively represents historically marginalized populations (Crawford-Garrett, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 1994; Popkewitz, 1998). TfAll affiliates have been accused of further marginalizing the young people they claim to serve, a majority of whom are low SES students of colour. Due to the fast-tracked nature by which teacher trainees within TfAll schemes enter classrooms, TfAll has been criticized for deploying underprepared teacher candidates to low-income schools (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Steudeman, 2015), representing “a harmful dalliance into the lives of low-income students who most need highly trained and highly skilled teachers” (Heilig & Jez, 2010, 3). Despite these criticisms, TfAll member organizations continue to proliferate internationally, making the network an increasingly globalized actor in education policy and practice.

A growing body of research has sought to illuminate the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of participants in Teach for America, the largest organization within the TfAll network (see for

example Anderson, 2013; Brewer & DeMarrais, 2015; Crawford-Garrett, 2017; Thomas & Mockler, 2018). As TfAll expands internationally, considerably less research attention has been devoted to its member organizations. Careful examination of these organizations is necessary to a critical understanding of TfAll as a global network and its implications for domestic education systems and the global school reform agenda. In this article, we draw on qualitative data collected over a six-month period in New Zealand to consider how participants in one TfAll affiliate program, Teach First New Zealand (TFNZ), interpret their mandate to rectify educational inequality on national and global scales. Our findings suggest that TFNZ participants privilege themes of personal responsibility, individual agency, and social mobility when talking about educational disparities, voicing global neoliberal discourses that blame students, parents, and communities for underachievement. Additionally, with confidence in their own roles as trainee teachers, TFNZ participants perceive quality teaching as a decisive factor in alleviating educational underachievement and even poverty itself. Lastly, we note that many participants had limited experience with issues of poverty prior to joining TFNZ and few had meaningful exposure to or engagement with the high-poverty communities in which they were placed. This at times led to a reliance on stereotypes as participants attempted to navigate educational challenges.

Taken collectively, these findings reinforce global discourses that elide the complexities of endemic poverty and reinforce neoliberal perspectives that place the onus of academic failure on individuals—specifically teachers, students and families (Brewer, 2014; Gorski, 2016; Vellanki, 2014). As Friedrich (2014) argues, TfAll 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” (9). These discourses largely ignore SES as a determinant force acting on educational outcomes. We seek to expose these tensions, not only by focusing on the narratives of TFNZ participants, but by arguing that these narratives are shaped, in part, by the discourse of TfAll and its affiliates, which privilege both neoliberal explanations of and solutions to persistent underachievement.

## Conceptual Framework

Overwhelming evidence shows that SES is a powerful determinant of educational outcomes (Benn & Millar, 2006; Fergusson, Horwood & Boden, 2008; Harker, 1995; Lemke et al., 2002; OECD, 2013; Wylie, 2011, 2012). The most comprehensive overview in the context of New Zealand draws the conclusion that, on the challenge of mitigating inequality of educational achievement due to SES, “schools have been, and remain, relatively powerless. Closing the gap requires a more holistic emphasis on policies to remove the causes and consequences of poverty and other social inequalities that affect the likelihood of educational success” (Snook & O’Neill, 2014, 25). We accept the evidence that schools and teachers can have limited impact on educational achievement without commensurate changes to the socioeconomic system itself. This is not to suggest that education cannot have importance to the project of social change if this is its intention. Rather, we acknowledge that teaching for progressive social change must ultimately be concerned with *systemic* problems and solutions that are reflected explicitly in curriculum and pedagogy, rather than with maximizing individual student achievement. This is broadly coherent with traditions of radical and critical pedagogy (Apple, 2004; hooks, 1994).

Despite this evidence, a powerful minority of opinion continues to problematize or outright reject the impact of SES on educational achievement, arguing instead that equality of educational outcomes can be achieved despite increasingly drastic socioeconomic disparities. This view is reflected in policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and Every Student Succeeds (2015) in the United States; global reform networks such as Success for All, the Knowledge is Power

Program (KIPP), Achievement for All, Bridges International; and in scholarship (Hattie, 2012; Slavin & Madden, 2001) that, taken collectively, suggest that individual teachers, students, and schools should bear the burden of addressing longstanding educational achievement gaps. TFA and its member organizations, including TFNZ, espouse similar views underpinned by the idea that student outcomes can be equalized regardless of broader social inequities through the intervention of enthusiastic teachers.

