Crawford-Garrett, K., Oldham, S. and Thomas, M. A. M. (2021) Maintaining meritocratic mythologies: Teach For America and Ako Mātātupu: Teach First New Zealand. *Comparative Education*, 57(3), pp. 360-376. (doi: 10.1080/03050068.2021.1885130)

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Maintaining Meritocratic Mythologies:

Teach For America and Ako Mātātupu: Teach First New Zealand

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Abstract: Alternative teacher education programmes associated with the Teach For All network are emerging worldwide. Largely inspired by Teach For America, these programmes draw on the meritocratic vision that 'one day' all children will receive a high-quality education and fulfil their potential. This paper questions the underlying ideology of meritocracy as evident in two Teach For All affiliate programmes – Teach for America and Ako Mātātupu: Teach First New Zealand. By drawing on qualitative data collected from across both programmes including interviews with participants and stakeholders, this article explores the ways in which meritocratic discourses undergird each programme's mission and are subsequently voiced by participant teachers. Findings suggest that, despite significant differences in socio-political and economic contexts, strikingly similar discourses surface. We argue that the meritocratic ideologies evident in both contexts promote narrow definitions of 'achievement,' disillusionment among teachers, and a general obfuscation of inequality.

Keywords: Teach For All, meritocracy, educational equity, socioeconomic status, teaching, teacher education, comparative education

Introduction

Teach For America (TFA) began in 1990 with the purpose of recruiting and training elite university graduates to complete two years of service in underprivileged schools (Kopp, 2003). Building on this model, Teach For All (TFAll) was launched in 2007 to disseminate fast-track alternative teacher preparation programmes around the world (Thomas, Rauschenberger, & Crawford-Garrett, 2021), aiming to advance educational access and opportunity on a global scale. To date, more than 55 affiliate programmes operate in countries as diverse as Afghanistan, Argentina, Armenia, and Australia. While programme participants are attracted to the TFAll mission and motivated by a desire to make change, they often find themselves teaching in contexts imbued with challenges – including endemic poverty, colonial legacies, intergenerational trauma, racism, insecure housing, and healthcare inequality – all without robust preparation in the field of education. Thus, conceptualising and navigating their roles as educators within and against complex sociopolitical settings have emerged in recent research as key tensions facing programme participants (Thomas & Mockler, 2018).

This paper builds upon our earlier work by specifically analysing how discourses of meritocracy (i.e., the notion that individuals can achieve "success" regardless of socio-economic status, gender, race, or culture as a result of merit and hard work) surface among teacher participants in two TFAll affiliate programmes. Drawing on data collected from participants in TFA and Ako Mātātupu: Teach First New Zealand (AM/TFNZ), we detail the ways in which participants in both programmes voice meritocratic discourses as they attempt to explain endemic educational inequity as well as articulate possible solutions. The phenomena suggest a remarkable persistence of meritocratic discourses across sociopolitical contexts and concomitant complications as participants navigate their beliefs about schooling as a means to addressing

societal inequities. These findings have significant implications as TFAll and its affiliates continue to proliferate globally and extend largely ‘western’ constructs of meritocracy into a range of cultural and sociopolitical contexts across the globe.

The Evolution of a Global Network

Teach For America

As a senior at Princeton University in the United States, Wendy Kopp conceptualised TFA, which in its first year, 1990, recruited approximately 500 recent graduates of elite institutions to join the programme. Espoused to be America’s ‘best and brightest’, these teachers – branded as corps members (CMs) – received a condensed training prior to being placed in high-poverty, historically marginalised communities to fill teacher shortages for two years. Since then, TFA has had a profound impact on American education in a variety of ways, including through its support of neoliberal reform agendas that emphasise privatisation, deregulation, and corporate investment in public education (Crawford-Garrett, 2013, Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017; Olmedo et al., 2013).

Early critiques of TFA centered on the high-turnover of its corps members; the lack of preparation it provided, especially considering participants’ placements in high-poverty schools (Darling-Hammond, 1994); constructions of rurality and poverty (Popkewitz, 1998); and a dearth of convincing evidence that its teachers performed better than traditionally prepared teachers (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2005: Glazerman et al., 2006; Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). As critiques mounted, TFA further pivoted its central “theory of change” away from a focus primarily on filling teacher shortages toward a broader social vision focused on fostering macro-level change and transforming district, state, and national policies

through the leadership of its participants and alumni (Horn, 2016; Trujillo et al., 2017). TFAll is many ways a global extension of this plan.

