Critical Education

Teach For America and the Dangers of Deficit Thinking

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Abstract

This article details the findings of a thematic analysis of Teach For America's (TFA) website in an attempt to add to the growing body of literature documenting the harmful effects of deficit thinking. The paper begins with a general description of the current U.S. education reform landscape, followed by a brief review of literature focused on ways deficit thinking maintains asymmetrical relations of dominance. Next, I describe my commitment to postcritical ethnography and how my positionality informed the production of the deficit theme, followed by ways that TFA implicitly and explicitly pathologizes the communities, families, and students who experience its corps members. After problematizing the savior mentality identified in my research, I conclude with a discussion of implications for students, families, and the communities where TFA teachers are placed, arguing that the organization is not necessarily the answer to the structures of inequality that persist in this country's schools; rather, it works to perpetuate these structures through its adoption of harmful deficit models. I suggest students may be better served by educators who are able to locate and teach to their strengths.

> We say we believe that all children can learn, but few of us really believe it. Teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households. It is hard to believe that these children can possibly be successful after their teachers have been so thoroughly exposed to so much negative indoctrination. When teachers receive that kind of education, there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths. (Delpit, 1995, p. 172)

The Organization: An Introduction

Originating as the senior thesis of Princeton graduate Wendy Kopp in 1989, Teach For America (TFA) is a non-profit organization that seeks to develop a national teaching corps of top-performing recent college graduates and professionals, who have been recruited into two-year teaching commitments in low-income urban and rural public school districts (Teach For America, 2012a, p. 1). Following a rigorous admissions process, accepted applicants attend an intensive pre-service training institute (five weeks) and regional orientation to their new communities. Once they begin their service in the classroom, corps members receive additional and ongoing TFA-sponsored support, as well as various school-based professional development events, on the path to achieve full teacher certification (Teach For America, 2012a). In theory, these activities prepare corps members to "create the systemic changes that will help end educational inequity" both inside and outside the classroom (Teach For America, 2012a, p. 1).[1]

TFA's meteoric rise to prominence in the education sector has largely been the result of its ability to achieve an overwhelming degree of legitimacy in public discourse. In addition to its vast financial resources from numerous philanthropic and other sources, TFA has won endorsements from well respected academic and independent organizations that point to the organization's accomplishments in student achievement outcomes (Teach For America, 2012a; Teach For America, 2012b; Teach For America, 2012c). The organization's recruitment efforts reflect a commitment to leadership and academic excellence. A highly selective organization, TFA boasts a 2012 applicant pool of 48,000 individuals and an acceptance rate that has been less than 15% for the past three years (Teach For America, 2012a).

Despite these glowing endorsements, however, the ways in which the organization

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[1] Much of the research on TFA's overall efficacy is conflicting. Supporters often point to: the organization's demonstrated impact on student achievement, which is comparable to, or even better than, that of similarly experienced teachers in similar school settings (Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001; Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004; Glazerman, Mayer, & Decker, 2006); its ability to attract academically capable individuals (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, & Wyckoff, 2008; Raymond & Fletcher, 2002), typically with extensive records of leadership (Farr, 2010/2011), who might not otherwise consider teaching; and its capacity to overcome the limitations of traditional teacher preparation programs (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998). Critics, on the other hand, are scaffolded by research that details: TFA's negative impact on student achievement outcomes when compared with fully certified teachers (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Pilcher & Steele, 2005); the inadequate preparation afforded to corps members (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Glazerman et al., 2006; Veltri, 2008, 2010), which ultimately serves both to deprofessionalize teaching and to devalue the students whom TFA serves; and the organization's high attrition rates (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, Ronfeldt, & Wyckoff, 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Mac Iver & Vaughn, 2007; Noell & Gansel, 2009). See also Anderson (in press).

frames its mission consistently defy its ability to correct the inequities that persist in our country's schools. Students and families become problems to be solved by the dedicated corps members whose leadership skills and enthusiasm will somehow be able to close the achievement gap (or is it just a gap in standardized test performance?) that exists between white, predominantly middle-class students and their poor and/or non-white peers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Delpit, 1995; Anyon, 1981). In effect, the kind of deficit thinking endorsed by the organization reveals its incapacity to end educational inequity, because it perpetuates the very assumptions that contribute to inequitable structures. Is the sort of deficit-informed speech that consistently labels TFA-taught students, families, and communities as problems to be solved really the best message to impart to new recruits? Doesn't this asymmetrical hierarchy of power simply justify and recreate existing structures of inequality?