This educational debate reflects differences in the ways people understand SES itself. In one broad view (typically associated with the political left), inequality is perceived as an outcome of economic systems and structures, as well as forms of social discrimination and exclusion along lines of “race”, culture, gender, sexuality, and so on. According to this view, individual agency is constrained by systemic forces that must be overcome through changes to socioeconomic systems. In an alternative view (broadly associated with the political right), differences in SES are perceived largely as due to individual qualities, abilities, and decision-making, such as employment choices, educational decisions, personal habits, family background, and so on. The editors of a recent volume capture this latter perspective well:

A common reductive explanation for many of the social issues that face our society is to blame the individual. So, the inability to find work, to feed and house one’s family, or to successfully manage one’s finances become seen as individual deficits and failures. The person is seen as lacking certain skills, whether this is in planning, thinking, regulating emotions, managing interpersonal interactions or self-presentation. Solutions become matters of further education, training or ‘nudging’ (the behavioural coercion) of such individuals. (van Ommen & Groot, 2017, p. 24)

The idea that the poor are responsible for poverty remains widespread, due in significant part to right-wing politicians and think tanks, mass media, prominent corporate leaders and individuals, among others. These attitudes distract from policies and systems that perpetuate inequality, as well as from the powerful groups and individuals who benefit from them. The idea that inequality is due to differences in personal effort, merit, and ability continues to predominate globally.

These ideas have been reinvigorated by the ascendance of neoliberalism. Neoliberal reform has spurred popular belief in the supremacy of individual efficacy, self-reliance and self-responsibility, obscuring the role of economic and social systems as determinant factors in people’s lives (Beder, 2000; Davies & Bansel, 2007; de Alba et al., 2000; Gibb, 1998; Keat & Abercrombie, 1991; Mascarenhas, 1993). From the 1980s, the “responsibilizing of the self” emerged as a theme supporting neoliberal reforms to welfare and education across the major Western democracies (Peters, 2001, p. 58). Once an explicit framework in political and policy discourse, this cultural construction has become both ubiquitous and invisible. As George Monbiot observes, “so pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognise it as an ideology [...] We internalise and reproduce its creeds” (2016, para. 3). The argument that socioeconomic inequality is inherent to capitalism is viewed as antiquated, giving way to the supremacy of individual ability, choice, work ethic, and responsibility.

We adopt a conceptual framework in which SES is central to understanding issues of educational achievement. Relatedly, we see differences in SES not as a result of differences in the decisions, qualities or abilities of individuals, but of forces that govern the structure of economic and social affairs. We argue that a related concept, social class, is helpful in framing an understanding of socioeconomic inequality and its impact on education. To borrow from Bowles & Gintis (2011), class might be conceived simply as “the pattern of economic inequality [that] is ‘set’ in the economy itself—via market and property institutions which dictate wide inequalities in income from property,

in the basic social relations of corporate enterprises, and in the tendency toward uneven development, which leads to regional, sectional, racial, sexual, and ethnic disparities” (p. 102). Scholars have observed the diminishment of social class as a category for social interpretation and action with the advent of neoliberalism (Bettie, 2002; Bradley, 2016; Ortner, 1998; Reay, 1998; Skeggs, 2013; Todd, 2015). In its place, ideas of “individualistic self-realization” have come to prevail (Reay, 1998, p. 263). Social mobility and the meritocracy have in many ways eclipsed ideas that emphasize social and economic forces beyond individual control. Capitalism, we believe, is a system in which “the distribution of rights and powers over the basic productive resources of a society” is concentrated to a narrow section of the population (Wright, 2005, p. 21). Without changes to the nature of the economic system itself, individual agency is contained within this pattern of relations.

Education has been a factor in these changes. Proponents of the views directly above have pointed to increased access to education as one factor contributing to social mobility and the demise of social class as a determinant, constraining factor in the lives of individuals (Pakulski & Waters, 1996). Education continues to be held up as an equalizing institution, allowing individuals to overcome disadvantage through personal effort and ability. Education is conceived as a tool for “equality of opportunity” and a cornerstone for meritocratic conceptions of social life. This partly explains the contemporary obsession with educational disadvantage, and the relatively lower levels of concern for inequality of outcomes (often by the same actors) in the form of drastic socio-economic disparity beyond school gates.