Teach For All

TFAll, then, was co-founded by Wendy Kopp and Brett Wigdortz (CEO of Teach First in the United Kingdom) in 2007 as part of the Clinton Global Initiative.[i] TFAll has been described as “an umbrella network that provides strategic support to social entrepreneurs that work to implement, in their own countries, the education reform ideals and organisational model popularised by the U.S.-based non-profit Teach For America” (Straubhaar & Friedrich, 2015, p. 1). Indeed, TFAll was predicated on the purported ‘success’ of TFA and its impact on U.S. education policy, at that time spanning nearly two decades. On average, at least four new national affiliate programmes were launched annually between 2013-2019 (see Thomas, Crawford-Garrett, & Rauschenberger, 2021), and some estimates suggest the number of teachers in these affiliate programmes grows an average of 18% per annum (Kwauk et al., 2016). In short, with affiliate programmes in more than 55 nation-states, TFAll’s transnational reach in undeniable.

Largely borrowed from TFA, discourses related to developing leaders to effect lasting change on a range of societal levels have also been adopted by TFAll (Straubhaar, 2021), and feature prominently among TFAll affiliate programmes across the world (Ellis et al., 2016). While there is some acknowledgement of the intersecting systems that contribute to inequality, troubling discourses about the role of the individual teacher in fostering educational transformation persist. For instance, a number of scholars have illustrated the ways in which organisational missions of TFA and TFAll are underpinned by concerns about teacher quality (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016; Paine & Zeichner, 2012), a notion that contributes to the trope

that teachers are the single most important factor in redressing student underachievement (Brewer, 2014; Matsui, 2015). This disproportionate focus on the role of teachers reinforces meritocratic notions by "reducing the crisis of education to a crisis of teachers" (Vellanki, 2014, p. 29), a common theme throughout educational history (Schneider, 2018). In addition, the notion that these teachers represent their nations' "best and brightest" reflects a reality that is far from meritocratic (Blumenreich & Rogers, 2016). More complex still are the ways in which TFA corps members and other participants in TFAll programmes are afforded significant advantages that enhance their abilities to advance their careers and secure more privilege, even as they seek to address longstanding disparities, an irony that has been pointed out in numerous studies (Labaree, 2010; Maier, 2012).

Indeed, meritocratic messages circulate implicitly and explicitly across TFAll programmes. In *Teaching as Leadership* (Farr, 2010), which has long been used to frame the work of TFA and TFAll teachers, Wendy Kopp writes about "the movement to ensure that one day, all our children, regardless of where they are born, have the opportunity to attain an excellent education" (p. 231). She further notes:

> The socioeconomic inequities and the lack of capacity in our schools persist because our prevailing ideology has not led to the necessary policies and investments. Among other things, we are hampered by societal beliefs that schools cannot make a significant difference in the face of socioeconomic disparities, that children in low-income communities cannot meet high expectations, and that it is not efficacious to invest in mitigating the challenges of poverty that make it hard for students to focus on school. (p. 231)

Here, Kopp counters research linking students' livelihoods and their life outcomes, opting instead for the meritocratic thinking of the 'one day' mantra. Perhaps more problematically, she situates the locus of change on teachers. While she also acknowledges a need for "stepping back and getting at the root causes of the problem" and taking "some of the pressure off schools by improving economics in urban and rural areas" as well as "improving health and social services", the overwhelming sentiment is that schools, full of the "best and brightest" TFA teachers, can shift social realities and rectify endemic disparities. This emphasis on positioning entreprenurial and inspiring individuals (e.g., Adhikary & Lingard, 2018; Brewer, 2014) to 'solve' endemic is evident across a range of TFAll programmes, including in New Zealand.

Ako Mātātupu: Teach First New Zealand

AM/TFNZ, a TFAll affiliate programme that largely follows the TFA model, was founded in 2013 with the mission of addressing educational inequality in New Zealand. Its cohort sizes have ranged from 20 to more than 80 participants, the majority of whom identify as Pākehā or New Zealand European (i.e., white), though the programme makes concerted efforts to recruit Māori and Pasifika participants and demographics of cohorts are shifting. AM/TFNZ began by placing cohorts in South Auckland and Northland—a primarily indigenous Māori region—but has scaled the programmes nationally with participants currently placed in schools across New Zealand's North and South Islands. Like TFA corps members in the U.S., AM/TFNZ participants complete an abbreviated summer training institute for approximately 7-9 weeks that includes online coursework and a summer school teaching experience. At the outset, the AM/TFNZ Summer Institute was delivered in partnership with the University of Auckland, but the partnership dissolved in 2016-2017, and AM/TFNZ changed its teacher education provider to

MindLab, a public-private organisation attached to a technical college. Research on TFNZ is scant, as is the case with many TFAll affiliate programmes (Crawford-Garrett, Rauschenberger, & Thomas, 2021), but the limited extant scholarship points to the mixed messages teachers receive and the complexities they navigate as they attempt to teach across lines of difference in the interest of fostering opportunity and access for historically marginalised youth (Oldham & Crawford-Garrett, 2019).