With this paper, I detail the findings of a thematic analysis of Teach For America's website in an attempt to contribute to the growing body of literature that documents the harmful effects of deficit thinking. Because this medium includes information about the organization, the leaders it attempts to attract, and larger societal realities that condition and inform schooling practices, it provides for a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which TFA aims to correct educational inequities, as well as the actors whom it views capable of such corrections. I begin with a discussion of context, noting the ways in which the organization's growing acceptance in popular discourse represents just one, albeit increasingly powerful, "solution" to the inequities experienced by students of color and of poverty, which is structured by a larger neoliberal reform movement successful in its efforts to fundamentally alter public schooling. Following a brief review of literature that documents the harmful effects of deficit thinking, I describe my commitment to postcritical ethnography and how my positionality informed the production of the deficit theme, after which I detail the specifics of my methodology. I then outline the ways in which TFA both implicitly and explicitly pathologizes the communities, families, and students who experience its corps members, and I problematize the savior mentality that I identified in my research. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research for students, families, and the communities where TFA teachers are placed, arguing that the organization is not necessarily the answer to the structures of inequality that persist in this country's schools; rather, it works to perpetuate these structures through its adoption of harmful deficit models. I suggest that students may be better served by educators who are able to locate and teach to their strengths.

Neoliberal Reform & Equity

The inequities that persist in our country's schools have enjoyed a long tradition of debate amongst policymakers and other stakeholders. For the last thirty years, the primary answer to these inequities has involved the institution of market-based, neoliberal[2] reforms that embrace the perceived advantages of school choice and market competition, charter schools, vouchers, standards, and consequential accountability systems. Certainly not without its critics (e.g., Boyles, 2011; Ellison, 2012), this reform movement has achieved an overwhelming degree of public legitimacy, largely through policymakers' success in connecting educational under-performance with both globalization and, later, with concerns

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[2] Neoliberalism is a late 20th century global shift in political and economic ideology that calls for market-based state policies over those which promote the welfare state and government control of economic and social activities.

over public schools' ability to establish more equitable educational environments (Ellison, 2012). In the 1980's, the political right sought to win approval for its mission primarily by connecting its preferred practices with American students' perceived inability to compete in an increasingly globalized economy.[3] With the rise of the New Left in the 1990s, the language of the achievement gap was introduced into the reform vocabulary of popular discourse. The guiding logic was this: not only were public schools failing to produce economically viable students, but they were also failing to provide very specific student populations with equal educational opportunities, thus legitimating the need for some sort of policy intervention (read: neoliberal reform). In many ways, then, educational under-performance became not just a rhetorical tool used primarily to criticize public education on the basis of economic competition (although this is still here); rather, under-performance became explicitly connected with equity through a process that established a series of solutions that ultimately changed the problem as a whole (see, e.g., Thayer-Bacon & Ellison, 2011). Overall, neoliberal reformers have been able to win approval for their mission by manufacturing a "crisis" in both economic and social justice terms.

TFA represents just one potential "solution" to such educational under-performance. Where TFA differs from other neoliberal reforms, however, is its professed commitment to serving historically marginalized student populations. According to Lahann & Reagan (2011), TFA's appropriation of corporate culture in the pursuit of more equitable schooling practices reflect what they term *progressive neoliberalism*: "embracing neoliberalism's focus on deregulation, business strategies, and the managerial culture of accountability, but working to fight inequity and to reform the systems that produced it" (p. 20). This commitment to equity, however, is not immune to the rhetoric of under-achievement that so permeates our current educational climate. In fact, TFA's mission is scaffolded by such rhetoric so as to attract dedicated young college graduates and professionals under the guise of social justice. On this point, I agree with Apple (2001), who contends that "the 'helping' language of schools at times makes it hard to see the very real hidden social effects of the social and psychological labels used by educators" (p. 261). Because it operates under the assumption that it is helping targeted children, TFA is able to assume a kind of altruistic authority that successfully legitimizes its commitments, regardless of whether or not its mission can be realized. What's more, the organization's overall approval in public discourse, as evidenced by its significant financial backing, academic endorsements, and substantial applicant pool, disguises the negative effects of its deficit-informed speech. Not convinced TFA is the solution to the inequitable structures that inform schooling practices and reforms, I worry it may do more harm than good.