## Methodology

### Research Context

Aotearoa New Zealand is affected by high levels of wealth and income inequality. From the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, the gap between the rich and poor widened faster in New Zealand than in any other developed country (Rashbrooke, 2013). As of 2017, 27% of young people live in poverty, with 7% in poverty described as “severe” (Child Poverty Monitor, 2017). As many as one in six New Zealanders is in temporary or insecure work, receiving the minimum wage, or unemployed (Groot et al., 2017, pp. 28-29). There is also limited movement in terms of wealth and income. Rashbrooke (2013) observes that many people simply “do not rise up the ladder”, and that 45% of people living in poverty are still there seven years later (9). Neoliberal structural reform in the 1980s and 1990s is widely considered to have contributed significantly to contemporary levels of inequality (Carpenter & Osborne, 2014; Groot et al., 2017; Harris, 2017; Kelsey, 1995; Nobbs, 2014; Rashbrooke, 2013; 2015).

Increases in inequality have had a drastically disproportionate impact on those who identify as indigenous Māori and Pasifika (primarily migrants from the Pacific Islands and their descendants), as well as other minority ethnic groups, LGBTI+ people, women, and other historically marginalized sections of the population. One in five Māori and Pasifika households live in poverty, compared with one in 10 Pākehā (Rashbrooke, 2013, 3). One in four Māori is a temporary or casual employee, jobless, or receiving the minimum wage (Stubb et al., 2017, 117). Māori continue to endure the consequences of colonization, while both Māori and Pasifika peoples have experienced high levels of discrimination in areas of employment, housing, healthcare, education, and the justice system (Bishop et al., 2009).

Unsurprisingly, New Zealand also has some of the widest gaps between the outcomes of its highest and lowest achieving students (Wylie, 2011). Again, Māori have significantly lower educational achievement than Pākehā. While “decades of educational reforms and policies such as

Multiculturalism and Biculturalism that have sought to address these educational disparities, for the large proportion of Māori students [...] who attend mainstream schools, there has been little if any shift in these disparities since they were first statistically identified over 40 years ago” (Bishop et al., 2009, p. 2).

TFNZ, granted charitable status in New Zealand in 2011, articulates a vision “that all young people in Aotearoa New Zealand achieve their full educational potential, regardless of their background” (Teach First NZ, 2018). Founded by a graduate of the Teach First (UK) programme, the programme deployed its first cohort of teachers in 2013, with a cohort of approximately 80 participants in 2019. Members of this cohort will from 2019 be deployed beyond the high-poverty regions of Northland and South Auckland to other parts of the country. TFNZ has been an active member of the TfAll network, supported in its nascent stages by other members of the network and hosting the global TfAll conference in Auckland in 2015.

At the time that our interview data was collected, TFNZ participants taught in schools exclusively in Northland and South Auckland. These are high-poverty regions with predominantly non-European populations. Schools served by TFNZ participants in Northland are almost exclusively Māori and, while the population of South Auckland (an imprecise region comprised of the former Manukau City and various Southern suburbs of the city) is diverse, Māori and Pasifika peoples are the dominant demographics. Research participants were also teaching exclusively in low-income schools (deciles 1 to 3).

## **Research Overview**

The data presented in this article stems from a larger, phenomenological research study focused on the experiences of TFNZ participants and organizational stakeholders within New Zealand. Phenomenological research foregrounds the life histories of participants while simultaneously examining specific phenomena (Schwandt, 2003; Seidman, 2005), in this case the participants’ decision to join TFNZ. In order to understand and document the experiences of stakeholders and participants, Crawford-Garrett used in-depth and semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Wengraf, 2001) that offered opportunities for participants to extend the ideas and themes presented in the initial set of questions.

## **Researcher Positionality**

As an American university professor and educational researcher, Crawford-Garrett travelled to New Zealand on a six-month fellowship to conduct a research project on TFNZ. She entered the research context with extensive background on Teach for America (TFA) as a result of prior research and teaching experience but little familiarity with the broader educational landscape of New Zealand aside from the background research she conducted prior to arriving in January 2016. Being an outsider had certain research advantages. Namely, participants often volunteered to explain various aspects of New Zealand education to Crawford-Garrett which revealed perspectives and beliefs that might have otherwise remained obscured. Additionally, like many of the participants interviewed, Crawford-Garrett is white and middle class. She has spent most of her career working with students of colour and navigating across lines of race and social class difference to foster educational transformation, similarities that enabled participants to make connections across these experiences. Specifically, Crawford-Garrett understood and could articulate the tensions participants experienced as they attempted to teach in culturally responsive ways in under-resourced schools.