One message advaned clearly by AM/TFNZ is meritocracy. On its Twitter handle, for example, AM/TFNZ (2020) proclaims: "Our vision is that all young people in Aotearoa realise their full potential. We work towards this by supporting amazing people to disrupt educational inequity." Again, this assertion counters existing evidence that socioeconomic status is the single most important factor in determining educational achievement and implies that endemic disparities with complex roots can be adequately "disrupted" by the "amazing people" that AM/TFNZ recruits. Thus, we now turn to examine theoretical and empirical literature on mertiocracy and how meritocratic myths belie systemic realities.

Meritocracy and Equality of Opportunity

A meritocracy is a social system in which everyone has an equal chance to advance their social position according to their individual merit, regardless of "non-merit" factors such as socioeconomic status (SES), gender, or race (Sandel, 2020). Belief in the existence of a meritocracy is an important ideological feature of major capitalist democracies, and in both the United States and New Zealand, equality of opportunity is a cherished value and ideal. For example, meritocracy is embedded in notions of the "American Dream", which "encourages each person in the United States to pursue success, and […] creates the framework within which

everyone can do it" (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003, p. 1). Yet in recent years, it has become more common for scholars and commentators to invoke meritocracy as a myth or an ideal that has been betrayed, usually as a result of rising socioeconomic inequality or unequal access to education (see Fergusson, 2019; Liu, 2011; Markovits, 2019).

Historically, access to education has been important to the meritocratic national projects of both countries. Horace Mann (1849), frequently referenced as the "father of American public education", described education in the middle of the nineteenth century as "a great equalizer of conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery", "beyond all other divides of human origin" (p. 59). At the time of Mann's writing, however, only a selected few had access to education, let alone the right to vote or other civil liberties. Similarly, in New Zealand, British colonial planners promoted the idea that their new dominion would eschew the rigid class divisions of Great Britain through universal provision of education (Beeby, 1956). This meritocratic vision overlooked and devalued the experiences of colonised Māori people as well as the experiences of destitute colonists from Britain and elsewhere. Indeed, forms of structural discrimination and exclusion powerfully circumscribed the experiences of Indigenous people, women, people of color, and others, both in New Zealand and the USA. Many of these obstacles endure still, even as there are simultaneous attempts to "Make America Great Again" and put "New Zealand First".

In recent decades, moreover, the elevation of meritocratic values within education, the application of neoliberal approaches to school improvement (such as high-stakes accountability, school choice, and privatisation) combined with dramatic increases in wealth and income inequality, has led to a further narrowing of the purposes of education. More than ever, schools and colleges are seen as sorting mechanisms, protecting elite privilege and justifying an

increasingly unequal social order (Sandel, 2020). Standardised testing remains the most obvious signifier of educational "achievement" within schools, despite representing a narrow assessment of individual or social development.[ii] It has contributed to the rise of a "testocracy", "a twenty first century cult of standardised, quantifiable merit" that "values perfect scores but ignores character" (Guinier, 2015, *ix*). This increasingly dominant testocratic paradigm often pre-empts the work of teachers who are striving to challenge the "sorting" and "sieving" role of schooling.

The belief that schools can facilitate meritocratic social arrangements is closely connected to debates over the extent to which schools and teachers are able to overcome "home background" factors, such as poverty, that constrain student achievement. We note that debates over the role of "home background" versus "quality teaching" in determining educational outcomes are frequently colored by ideology, and that data can be provided to support the legitimacy of both positions (see Alton-Lee, 2003). Despite this, the weight of evidence seems to show that SES remains the most powerful determinant of educational outcomes internationally (OECD, 2013). According to one OECD (2013) meta-analysis, "home background" accounts for around 70% of a young person's educational achievement across OECD member states. As New Zealand scholars Snook and O'Neill (2014) note, "schools have been, and remain, relatively powerless" to equalise achievement in conditions of socioeconomic inequality, as "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" (p. 25).

We argue that a perception of schools and colleges as "equalizers of opportunity" represents an oversimplification of the complex relationship between educational and socio-economic systems. Rather, governments (and organisations like TFAll) must take a more holistic, systemic approach to addressing the multifaceted issues that combine to limit the

economic, political, and educational access of particular populations. In conditions of serious socioeconomic inequality, such as those that characterise New Zealand and the United States, the ability of schools and teachers to promote equal educational achievement will continue to be sharply circumscribed without commensurate changes to the socioeconomic system itself.