The Dangers of Deficit Thinking

Within this highly punitive and condemnatory educational landscape, students and teachers are initiated into the everyday realities of U.S. classrooms. Current accountability systems explicitly connect school performance with processes of accreditation, evaluation, and other external motivators designed to reward schools that are performing well and punish those performing poorly (Sahlberg, 2007). As a result, schools and teachers labeled under-performing become pathologized for failing to perform at levels commensurate with standards perpetuated in public schools, and so risk losing funding/employment (Sleeter, 2012). Not only does this sort of high-stakes atmosphere create classroom environments

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[3] See, for example, the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* under the Reagan administration.

based on fear, but it also forces students to comply with whitestream standards and curricula that may be inconsistent with their unique interests and/or needs (Anders, 2011; Cass & Curry, 2007; Kumashiro, 2012, Meiners, 2007). Tracing the history of student labeling and tracking, Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) argued that standards-based reform, as well as the tests required to measure proficiency, reflect just one recent example of what ultimately amounts to whitestream standards that disguise inequitable practices.[4] Similarly, Valencia (1997) suggests that academic under-performance can be traced, not necessarily to confirmed inadequacies, but to externally identified inequalities of intellectual competence, motivation, behaviors, and/or cultural differences. Overall, these sorts of "failures" function to legitimate the very deficits that inform them, thus allowing the cycle to continue. As Brantlinger (2009) suggested, "In creating imaginary, symbolic distinctions that reify difference, powerful insiders project onto outsiders what they disdain. If the central group considers itself normal and able, 'Others' become abnormal and disabled" (p. 402; see also, Freire, 1998; Lewis & Macedo, 1996). In this way, the problem of educational under-performance becomes located within the body of the student, as opposed to the systemic inequities that inform social reality. Ultimately, students become labeled as failing, relegated to low tracks and special education, and ultimately alienated from the schools that fail to recognize their part of the "problem." This is the hallmark of a deficit model: individual students (as well as their families and communities) become targeted and blamed for academic under-performance, all the while letting the systemic inequities that inform student outcomes off the hook.

The harmful effects of this kind of deficit thinking on both students and families have been extensively documented. García and Guerra (2004) identified a direct negative correlation between deficit thinking and the academic achievement of targeted students. Similarly, Oakes (2005) described the ways assumptions about the perceived limitations of targeted student populations (and their families) restrict their access to various educational advantages. In addition, the same systems of tracking that were designed to mitigate the negative effects of the achievement gap resulted in the disproportionate placement of targeted student groups in "lower" academic tracks (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). As such, students of color and of poverty are most likely to experience the disadvantages of tracking (Farkas, 2003; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Oakes, 2005; Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1999). For example, according to the Children's Defense Fund (2007):

> Black children are twice as likely as White children to be put in programs for mental retardation; almost twice as likely to be retained in a grade; three times as likely to be suspended; and 50% more likely to drop out of school. . . . Minority youth make up 39% of the juvenile population but are 60% of committed juveniles. (p. 38; See also, Delpit, 2012; Cummins, 2001; Artiles, 2011)

Because levels of educational attainment are directly connected to students' future economic, democratic, and social prospects (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996) and because targeted student groups overpopulate tracks labeled under-performing, the raced and classed structures that stratify our society remain in tact.

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[4] According to Deschenes et al. (2001), "Testing was used not so much to diagnose specific learning problems and to devise appropriate learning strategies (surely valuable uses of the new technology of assessment) as to isolate the *ne'er-do-wells* from the mainstream of the graded school for the *normal* students" (p. 532).

This practice of "blaming the victim" translates to a student's home life, as well. In their national study of kindergarteners, West, Denton, and Reaney (2001) found that the teachers of targeted students had a tendency to blame parents for failing to provide their children adequate preparation for the challenges of kindergarten. Their findings indicate that, at the beginning of the school year, teachers perceived the academic, social, and emotional preparation of white students to be superior to that of students of color in the areas of cooperation, ability to pay attention, and activity completion. Additionally, when a student's perceived deficiencies are presumed the result of parental and/or communal noninvolvement in or antipathy towards their child's education, his/her background is also targeted (Betsinger, García, & Guerra, 2001; Oakes, 2005). This form of deficit thinking is especially dangerous. Brantlinger (1985) documents the long-term resentment felt by low-income parents when their students' experienced the application of disparaging labels, rejection, and alienation from "respectable kids."