At time of the study, Oldham was a second-year participant in TFNZ as well as a participant in the research study. He was interviewed once by Crawford-Garrett and participated in the focus group she conducted at the end of the data collection period. Oldham is Pākehā (New Zealand

European) and from a similarly middle-class background. Prior to his participation in the TFNZ programme, Oldham was a support worker in alternative education for students who had been exited from low-income state schools. Previously, he had been a student union organiser, low-income worker and labour unionist. During his time on the TFNZ programme, Oldham served as a branch organizer for the New Zealand secondary teachers' union. These experiences helped to frame his perspectives around poverty and education. At times, Oldham draws on his personal experiences of participation in TFNZ to inform the work of this article.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study, collected over a six-month period from January 2016 to June 2016 in Auckland and Northland, New Zealand, consisted of formal and semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2005; Wengraf, 2001) with TFNZ thought leaders and key personnel ( $n = 3$ ), current TFNZ participants ( $n = 16$ ), alumni of the program ( $n = 5$ ), school principals ( $n = 2$ ), university professors and leading experts in teacher preparation practices ( $n = 6$ ), and a representative from a national teachers' union who actively advocated for specific changes to the TFNZ certification process ( $n = 1$ ). While a number of stakeholders were interviewed for the broader study, this article focuses specifically on the narratives of participants collected in one-on-one interviews with Crawford-Garrett. An open-ended interview protocol was used in which participants were asked questions like, "What made you decide to become a teacher?", "What did you know about working in low-decile communities before entering TFNZ?" and "How would you describe the TFNZ mission?" Interviews were one hour in length and variations of the same protocol were used each time for both participants and stakeholders. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Crawford-Garrett also used document analysis (Yin, 2003) as a supplement to the interview data by examining websites, recruitment materials, and other artifacts produced and disseminated by TFNZ or the University of Auckland, which partnered with TFNZ at the time of the study.

In an initial analysis of the data, Crawford-Garrett used Dedoose, a qualitative software program, to code the data and identify themes and categories (Janesick, 2000). In further efforts to assess the validity of emerging themes and categories, Crawford-Garrett convened a focus group after the first round of data analysis, inviting the 16 current TFNZ participants to attend. Of those invited, seven self-selected to participate. Focus group questions reflected the initial codes and the focus group was used as an opportunity to conduct member checks with key participants and as a means of validating or invalidating burgeoning interpretations (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Focus group data is not included in this particular analysis. After the focus group, Crawford-Garrett conducted a more intensive, secondary round of coding in an effort to finalize a set of interpretive categories. Author 2 shared these categories and selected data samples with a range of differently-positioned individuals, including faculty members at the University of Auckland and TFNZ personnel, in order to gain additional insights on the data and to substantiate and/or challenge the interpretations.

Lastly, Crawford-Garrett shared a set of de-identified data with Oldham drawing on categories she had previously identified which connected broadly to notions of social class including "parents," "poverty," and "low-decile communities." Oldham then read through this data and generated his own set of sub-codes and organizing categories which were then shared and validated by Crawford-Garrett. The findings detailed below are the result of this collaborative, analytical process.

## Findings

We identified three broad discursive patterns in TFNZ participants' responses with respect to their mandate to rectify educational disparities. First, participants routinely privileged personal responsibility, individual agency, and social mobility as explanatory frameworks when discussing issues of educational underachievement and poverty. While all could acknowledge the impact of SES on education, few talked about SES (or social class) as determinant forces in the lives of students and their communities. Second, participants shared an almost universal belief that education was the primary means by which disadvantage could be overcome, again privileging individualist conceptions of complex social phenomena and obscuring the multi-faceted ways in which social class functions in society. Third, most participants had little or no direct experience with poverty or educational inequity prior to entering the scheme, which led to the reinforcement of stereotypes and an over-reliance on global, neoliberal discourses to explain persistent inequities.

### Responsibilizing Individuals for Underachievement and Disadvantage

Participants frequently attributed both the causes of poverty and the responsibility for overcoming it to the individuals and communities living with it. This often surfaced as deficit discourses around people within their teaching contexts. Numerous participants talked about the parents of their students when discussing these challenges, suggesting that problems of parenting represented a significant—if not the most significant—challenge to educational achievement. Most participants, like Sorin, an alumnus, commented on the role of parents within low-income schooling contexts by critiquing the level of parental involvement, suggesting that these parents have a propensity for violence and physical abuse:

Parents don't necessarily check [that their child is doing well in school]. Some of them do, and I think those kids are luckier. The parents don't necessarily check in with their kid to see what they've done or whatever. And often, you know, if we call home, the parents will go 'oh, you had this assignment or whatever', or 'you had this homework due and it wasn't done', and then sometimes they end up beating the kid up because of it.