Education scholars drawing on critical political economy have sought to remind observers that, within capitalism, "the pattern of economic inequality is 'set' in the economy itself" rather than in the outcomes of education systems (Bowles & Gintis, 2011, p. 102). Educational achievement may help to determine the *position* of an individual within the system, but the structure of economic relations—including features such as poverty and income inequality—cannot be said to emanate from schools. For example, rates of educational attainment have been rising since the 1980s in the United States (Schmidt, 2018), but over the same time period, socioeconomic inequality has increased dramatically (Saez & Zucman, 2016), and poverty rates have not declined substantially (Chetty et al., 2014). The attachment of economic and equity goals to schooling has been accelerated in recent decades by the ascendance of human capital approaches to education within which "education is understood as a means for achieving two central goals: economic growth and poverty reducation" (Bonal, 2016, p. 98). This paradigm, premised on the belief that countries can mitigate poverty and inequality by simply exanding access to education, continues to be criticised by economists, political philosophers, and scholars of education (Brown et al., 2010; Brown & Lauder, 2006; Chang, 2010; Pritchett, 2001; Roth, 2018; Sandel, 2020).

In sum, the power of meritocracy as a public ideal is likely due to its value as an ideological device (Littler, 2013). An over-reliant faith in meritocracy serves to endorse wide diversities in wealth and power and blames individuals for their social position (Markovits,

2019). Political and economic elites are justified as having earned or deserved their wealth and status, just as AM/TFNZ and TFA fellows/corps members have "earned" their participation in these elite programmes because of their status as the "best and brightest" (Blumenriech & Rogers, 2016). Meanwhile, the poor are either blamed for their own hardships or challenged to fight to overcome structural obstacles. This occurs even as socioeconomic inequality itself stifles social mobility and equality of opportunity, as "higher inequality skews opportunity and lowers intergenerational mobility" (Corak, 2013, p. 80). Finally, commitment to meritocratic ideals encourages the elevation of certain social values, such as competitiveness, neoliberal subjectivities, and lack of concern for others. In this respect, meritocracy has the potential to serve paradoxically as a powerful ideological device for the justification of socioeconomic inequality rather than its elimination.

Methodology

Building on this theoretical grounding, we turned to cross-case analysis to better understand how teachers/participants in these two programmes interpreted their missions to address educational inequality. Cross-case analysis puts independent 'cases' in conversation with one another with the intention of provoking questions and suggesting new understandings (Stretton, 1969); it enables researchers to compare across groups and communities in the hopes that these comparisons will lead to fresh perspectives. Essentially, cross-case analysis is a meaning-making endeavor that involves the integration of knowledge from previously-learned cases (Donmoyer, 1990).

The two cases compared and analysed in this paper are robust data sets from established studies of Teach For America (N=27)[iii] and Ako Mātātupu: Teach First New Zealand (N=33)[iv].

These studies used primarily semi-structured interviews (Seidman, 2005; Wengraf, 2001) to explore the perspectives and experiences of teachers associated with each programme. Considering the similar foci of our separate studies, we sought to look across our cases with the goal of investigating what Stake (2006) calls the "quintain" or common phenomena that unites our work. In this paper, the "quintain" focuses on how ideas related to meritocracy were taken up in each research setting and what tensions and insights surfaced among teachers as a result. Our process for strategically looking across two robust data sets involved first identifying a subset of nine interviews (five from New Zealand and four from the U.S.) that reflected differently-positioned TFA corps members and AM/TFNZ programme participants who articulated their understandings of the respective organisational missions. We specifically selected participants who were actively grappling with what it means to address longstanding disparities on a national scale within and against their efficacy as individuals. The interviews represented various positions in how teachers approached, discussed, and attempted to resolve these issues.

As researchers we shared these interviews with one another, read them in their entirety, and coded them qualitatively by reading the data set in its entirety and identifying key themes and categories. Discourses of meritocracy emerged across both data sets in multiple instances and was identified as a key theme. Once we pinpointed this category, we had a series of collective data analysis discussions that allowed us to articulate the ways in which participants embraced meritocracy, how their language was shaped by mythologies and organisational ideologies, and the vague commitments they made to addressing inequality within complex socio-political contexts. Our hope in analysing these two cases is to generate new insights into the tensions, challenges, and possibilities that TFAll affiliate programmes face in preparing

educators to enter high-poverty communities where substantial achievement disparities have existed for decades.