When we locate the blame for academic "failure" within students and families, we ultimately forgive the systemic realities that inform schooling outcomes. Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, (2001) found that reform efforts were impeded by educators' and policymakers' tendencies to engage in the kind of deficit thinking that systematically pathologizes individual schools and/or students (and subsequently families and communities), without adequately considering the impact of school practices on student outcomes (See also, Deschenes, et al., 2001; Weiner, 2006). Although teacher attitudes are more directly related to student achievement than facilities or funding (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2004), Cummins (2001) argued it is much safer to blame students and families for academic under-performance than to locate and place the blame with the inequitable distribution of resources and educational opportunities. Ultimately, deficit thinking lets the system off the hook, allowing educators to treat difference as deficit instead of prescribing alternative ways to help students learn and to address systemic inequity.

The overall outcome is this: when educators and policymakers locate the problem of educational under-performance within the students who are perceived as having some innate inequality of knowledge, income, equipment, motivation, or experience, there is little incentive to question whether the system is, in fact, under-serving targeted student populations (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001). We know that deficit thinking is harmful. So, why are we still using lack to explain why students aren't achieving? Why can't we locate and teach to strengths?

Critique & Methodology

Tracing just one of several identified patterns, I share an analysis of Teach For America's website that is informed by my commitments to postcritical ethnography. Postcritical works seek to connect critical theory/ethnography with a poststructural orientation. Critical ethnographers critique the ways in which power structures social reality, largely for the purposes of revealing oppression and emancipating the oppressed. As such, critical researchers have a political agenda deployed through research designed to "develop forms of critical consciousness, both in the researcher and the researched, that can lead to positive social change" (Hytten, 2004, p. 97; see also, Carspecken, 1996; Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004; Thomas, 1993). However, the extent to which critical ethnographic works have been able to emancipate and transform the lives of the oppressed remains a point of contention for many scholars (Noblit et al., 2004). According to Hytten (2004):

Critical researchers argue that the hegemony of dominant structures creates a false consciousness in people that disables them from effectively challenging the status quo. Yet, what we have not considered enough are the ways in which many critical researchers substitute one form of hegemony for another. That is, they do not truly problematize their own understanding of the social world, and rather argue for the oppressed to replace their false consciousness with the "critical consciousness" the researcher has. (p. 96)

To avoid reinscribing dominance through research, postcritical ethnographers work to interrogate systemic inequities and the contexts in which power is deployed, while at the same time embracing a poststructural orientation that acknowledges the limitations of objectivity claims. My identification with this position, then, demands that I identify and investigate how my positionality constructs my interpretations, take up the practice of recursive reflexivity, wherein I continuously critique my role as critic, acknowledge the risks and limitations of claims to objectivity, and problematize the ways in which my both partial and positional representations inform and produce the social world that I describe (Noblit et al., 2004). As such, I work to write against myself, all the while acknowledging the impossibility of this task (Noblit, 1999). As a former alternatively certified urban classroom teacher who is cognizant of her raced and classed privilege and status and who is committed to progressive politics, I work to problematize the ways in which power structures the lived experiences of individuals. I worry about the manifestations of deficit-informed speech that I identified in my research, and I question whether this kind of deficit thinking can effectively end educational inequity as TFA's mission claims. As a result, I seek to critique and reenvision the ways in which we talk about students of color and of poverty.

I include excerpts that reflect my identification of the deficit theme across various links in the website, as well as my critical interpretations. Document analysis, an ethnographic method wherein the researcher collects and analyzes artifacts that represent the culture of the participants and/or the research setting, guided my approach to the website (Glesne, 2011). I produced the deficit theme via my application of both *in vivo* and descriptive codes to the data (Saldaña, 2009), after which I collected and categorized the patterns I developed according to the dictates of thematic analysis. This method requires that particular attention be paid to repeated words or phrases and/or evidence of potential answers to research questions, which were largely concerned with the assumptions implicit in TFA's mission, the picture of teaching and learning that was presented, as well as the population to whom this picture was directed (Grbich, 2007). Additionally, my commitments to postcritical ethnography led me to focus my efforts on manifestations of power within the documents and their potential consequences for students, families, and the communities in which TFA leaders are placed.