Another alumnus, Priyam, attempts to explain a perceived lack of achievement among some of her students with the suggestion that their parents do not take them shopping or teach them how to cook:

I think for me it goes back to one of the basics things, so basic things. I'm a Maths teacher—my kids don't go shopping with their parents; they don't even go grocery shopping. [...] Unless you tell one of them one day: 'what happens when you go shopping?'—'I don't go shopping, I just give my sizes to so-and-so and they go and buy all my clothes.' [...] And it's these basic things like shopping, who pays the rent... I sometimes don't think their parents have these conversations either [...] which I think are very basic. They don't know how to cook; they're not given the time and space to make the mistake as well.

Each of these narratives seems to make unfounded assumptions about parents in low-SES communities. Priyam's in particular runs counter to research suggesting that children in low-income homes can often be *overburdened* by household work, having significantly greater responsibilities in these areas than their higher-income peers (Lareau, 2003). Operating on a similar set of assumptions about families, Sorin categorizes his own arguments about poverty as "cultural," noting: "That's why

I make the cultural argument: they haven't had enough time to really think of abstract things and they focus a lot more on the day to day survival [...] I think a lot of what our kids lack is just time." These participants provide a representative example of a focus on individual deficits. They neglect to mention forces beyond the control of low-income communities as causative factors in explaining their disadvantage. In their shared opinion, what students and parents in low-income communities lack above all tends to be forms of knowledge (e.g. about shopping, cooking, or ideas), and this is the major factor in their social disadvantage.

Participants on the whole seemed to struggle to articulate complex understandings of the structural causes of inequality. While there was universal understanding among participants that many of their students lived in poverty, many struggled to offer explanations as to why. Addison, a first-year participant, attributes blame for poverty to "no one really", beyond it being "a societal issue":

Poverty plays a really big part. Kids who come into school and they haven't had any breakfast and they are in a home with seven kids and their parents work two shifts and they don't really see their parents. Like some of the kids go home and there's no one home and they just fend for themselves. And that's no-one's fault really; that's a societal problem where people have to work constantly just to keep body and soul together [...] It's inequitable and we're never going to have a perfectly equitable society.

Other participants fall back on well-rehearsed issues taught about in TFNZ seminars and teaching materials, although, again, they struggle to articulate a comprehensive explanation of these issues. Colin, a first-year participant, offers a representative example:

I think that's huge—just getting parents to be involved is hard. But again, obviously there's another layer of problems going into that, too [...] Um, so, I don't know. I think social housing needs to improve and you know we... we do give free medical care, but maybe that... that needs to improve. We need to improve other benefits for unemployment and things like that. I don't know the logistics but, or the financial costs or whatever—there's got to be something.

As an aside, we might note here that "free medical care" does not reflect the reality of user pays in the contemporary healthcare system. Priyam reinforces the notion that there are no clear causes of poverty, reverting in the end to parents as a source of blame:

I don't know [...] I think the cause has been diluted and dispersed among many different factors and everything is now a cause. Or everything, every symptom, is basically continuing the problem anyway, so if they don't come to school because of, um, I don't know [...] 'cause there's also intergenerational... intergenerational where the parents also didn't like school.

Participants seemed to lack clear explanatory frameworks for the causes of poverty and educational underachievement, even suggesting that no specific causes exist and that inequality is natural. Assumptions such as these may explain why participants seem to rely upon individualized deficit discourses in lieu of exposure to more nuanced, comprehensive explanations.

A minority of participants did attempt to go further to offer more complex and multi-faceted explanations of inequality. George, an alumnus, commented on a perceived sense of hopelessness among his students, linked it to disenfranchisement and alienation: "I think because you are dealing with people who I guess didn't feel they had a stake in the society, so why play by

society's rules? It's not going to do me any good. So there is that hopelessness or that giving up hope." Natalie, a second-year participant, talks about poverty in her region with reference to corporate wealth, saying "that's reality here but it shouldn't be actually—we've got the biggest dairy company in the world". This statement, in contrast to the suggestion that poverty is "no-one's fault", begins to point to systemic explanations. Another participant expresses the view that the mission of achieving educational equality is futile without making commensurate changes to the economic system: "Sometimes I actually go so far as to think, well, why would you even want to achieve it [educational equality]? Surely, we should be alleviating *social* inequality. Like, there aren't enough jobs for people; even if everyone is achieving equally, there aren't enough jobs. We have constant [...] unemployment and underemployment, you know?" These responses begin to approach what we could consider to be a class analysis, or at least an acceptance that socio-economic inequality is a structural phenomenon. These views contrasted against the prevailing attitudes among participants interviewed.