Findings and Discussion

Teaching and Equality of Opportunity

Meritocratic sentiments, like those outlined above, were echoed by participants in both TFA and AM/TFNZ. A straight-forward example is offered by Linda, a corps member, who characterises TFA "as this idea of working extremely hard to close the achievement gap and bring about a great sense and reality of social equity among people from different social backgrounds and economic incomes." Linda views this as a "phenomenal" innovation and "agree[s] wholeheartedly with the idea that we can do it." Linda's comments reflect the broader rhetoric of TFA which gives a nod to the systemic complexities at play in the lives of youth but simultaneously promulgates notions that individual teachers can achieve "social equity" through persistence, hard work, and the 'relentless pursuit' of results.

Another participant, Ken, provides a similar justification for his role in TFA, relating explicitly to the idea of a meritocracy. As he frames it,

> I am trying to devote myself to reaching some sort of socially just end and I think that, you know, part of the big piece of why there is this inequality in America's youth is because just for a whole bunch of reasons, but I'm motivated by the fact that education could be degrading…But if you light that fire in the mind of a kid, and for that one individual kid…well, you can often side with the people who say, you know, 'We do have this meritocracy because it seemed to be working well.' You know, that's not

> necessarily true, but that it is possible. That's kind of why I get out of bed and work…I can do that for some kids.

Although Ken recognises the limitations of meritocratic thinking on a broader scale, he asserts that it can work "for some kids" and cites this perspective as fundamental to his motivation to keep teaching in the hopes of changing students' lives. Ken further notes, "I'm trying to do it to build a better tomorrow". Elsewhere, Ken implies that he may leave teaching, though he talks about the lasting impact that his campaign for equality of opportunity at TFA may have on him. He posits that "whatever I end up doing with my life, it should be to fight to try to do some work that's going to make it easier for some people, to level the playing field a little bit." While these commitments may be admirable, the centering of himself as a teacher/worker are also problematic.

Similar responses were given by AM/TFNZ participants. Sienna, an AM/TFNZ participant, talks about "knowing that there are some students who just haven't had the right side of the coin…but I can still see that they've got that kind of determination…It's about each individual being given the opportunity to do what they can to have a good educational outcome". Another AM/TFNZ participant, Dennis, echoes the idea that teachers – specifically those within the TFAll network – can be decisive in ensuring equality of opportunity through schools. He emphasises students' individual choices, made from seemingly boundless options, as connected to advancing educational equity:

> I think in terms of Teach First [NZ] their vision is working towards a day where every child reaches their fullest potential regardless of their background or something like that. So, I feel like that does match to what [we] have said. Because it is about giving them the freedom—the choices they want. Enabling them to make whatever choice they want to

> reach their fullest potential. You know by meeting their needs and helping them to become adults.

These remarks echo the marketing of AM/TFNZ quite closely. Dennis suggests that equalising outcomes (i.e., 'one day') and addressing longstanding disparities is a matter of offering students "freedom" to make the choices, a notion that obscures the multiplicity of factors at play in students' lives and reinforces ideas surrounding neoliberal subjectivities and market-based reform models that emphasise individual choice and responsibility as central to increasing access, opportunity, and outcomes.

Other participants echoed similar sentiments but developed their own, more personalised understandings of promoting equality of opportunity through schooling. Quinn, a second year AM/TFNZ participant, provides an illuminating analogy to describe his idea of meritocracy in relation to schools:

> Right now, most of our kids are down at the very bottom of the ladder and they can't see the top of the ladder. Also, a lot of them aren't even looking up the ladder; they are just kind of looking straight up, seeing, like, whatever thing is out there. And they're not even looking up and completely missing that opportunity, that pathway. We've got all these teachers who are standing halfway up the ladder and they are like, 'I can see where you need to go but you can't see it and you're not even trying to look.' And part of that is created by the context in which they live. I think schools are going to be successful if they can remove the fog that stops that child. Make sure that the child is looking the right way up that ladder and is actually making steps up that ladder.

This metaphor is framed by a similar set of assumptions – that teachers and schools can be an "equalizer of opportunity", with teachers occupying a central role in the process of "removing the fog" and directing students "up the ladder".