Assuming the Problem:
Implicit Manifestations of Deficit Thinking

With this section, I outline the implicit ways in which TFA reveals a commitment to inequitable educational practices both through its application of deficit-informed labels to the students (as well as families and communities) who experience it within TFA-lead classrooms and through its denigration of student backgrounds. The labels used to describe stakeholders assume a "problem" that must be overcome through a process that ultimately devalues students and the teachers who currently serve them, while at the same time

positioning corps members as potential change agents. Categories led to the generation of the following themes: 1) *access and excellence,* wherein TFA assumes that students of poverty do not have access to a quality education, and so require the organization's intervention; 2) *transformational change*, wherein TFA leaders are positioned as change agents, often at the expense of the teachers currently working in the communities where corps members are placed; and 3) *progress*, which refers to situations where students have demonstrated some form of improvement, largely as the direct result of TFA teachers' skillful intervention.

Access and Excellence

This theme illustrates TFA's assumption that its leaders are uniquely capable of providing their students with access to the kind of quality education that they do not currently possess. Examples include:

- "**We**[5] can provide an excellent education for kids in low-income communities" (Mission: A Solvable Problem).[6]

- "The stakes are higher than ever for students in low-income communities, but **you can help them** get the excellent education that can change their lives" (Why Teach For America: Homepage).

- "**We** strive to develop and become the leaders necessary to realize educational excellence and equity" (Our Organization: Leadership).

These examples are largely animated by linguistic and syntactical selections that empower corps members, often at the expense of the students whom they teach and the teachers currently working in the schools where they are placed. Here, TFA establishes a strict Us vs. Them dichotomy where **we/you** (TFA as an organization, its leaders, and potential recruits) can correct the problems of **them** (students of poverty).

Corps members typically enjoy subject positions, thus indicating their empowered status, while students are described largely as objects of TFA intervention, and so become removed of any sort of agency. What's more, this distinction highlights the fact that most TFA recruits do not belong to the communities where they will teach, a feature that further complicates the kind of deficit thinking favored by the organization. Linguistic selections like *you can help them* reveal the ways in which TFA is able to assume a sort of savior mentality, where external intervention becomes favored to community empowerment. Ultimately, this sort of mindset denigrates student backgrounds, and so limits the implementation of the kind of culturally relevant forms of teaching that have the capacity to support a more empowered and equitable form of learning for all students, regardless of individual backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). Overall, these rhetorical strategies imply that the schools and teachers currently serving low-income students are not able to provide excellent educational opportunities, thus requiring the intervention of the dedicated young college graduates who possess the skills necessary to deliver their students from poverty. As a result, teachers and schools become pathologized in a process that creates a sort of hierarchy where TFA leaders enjoy the top spot. This sort of power differential ultimately maintains, not eliminates, existing structures of inequality.

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[5] I use boldface here and throughout the document for emphasis.

[6] All website materials were accessed on February 2, 2012.

Transformational Change: Making an Impact

This theme refers to those instances where TFA leaders are positioned as change agents. As was the case in the *access and excellence* category, the language used here consistently empowers TFA leaders, at the same time that it objectifies the students and communities who experience TFA intervention. Examples include:

- "Teach For America corps members and alumni are helping lead an educational revolution in low-income communities across the country" (Mission: Homepage).

- "You have the opportunity to serve as a catalyst for change" (Why Teach For America: Where and What You'll Teach).

- "We seek to expand educational opportunity in ways that are life-changing for children and transforming for our country" (Our Organization: Core Values).

These excerpts reveal TFA's commitment to educational change and transformation. However, they also suggest that such transformation may not possible without TFA intervention. Here, the organization is able to set up a clear power differential: schools in low-income communities are not performing at levels commensurate with national and state standards, and TFA has the capacity to correct such under-performance. However, in so doing, the organization also assumes that the schools in which TFA teachers are placed, and public education in general, are either unable or unwilling to produce the kind of positive educational outcomes that TFA is capable of delivering. What's more, these statements assume that the over-arching problem of educational under-performance can be solved by simply replacing the teachers who are currently at work in these communities. In many ways, this rhetorical strategy functions to undermine the good work being done in the schools where TFA recruits are placed at the same time that it blames teachers for the inequities that persist in our country's schools instead of the systemic realities that structure student outcomes (Kumashiro, 2012). Ultimately, these implicit manifestations of deficit-informed speech function to recreate the very inequities that TFA aims to correct.

Progress

The theme of *progress* refers to situations where students have demonstrated some form of improvement, largely as the direct result of TFA teachers' intervention and includes language that describes how TFA as an organization has positively impacted the institution of public schooling.