### **A Belief in the Power of Teaching to Reverse Underachievement**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, TFNZ participants shared an almost universal belief that educational underachievement could be mitigated by the intervention of quality teaching, a discourse that underpins the mission and aims of the organization itself. Amelia typifies this imperative or, as she calls it, "moral feeling" to the effect that, in becoming a TFNZ participant, "there's something there that I can do [...] Like, it's nice to see *Doctors Without Borders* but it's like I'm not going to be a doctor kinda thing, in the sense that this is actually something, a need in the community that I do have skills to help with." Amelia, like all TFNZ participants, has been assured of her potential to transform the life chances of their students by TFNZ itself. We note here that *Doctors Without Borders* is comprised of qualified medical professionals rather than professionals in training, and may not make for an entirely appropriate comparison with TFNZ. The comparison does, however, reflect Amelia's confidence in both the mission of TFNZ and her own contribution.

Despite emphasizing her ability to meet urgent social needs, Amelia, like other participants, struggled to articulate precise ways in which TFNZ was able to mitigate educational underachievement. This was true also of TFNZ staff. One staff member asserted that: "We're trying to engage people in a problem [educational inequality] that people don't even know exists. So, first of all, we have to let people know the problem exists; secondly, we need them to be engaged and know that this is one of the most awesome ways that they can contribute to it being solved. And then we start to get the tipping point of... then we might raise the profile of teaching [...] and all the rest that follows." Here and elsewhere, detailed explanations of how participation in TFNZ can solve the problem of educational inequality, beyond (in this instance) vague reference to "raising the profile of teaching", remain absent.

We might affirm at this point that a belief that quality of teaching is decisive in reversing educational inequality is a version of the idea that the causes of educational inequality lie with teachers and students. Lachlan, a first-year participant, made some of these connections explicit, remarking that he would have preferred teaching in primary schools rather than secondary, expressing the belief that in "troubled areas [...] you do have those kinds of issues, things that probably need to be addressed sooner rather than later", whereas "people in the real bad cases, by the time you get to high school, it's actually too late almost." The "issues" identified by Lachlan in "troubled areas" are able to be "addressed" by his own intervention as a teacher—they must be rectified within a student's character before it is "too late". This represents, again, an

individualization of systemic phenomena, such as social and economic conditions, and arguably a pathologization of young people struggling with them. Sorin reinforces these ideas in his narrative:

As an English teacher I have a lot of opportunities to be able to bring texts that either defy the stereotype or... you know what I mean. So, there is a kind of exposure element that I'm involved in, to make them more aware. I would like them to... if it is their choice and their will to change something or do something with this community or with their place in this community the first thing they need to know is that they need to be aware that this is not the world, that there is a world outside of this community and that world has certain opinions and views and leanings and biases and this community is affected by those.

Students are framed as needing to “defy stereotypes” and to deploy the power of “choice” and “will to change something”. This shifts the focus away from poverty understood as a set of economic conditions that happen to a community (through unemployment, casualization of work, low wages, high rents and prices, inadequate social infrastructure, and so on) and towards the view that poverty and its consequences are outcomes of individual choices made by those experiencing it. Sorin also suggests that the low-SES communities in which students may live are “not the world”. This is a familiar narrative—that if low-SES youth could see the world beyond their ghettoized communities, they would have a better chance of overcoming the challenges within them or leaving altogether. Moreover, this view further denies again the reality of poverty as a structuralized phenomenon.

At least one participant grappled with the idea that he could have a decisive impact on educational inequality. Quinn, a second-year participant, considers “the whole debate of, like, which is the greater influence on a child’s success: poverty or the teacher”. He adds that, because it is “a debate clouded in ideological ambitions, it’s a really hard debate to engage with [...] For me, it’s a hard one to wrestle with.” As we have shown above, the evidence that SES is significantly greater determinant than teacher quality is overwhelming, and Quinn’s problematization of the issue speaks to the broader role of TFNZ (and TfAll) in affecting discourse. Notably, TFNZ has approached this dilemma by promoting the rather self-evident view that quality teaching has *some* impact on educational achievement, notably that “teaching is the most significant in-school factor” in determining achievement, rather than whether this impact is greater than that of SES (Teach First NZ, n.d.). We further discuss this point below.