We note that all of these descriptions of education are heavily informed by meritocratic thinking. They seem to conceptualise schooling and life beyond school as an individual competition to achieve. Explicit references to "individual" success and meritocratic metaphors (e.g., "leveling the playing field" or "the ladder") have the potential to locate responsibility for overcoming disadvantage heavily on teachers, or worse, on students themselves. Quinn, for example, attributes educational disadvantage to the fact that students simply "aren't looking up the ladder" and "aren't even trying to look", despite "all these teachers" trying to assist them. The reason why students are failing to achieve is due to a "fog" that schools are able to lift. Sienna talks about students who "haven't had the right side of coin" but still have "determination" to succeed. Implicitly, and perhaps unconsciously, the narratives suggest that students and teachers bear the primary responsibility for achievement, largely ignoring other socioeconomic factors.

Inevitably, these discourses contribute to the paradox that teachers are consistently cast as both the problem and the solution to student underachievement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). These perspectives connect to official messaging of TFAll and its affiliates, which aim to improve educational provision by recruiting high-achieving college graduates and/or potential leaders. While it is rarely admitted in TFAll's official communications, the implication of this mission is that the quality of teaching in low-income, "underachieving" schools needs lifting. Nora, a TFA corps member, offers a relatively explicit expression of this view:

> I guess many of the teachers I see really see teaching as more of really their job, which certainly being a teacher is my job right now, but, especially for these three years, it is more than that…I haven't seen in many teachers, like, a real passionate belief in like the necessity of an education. It is just like—this is their job, this is what they are doing…I don't really see sort of almost a political belief in the power of education similar to what I have.

This attitude holds teachers responsible for underachievement, connecting again to a meritocratic view of schooling and implying that hard work and commitment to a set of ideals can alter outcomes for students. Nora makes several other references in the interview to "educational inequality" and the "achievement gap", perceiving TFA as instrumental to their eradication. Education can indeed be transformative in a range of ways – as Freire (1970) reminds us, it has liberatory potential. Yet even TFA teachers who question school practices and policies and seek to disrupt dominant paradigms may lack the expertise, confidence, knowledge, and political will needed to substantially shift policy (Crawford-Garrett, 2013).

Linking to Meritocratic Traditions

A number of participants from both contexts drew connections between the meritocratic discourses they used to justify their work and national "narratives" or mythologies of meritocracy. As noted above, both countries have strong traditions of meritocratic ideology and the idea that "anyone can achieve" is a relatively pervasive cultural phenomenon propped up by universal access to education. This connection is often made explicitly among members of the two organisations. An AM/TFNZ staff member noted that one of their marketing and recruitment strategies on university campuses is to emphasise how "disgusting" educational inequality is in

"our own fair opportunity country" and that AM/TFNZ is "one of the most awesome ways that they can contribute to it being solved". Similarly, Natalie, an AM/TFNZ participant, noted:

> For me, Teach First understands the inequality that exists and doesn't deny it, and is working hard to address it to get back to the country that we actually thought we were establishing from my great grandfather's generation. We have this saying…if you work hard and do the right thing, you can have a piece of the pie. That's the deal. But we don't have that deal anymore. We're actively moving in the direction that's further and further away from that ideal…It no longer exists.

Natalie draws on popular narratives that New Zealand has historically been a place where everyone can have "a piece of the pie". Despite acknowledging the ways in which the country is becoming increasingly inequitable, Natalie's statements continue to invoke a historical narrative in which more equitable circumstances did exist, without acknowledging the devastating impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities. In this sense, Natalie's statement and others illustrate the ways in which the myth of meritocracy is intertwined with the practice of re-historicising each country's past in ways that elide the harsh realities experienced (historically and contemporarily) by marginalised communities. Oliver, another AM/TFNZ participant, echoes Natalie's assertion by discussing the importance of "bringing this New Zealand value of egalitarianism, especially in relation to education, to light." This represents an act of connecting the work of AM/TFNZ to a national "value", as well as a subtle (re)orientation of egalitarianism towards a version of equality of *opportunity* through schooling.

Comparatively, TFA participants made more subtle connections to national ideas about meritocracy. Nora offers a fairly representative version of the connection:

> I believe that every person in the United States who lives, or even *beyond* the United States, like anyone who lives in a democratic free country deserves an education and the best one possible. And so I think a lot of the things I believe sort of eventually did attract me to TFA—the idea that every person deserves one and but not everyone in the country is getting the best education they could, and that is deeply unfair. And I think ultimately it is going to hurt our nation or democracy or economy.

Though subtle, the idea that everyone is entitled to an education regardless of their background is perhaps a dominant one in American culture. The clear implication is that education is a source of opportunity, which should be—or is—evenly distributed, even where the outcomes are radically different.

Linda, another TFA participant, proclaims that "for me, the most important thing is closing this achievement gap that is creating…huge social inequality, and is a civil rights issue for me and for a lot of other people". Here, Linda links "social inequality" to schooling, a notion that places the onus of responsibility squarely on students, schools, and teachers even though the causes of social inequality are complex and multi-faceted.