- "My students are college-ready and have embraced their role as life long learners. Every day we see how the progress we make ties directly to their futures"—Joseph Cucolo, Hawaii Corps '09 (as cited in Why Teach For America: Homepage).

- "Students make the most significant progress when they are given ambitious, measurable goals" (Why Teach For America: Teaching As Leadership Framework).

- "The teachers who are most successful in the challenging environments of high-need schools begin every endeavor by asking: 'Where are my students now versus where I want them to be?' and 'How can I be most

efficient in helping them move forward?'" (Why Teach For America: Teaching As Leadership Framework).

The kind of progress described here really correlates to assessments of student outcomes.[7] However, the standards according to which these outcomes are measured are, more often than not, consistent with curricula and practices that may not speak to the individual strengths of all student populations. What's more, TFA's use of *progress* as a rhetorical strategy may function to maintain whitestream dominance. According to Grande (2004), "the construction of a grand narrative organized around change as progress and progress as change not only legitimates the path of 'whitestream' history but also sustains the hegemonic goals of capitalism (wealth accumulation) and colonization (appropriation of property)" (p. 68). In this way, the language of progress becomes an element of the colonial project, wherein schools and students labeled under-performing become a sort of "rescue mission" for the dedicated and enthusiastic corps members who populate TFA (see, e.g. Paperson, 2010). Ultimately, student backgrounds are positioned as something to be overcome, as opposed to cultivated, and so represent a clear departure from the kind of culturally relevant teaching framework that seeks to empower students to achieve academically, though not at the expense of their cultural integrity. In addition, progress becomes explicitly tied to the hard work and dedication of TFA corps members, not the students and schools who produce the desired results, thus setting up a clear power differential. This process also results in the overall denigration of the outcomes already exhibited in the communities where TFA teachers are placed. In this way, students, schools, and communities are denied their many strengths and labeled as failing before they are given the opportunity to name their own value. As such, TFA's inclusion of speech directed at forms of progress does little to meaningfully challenge the systemic inequities that structure schooling realities.

Naming the Problem:
Explicit Manifestations of Deficit Thinking

Here, I detail the explicit ways in which TFA ascribes deficit-informed labels to the students whom it serves (as well as their families and communities). According to Brantlinger (2009), "People have the right to name themselves and have their names respected by others" (p. 401). As a result, when TFA defines students according to their perceived inadequacies, it disallows this right and "Others" entire populations of students who benefit most from positive interpersonal relationships that capitalize off of their unique strengths. With this section, then, I seek to highlight the harmful effects of this form of deficit thinking and to challenge the ways in which its explicit manifestations expand, not diminish, educational inequity. These themes include: 1) *"extra challenges of poverty*," which explicitly names poverty as a challenge experienced by students in TFA-led communities; 2) *"culture of low expectations*," wherein TFA equates poverty with low expectations in a process that effectively pathologizes the families and communities who experience its leaders; and 3) *achievement gap*, which includes language that describes the

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[7] The research detailing TFA's impact on student achievement is conflicting. Studies suggest that TFA teachers produce comparable or better gains in student learning, particularly in Mathematics, when compared with other similarly experienced teachers (Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004; Raymond, Fletcher, & Luque, 2001). However, when compared with traditionally certified teachers, TFA teachers are typically outperformed (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002; Pilcher & Steele, 2005).

raced and classed disparity in student test scores and college attendance that exists between white, predominantly middle-class students and their poor and/or non-white peers. As was the case in the implicit manifestations of inequity, the linguistic choices made here signal the empowerment of TFA leaders at the expense of their objectified students, whose educational under-performance becomes largely the result of what amounts to an inferior background. This strategy denigrates the students who experience TFA intervention, and so disguises the inequities that inform schooling outcomes.

"Extra Challenges of Poverty"

Excerpts categorized under this label explicitly name poverty as a challenge experienced by students in TFA-led communities. In addition, poverty is, here, depicted as something that students can overcome, often with the help of TFA corps members.

- "Although 16 million American children face the extra challenges of poverty, an increasing body of evidence shows that they can achieve at the highest levels" (Mission: Homepage).

- "Poverty is not destiny" (Mission: A Solvable Problem).

- "In many low-income communities, schools with the fewest resources serve students with the greatest needs. Our most successful teachers go above and beyond the traditional role of 'teacher' and do whatever it takes to help their students reach their big goals. They refuse to allow inevitable challenges to become roadblocks and work hard to overcome them so that their students can succeed" (Why Teach For America: Teaching As Leadership Framework).