### **Lack of Experience with High-Poverty Communities**

In a final tendency, many participants comment on the fact that they had little or no experience with low-income communities prior to their acceptance into the TFNZ scheme. They were honest about their lack of understanding of their communities, and some demonstrated an awareness that they held stereotyped views taken from media and other sources. Several expressed confidence that the programme allowed them to “learn” about their communities, as well as issues of social and educational inequality. Paige, an alumnus of the program, notes that “particularly in my first year, when I was a sponge for everything, [...] I was learning so much about what it meant to be a child growing up in certain circumstances or ascribed to a certain culture. There was a lot of learning for me.” Amelia, a second-year participant echoes these sentiments when she asserts, “I just had no idea of the challenges that people face [...] You know about poverty, but you don’t understand all the implications that poverty has in so many different areas in society. And so that really compelled me to think—actually, that’s a really big problem.” Amelia also attributes much of her learning about poverty to TFNZ lectures: “We kind of crammed it in—we had a really interesting lecture around poverty and education, and I remember that as being quite, um, that, you

know, that it wasn't that the students didn't want to learn, but it was all the other factors that come into their life that make school just really difficult." Benjamin, a second-year participant, expressed a similar perspective, adding that the idea of teaching in a low-income community appealed to him:

Those [challenges of teaching in a low-decile school] were all very appealing, the low socioeconomic side of things; teaching in the low decile was different and I thought, 'oh, this would be a good challenge'—but I had no concept of the level of poverty; I had no concept of inequality. I come from a very white middle-class community where, a few months before getting accepted into Teach First, I was sitting in a Victorian literature tutorial boldly claiming that New Zealand didn't have a class issue.

George, an alumnus of the program, spoke candidly about his own lack of direct experience with poverty. As he put it, "It's the easiest thing in the world to be a middle-class, white liberal that will do anything for the poor except have any close contact with them. [...] And so, you know, I'm fully prepared to acknowledge my own... It's not hypocrisy but it is simply a compromised position." Most TFNZ participants had little direct contact with poverty in New Zealand prior to their recruitment to the scheme. Lachlan differed from his colleagues in that he had attended a low-decile school himself. In talking about having been almost physically assaulted by a student during his time on the TFNZ programme, he expressed that he felt better equipped than other participants to handle this as a result of his own background.

As a result of their prior lack of experience, many participants drew on media representations and even social stereotypes in formulating understandings of their schools and communities. Almost all participants, for example, emphasized negative representations of their communities and schools that helped to shape their early impressions. One admitted to hearing "horror stories" of violence in the community served by her school. Sorin recalls: "I was very aware of stereotypes and when my mum found out that I was going to that school she cried and she thought I was going to get stabbed." Priyam echoed these sentiments: "I grew up [...] in a generation where there were a lot of stabbings and it was on the news and South Auckland, blah, blah, blah. And when I went to come out here, my father was going to ring his friends to see if I could get moved." Another participant, Stella, admitted she felt a lot of "trepidation" before beginning at her school because she had read about it in a newspaper article that profiled schools with the most expulsions nationally. Participants' discussions of media representations are themselves of interest. Indeed, research has pointed to negative media stereotyping of Māori in particular as violent, lazy, and negligent (Gregory *et al.*, 2011; Moewaka-Barnes, 2012), having added implications for participants deployed to communities with high concentrations of Māori students.

A likely corollary of this characteristic shared by TFNZ participants is a superficial or distorted understanding of the communities in which they teach. It might also explain their assumptions that particular families are violent or abusive, as these narratives likely stem from stories of violence they heard about the communities prior to entering them.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The broad themes delineated above indicate a distinctly individualist set of views among the TFNZ participants we interviewed. In relation to our conceptual framework, we suggest that TFNZ participants uphold a discourse that explains educational underachievement chiefly in relation to parents, communities, and students themselves. This was largely an implicit discourse, invisible perhaps even to those perpetuating it. To apply a phrase that surfaced in our interviews, this

discourse might be considered a “problem that they don’t even know exists”. All participants could acknowledge the impact of SES on their students, but, on further exploration, many tended to fall back on explanations related to parenting, or lack of knowledge, skills, and other deficits in their students and communities in explaining underachievement. In some cases, they used the same discourses to explain aspects of SES itself. This pattern was reinforced by participants’ limited understandings of the complex, multidimensional and intersecting societal factors that contribute to endemic poverty. Few were willing to attribute the existence of underachievement and poverty to systemic or structural forces, such as property relations, market forces, government and private sector policies and so on, as might be expected if they were thinking in terms of social class. Some went so far as to suggest that poverty had no real cause and was more or less an inevitable feature of contemporary life.