Dissenting Views: Questioning Meritocratic Possibilities

Finally, some participants expressed what might be considered dissenting views in relation to their respective organisations. One AM/TFNZ participant, Eli, questioned the emphasis on achieving equality of opportunity through educational achievement:

> 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?

This narrative captures the dilemma within which TFAll is embroiled. Eli highlights the problem of equality of opportunity and perceiving school achievement as synonymous with broader social progress, such as higher levels of secure employment and economic security. It furthermore recognises the potential limitations of equalising educational achievement, as little evidence supports claims that universally higher educational achievement is sufficient to overcome intransigent social problems. Thus, the relationship between education and social mobility remains decidedly unclear.

Eli was somewhat unique among participants in his cynicism towards the project of "equality of opportunity" through schooling, taking a broader concern with inequality itself and acknowledging the clear gaps between the two concerns. Other participants questioned the ability of their respective organisations to address inequities in education or broader social inequality, but remained committed to a belief in the possibility of a meritocratic social system achieved through education. Nora, for example, expressed doubt about the mission of TFA and its ability to "close the achievement gap". In her words, addressing the causes of inequality,

> [is] something that our entire society needs to get behind, not just like 5000 corps members. That is, like, a real societal paradigm shift that we would need to take to really value education…that is much deeper than putting really good college students into a classroom in a low performing school.

It must be noted that, despite these criticisms of TFA, she still places emphasis on the need to mitigate equality of opportunity through the school system within a broadly meritocratic framework, supporting the notion that the "achievement gap" is a result of society failing to "value education", and relocating the problem within education system.

Other dissenting views were evident in relation to the relentless emphasis on educational achievement and specifically grades and test scores. As noted above, the ascendance of a "testocracy" is a feature of meritocratic ideology, and TFAll affiliate organisations in particular have been accused of promoting narrow conceptions of schooling and achievement associated with test scores. On its website, TFNZ connects its mission to "qualifications": "our society is failing thousands of children who leave school each year without the most basic qualifications and what they need to live full, happy and flourishing lives, including accessing further education" (TFNZ, 2019a). TFA makes similar pronouncements in relation to low rates of college attendance (e.g., TFA, 2019).

Additionally, the participants we interviewed were resistant to the reductionist idea that educational achievement should be equated with grades and test scores. Both TFA and AM/TFNZ participants interestingly seemed to problematise the narrative that all students should go to university more than other aspects of the TFAll mission. One TFA participant, David, expressed uncertainty about the assumption that "every child should go to college", describing it as "rooted in sort of the cultural imagination that we have in the United States," an "American mentality of education in which it seemed like a cop out…if you don't go to college." This does represent a deviation from the "official line" of TFA in which college attendance is viewed as a key indicator of programmatic success. Dennis, an AM/TFNZ participant also problematised the primacy of university attendance as a measure of achievement, noting:

> The freedom of choice, I think, would be the sign of a successful school. So, if we had students doing lots of different things. Going into university, going into work, travelling, you know. Being able to choose what they want to do.

By foregrounding student agency and choice, Dennis is, in some ways, speaking back to meritocratic and neoliberal frameworks that focus disproportionately on testing, grades, and college attendance as key indicators of programmatic success, though his emphasis on individual choice remains prominent.

On the surface, these views may represent a point of subtle resistance among participants in TFAll organisations, perhaps due to their own experiences of higher education in relation to labour markets. None, however, were able to reconcile this resistance with their passionate commitment to the aims of their organisations. In other words, participants believed powerfully in the ability of their respective organisations to promote equality of opportunity, though few were willing (or able) to explicitly connect this particular ideological project to the need for higher test scores.

Implications: Concepts, Programmes, and Politics

Despite the counter examples just discussed, meritocratic frameworks dominated the language of participants in both programmes as well as organisational discourses. In considering the potential impact of these trends on education on a broader scale, in what follows we explore the conceptual, programmatic, and political implications of relying on meritocratic explanations for student underachievement and, in so doing, illustrate the need to problematise meritocracy within teacher preparation.

Viewing education within a framework of meritocracy may contribute to a range of harmful social and political effects. Not least, by reinforcing values of competition and hierarchy, belief in meritocracy may perpetuate socioeconomic inequality by encouraging the idea that inequalities in income and status are due to individual differences rather than deliberate

policies and structuralised features of economic systems (e.g., Kendi, 2019). Young people who find themselves unemployed, or trapped in low-wage or precarious work, for example, may blame themselves for their experiences, especially in the absence of a more robust analysis of structural inequality. Poverty is thus framed as an individual problem rather than a collective responsibility. Similarly, participants in TFAll programmes who do not possess robust training in education and who potentially move into other sectors to advance change, may carry these same notions with them, which can perpetuate overly simplistic understandings of inequality.