Although the devastating effects of poverty on the individuals who experience it is undeniable (Children's Defense Fund, 2007), the ways in which the organization talks about students of poverty suggests that it is something that capable young people can overcome with the help of dedicated TFA corp members. In many ways, this rhetorical strategy functions to validate the sort of state-sanctioned poverty that results, in part, from our country's inadequate social welfare system. According to the Children's Defense Fund (2007),

> Poverty is the largest driving force behind the Cradle to Prison Pipeline crisis, exacerbated by race. Although a majority of poor children live in working families playing by the rules, they cannot earn enough to escape poverty. A minimum wage job pays only 58.9 percent of the federal poverty level for a family of four. (p. 25; see also, Anders, 2011)

Despite the systemic inequities that inform poverty outcomes, TFA continues to equate hard work and self-sufficiency with academic success. What's more, this logic suggests that, should students fail to escape poverty, they have only themselves to blame. Ultimately, this sort of perspective lets the system that structures inequitable student outcomes off the hook.

"Culture of Low Expectations"

This theme equates poverty with low expectations in a process that effectively pathologizes the families and communities who experience TFA leaders.[8] As with other themes, the linguistic choices signal the empowerment of TFA leaders at the expense of their objectified students, whose educational under-performance becomes largely the result of what amounts to an inferior background.

- "Leading educators explain why **we must help kids growing up in poverty** beat the culture of low expectations" (Mission: A Solvable Problem).

- "**Successful teachers break the cycle of low expectations** faced by many students in low-income communities. **They** show students that if they work hard enough, they can and will achieve. **They** maintain high expectations for their students, while still meeting them where they are academically, so the students can succeed" (Why Teach For America: Teaching As Leadership Framework).

Educators who embrace this form of deficit thinking assume that their students enter school with some innate inequality of knowledge, skill, and/or motivation as a result of parental and/or communal noninvolvement in or antipathy towards their children's educations (Betsinger, García, & Guerra, 2001; Valencia et al., 2001). As a result, they are either unable or unwilling to acknowledge their part in the problem (García & Guerra, 2004). Ultimately, this frame functions to relieve the systemic inequities that structure schooling practices of any blame. What's more, these examples remove the high-poverty communities in which TFA teachers are placed of any agency in the educations of their children. The overall logic suggests that the deficiencies of these communities prevent them from achieving the kind of transformational change that only TFA leaders can provide.

This sort of deficit-informed rhetoric also feeds into the white savior industrial complex. Originally coined by Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole in response to the Kony 2012[9] media frenzy, this phrase refers to the confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities to ultimately validate white privilege. For Cole, the ways in which we talk about Africa as a sort of "backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism" perpetuate the notion that external forces, typically under the guise of altruism, are uniquely capable of delivering local citizens from the challenges they face in their communities/nations (para. 12). White intervention, not local empowerment, becomes the solution. As a result, entire populations are denied the autonomy to direct their own lives in a manner that is not exclusive of self-respect. Moreover, the commonsense manner in which the argument is framed positions any challenge to the intervention as antipathy towards, or even approval of, the externally identified "problem." Ultimately, the object of "help"

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[8] This category is reminiscent of the now generally discredited "culture of poverty" argument from 1960's and 70's sociology that equates poverty with a poverty-perpetuating system of values (see, e.g., Lewis, 1966).

[9] This short film, developed by NGO Invisible Children Inc., sought to bring attention to the African militia leader and indicted war criminal, Joseph Kony, for the purposes of facilitating his arrest. The film's lead investigator, Jason Russell, is a young, white, American activist who, according to Cole, reduces the historical complexities of present realities to a sort of white rescue mission that becomes legitimated by its appropriation of social justice language.

becomes a source of "feel goodery" for the "helper," not an empowered agent capable of directing his/her own life. This process suggests that enthusiasm and a desire to "make a difference" will be able to correct a problem that has been named according to the "helper's" own standards. According to these principles, TFA is able to frame teaching, not so much a calling for dedicated individuals willing to put in the time and effort required to achieve full teacher certification, but a sort of rescue mission designed to save students from the deficiencies of their unique backgrounds. Ultimately, this distinction perpetuates asymmetrical relations of power that privilege and legitimate the backgrounds of TFA teachers over those of the TFA-taught students and their parents, who then become objectified "Others" incapable of saving themselves. This sort of hierarchy poses a serious threat to TFA's ability to end educational inequity.