As discussed in our conceptual framework, these views are embedded in popular ideas about SES that have been re-invigorated by neoliberal reform projects, and that powerfully shape the experiences of teachers and students on a global scale. However, we suggest that these tendencies might be further encouraged by participation in TFNZ. TFNZ, in keeping with the global ethos of TfAll organizations, presents its mission as working to achieve educational equality regardless of differences in SES. As the formal goals and principles of the organization are diffused among its cohorts, TFNZ participants are encouraged to believe that equality of achievement can be achieved despite drastic differences in SES, locating the responsibility for this with teachers, students, parents and communities. TFNZ does not dispute that SES is a significant determinant of educational achievement. In practice, however, its insistence on mitigating educational inequality through teaching automatically sidelines the significance of SES, and may distract from solutions that address the root causes of unequal educational achievement. To give an example, as a participant in TFNZ, Oldham had the experience of questioning a leader of Teach First (UK) regarding how he navigated this dynamic in his own context. His response was “to punt the question” (his words) because poverty was an issue that Teach First could do little about. In this way, we are alerted to the fact that TFNZ, like all TfAll member organizations, is bound institutionally to a focus on the individual efforts of students and teachers rather than the complex web of social issues and forces that inevitably impact students’ experiences in schools.

While our findings may not be unique to TFNZ participants, TFNZ makes specific claims about its ability to eradicate educational inequality through teaching that other teacher preparation programs do not. Moreover, traditional teacher education programs have made significant strides in disrupting deficit discourses through community mentoring (Zygmunt et al., 2018), opportunities to interact with urban youth in out-of-school settings (Lyiscott, Caraballo & Morrell, 2018), and, perhaps most importantly, academic preparation that consistently depicts poverty and educational inequality as systemic problems with complex but clearly identifiable causes (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). On this last point, it is notable that the initial preparation of TFNZ participants is sharply abbreviated in the form of an eight-week intensive, a factor that may also make it difficult to integrate a more robust understanding of SES and underachievement. Comprehensive initial teacher education incorporating a range of learning across the social sciences has been shown to be an important factor in student teachers’ critical understandings of social phenomena such as poverty and culture (Garmon, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006). In contrast, we might recall Amelia’s comment about having “a really interesting lecture about poverty and education” upon commencing TFNZ, in which she claimed to learn a great deal. Under these conditions, more simplistic narratives around attainment and equity are likely to find fertile ground, while participants may be poorly positioned to challenge organizational doctrine.

Our research also emphasizes the fact that the TFNZ participants we interviewed were largely middle-class and Pākehā, had excelled in university studies, held leadership positions in various sectors, and had experienced success in other professions prior to their recruitment to TFNZ. Indeed, research on Teach First (UK) analyzes the ways in which the organization serves as a means for middle-class reproduction, perpetuating both middle-class advantage and the negative stereotyping of working-class communities through discourses of social ability (Smart et al., 2009). Returning to Reay (1998), we agree that “the orthodoxy of self-realization” (p. 263) represents the imposition of middle-class values onto complex social reality. Given this dynamic, it is unsurprising that many TFNZ participants perceived upward social mobility as easily attainable through education and personal development. In other words, this might explain participants’ tendency to fall back on meritocratic ideas to explain educational underachievement and poverty, invoking notions of personal agency and ability, hard work, and individual responsibility when looking for discursive frameworks. In many cases, they are simply defaulting to their personal experiences, even where these contradict the lived realities of their students.

Each of these factors has significance for education policy and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. As TFNZ’s trajectory of growth continues, it is foreseeable that the discourses analyzed above may come increasingly to define educational processes, practices, and institutions at the expense of alternatives. As we have insisted, educational underachievement cannot be seriously mitigated or eliminated without action to alleviate poverty and social alienation. Discourses that locate the responsibility for overcoming poverty and educational underachievement with individuals are likely to result in policies and practices that are ineffective or harmful. Such discourses risk shaming individuals struggling with socioeconomic disadvantage, encouraging frustration, self-doubt, even resentment as they are held to blame for phenomena that are beyond their control. While it was not the aim of our study, it might be surmised that TFNZ participants pass their beliefs and opinions on to their own students, spreading and sustaining ideas of individual self-realization among student populations who are often suffering the consequences of forms of systemic disadvantage beyond their individual control. TFNZ continues to encourage its alumni and staff to pursue high-profile positions in educational leadership and policy. In fact, TFNZ is now marketed as a leadership development program, emphasizing more than ever its influence within education policy and governance. This is a globalized feature of the TfAll network, and TFNZ echoes other global partners in using the language of a “movement”. Sustaining other discourses as critical alternatives to those discovered above may become harder as TfAll grows in influence, though it will be crucial to the project of promoting proper understanding of the relationship between inequality, poverty, and education in the interests of those affected.

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