An ideology of individual competition, in which people rise according to personal talent, ability, grit, even ruthlessness, stands perhaps in natural opposition to ideas of cooperation, collectivism, and solidarity (Love, 2019). To take a practical example, a disproportionate focus on meritocracy has potential to undermine the values of labour union organising, which is considered vital to the mitigation of socioeconomic equality as a whole (Dromey, 2018; Farber et al., 2018). Predicating success and failure on individual capacities or shortcomings contributes to a lack of public support for government interventions, such as spending on welfare and public healthcare.

As an important note, we must acknowledge that while meritocratic thinking has a strong tradition within European cultures, it finds much less of a home in others. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Mātauranga Māori (Indigenous Māori ways of knowing and being) tend to prioritise values of mutual aid, cooperation, and social unity rather than individual competitiveness and personal gain (Mead, 2003). There is a similar set of values embedded within Indigenous communities in the United States – dynamics which add to potential tensions between educational organisations and their target communities, especially when those organisations are predicated on conflating success with individual achievement.

Conclusion

This analysis of data from two distinct TFAll affiliate programmes – TFA and AM/TFNZ – illustrates some of the ways in which discourses of meritocracy functioned as dominant and persistent themes across both organisations and their participant teachers. These meritocratic discourses risk perpetuating narrowly defined notions of 'achievement' for students and an obfuscation of the real causes of inequality, which we argue must be addressed more holistically by government entities to truly enable equity. Meritocracy is not only implied in both TFA and AM/TFNZ's respective missions – featuring heavily in their marketing and official communications – but present in the narratives of participants and personnel who rely on meritocratic discourses to explain and justify their efforts. Given the mission of TFAll, namely its goal of providing equal opportunity to all young people through quality teaching, a belief in meritocracy among participants' is perhaps predictable. Interviewees shared a largely consistent view that equality of opportunity could be achieved through improvements to education systems, and that individual teachers (placed through TFAll programmes) were the means to achieve it.

The conceptual, programmatic, and political considerations have amplified significance given the global expansion of TFAll. As these entities proliferate, meritocratic 'solutions' to endemic problems could be elevated in education policy and practice, and perhaps in societies more generally. As TFAll participants segue into leadership positions in both the private and public sectors (e.g., Trujillo, Scott, and Rivera 2017), their belief in the efficacy of meritocracy takes on increased import as they presumably shape policy on multiple levels. We argue, then, that robust engagement with the complex causes of social inequality be engaged within all teacher education programmes, and specifically within the abbreviated training received by

TFAll participants, so that teachers recognise that education is situated within an intricate web of social factors that have a profound impact on both rectifying and maintaining inequality. Perpetuating the myth of meritocracy does little to transform the lived realities of marginalised students; in fact, it may only concretise the very inequities that TFAll and its affiliates purport to address.

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[i] See Rauschenberger (2016) and Thomas, Crawford-Garrett, and Rauschenberger (2021) for more on the launch and historical evolution of TFAll as a global network advancing educational reform.
[ii] See Rauschenberger (2020) on the student achievement measurement system instituted by TFA to 'prove' the effectiveness of its corps members.
[iii] In the U.S. case, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with TFA corps members from one TFA region in the Midwest. The corps members were overwhelmingly female (n=22) and grew up outside of the state in which they were teaching (n=17). They represented various TFA cohorts and content areas—ranging from elementary/primary general content to middle school special education to high school English, among others—with the majority placed in charters schools (n=16). The interviews generally lasted between 1-2 hours in duration and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Additional information about this data set and concomitant methods and findings are available elsewhere (Thomas, 2017-2020).
[iv] Data from the New Zealand case consisted primarily of semi-structured interviews with participants and community stakeholders (N=33), including interviews with TeachFirst thought leaders and key personnel (n=3), current AM/TFNZ participants (n=16), programmes alumni (n=5), school principals who employ AM/TFNZ participants (n=2), university professors and leading experts in teacher preparation practices (n=6), and a representative from a national teacher's union who played a key role in advocating for specific changes to the AM/TFNZ certification process (n=1). Most interviews were at least an hour in length, and interviews were transcribed verbatim. See Crawford-Garrett (2017-2020) for more information about this data set, methods, and subsequent findings.