Achievement Gap

This theme describes the raced and classed disparity in student test scores and college attendance that exists between white, predominantly middle-class students and their poor and/or non-white peers. This particular label, although common in popular discourse, ultimately pathologizes students for failing to conform to whitestream standards and curricula that are perpetuated in public schools, despite the fact that these particular understandings of knowledge and behavior may be inconsistent with the unique backgrounds of an increasingly diverse student population.

- "What really made a difference in my life was experiencing teachers who were so for the student . . . they were doing all of it to close the achievement gap and give students a chance to succeed"—Janiceia Adams, student of Teach For America corps member Eric Thomas, Teach For America alumna, New York Corps '07 (as cited in Mission: A Solvable Problem).

- "But in our country today, a significant achievement gap exists between low-income children and their wealthier peers. It's not easy to close this gap, but hundreds of proof points show that it's possible. It takes committed leaders in our classrooms today who will continue to fight for students tomorrow. Teach For America's mission is to build the movement to eliminate educational inequity by developing such leaders" (Our Organization: Homepage).

- "A child's education begins long before they walk into an elementary school and unfortunately, so does the achievement gap" (Our Organization: Homepage).

These excerpts assume that high-poverty students have a gap to overcome. However, they do not account for the whitewashed schooling practices that inform such disparities (Anders, 2011; Deschenes et al., 2001). Students are expected to both engage with a curriculum that may not speak to their unique interests and/or needs and to demonstrate complex skills [e.g., self-control, memorization, social flexibility, and obedience (Cass & Curry, 2007)] that may be inconsistent with students' cultural values/norms. Additionally, if the students elect not or are unable to perform these skills, they are made to feel their "failures" with labels that segregate, pathologize, and/or deny their abilities. In many ways, then, the language of the achievement gap functions to recreate existing structures of inequality that systematically target and villainize entire populations, despite the fact that its

very existence is based on entirely arbitrary standards. As Kumashiro (2012) argues, "inequity and power differences can result not simply from one group overpowering another in a competition, but also from one group defining or in other ways indirectly manipulating the very rules of that competition in ways that advantage them" (p. 4). In effect, the commonsense way in which TFA describes what is ultimately a violent slogan defies its ability to end educational inequity. I see only more of the same.

Discussion & Implications

The manifestations of deficit thinking I produced in my research pathologize low-income communities in a process that creates (not diminishes) an inequitable hierarchy where TFA leaders enjoy the top spot. In so doing, TFA undermines the good work being done in low-income communities and, ultimately, perpetuates the status quo. What's more, low-income communities become problems that require TFA intervention. This rhetoric feeds into the white savior industrial complex that both appropriates the language of social justice in order to validate the status and privilege enjoyed by TFA teachers through their educations and disguises the harmful effects of deficit thinking. These commitments ultimately silence and devalue the same students whom it purports to help. We know that deficit thinking is dangerous. So, why are we not considering alternative ways of assessing the inequities that persist in our schools?

TFA suggests that poverty is some abstract obstacle that can be overcome with the help of the dedicated young college grads and professionals who populate TFA. What's more, the students are blamed if they fail to do so, thus feeding the myth of meritocracy. I am not convinced that a revolving door of under-experienced teachers who have received a heavy dose of deficit-informed rhetoric can really put an end to educational inequalities. Instead, I argue that we must change the ways in which we talk about and educate our students. Yosso (2005) speaks of the "contradictory nature of education, wherein schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower" (p. 74). If we are really committed to ending educational inequity, then we have to stop thinking about and teaching to our students' perceived inadequacies. We know that targeted students benefit from culturally responsive pedagogies, curricula, and relationships (Delpit, 1995; Goodwin, 2002; Howard, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Meiners, 2007; Michie, 1999; Mihesuah, 2003; Olson, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). So, why are we not actively committing to identifying and teaching to student strengths? If equity really is the overall goal of current reform movements, then it warrants much more than lip service. As Nieto (1994) suggests, "It is too convenient to fall back on deficit theories and continue the practice of blaming students, their families, and their communities for educational failure. Instead, schools need to focus on where they *can* make a difference, namely, their own instructional policies and practices" (p. 394). Our students and teachers deserve better.

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