**Overcoming educational inequality: An examination of the perceptions of Teach First**

**Group 3**: Mohamed Hidayat Al-Rahman, Rachel Lim Pei Yi, Puneet Minocha, Jivan Navani, Jessica Pandian, Yun Zhang.

**Acknowledgements**

*We would firstly like to thank our supervisor Maria Norris for her unending support throughout this research project. We would also like to thank Dr. Esther Saxey and Dr. Claire Gordon from the LSE Teaching and Learning Centre for providing us with this opportunity. Finally, we greatly appreciate the willingness of all our interviewees in agreeing to participate in our research and providing us with insights into their perceptions of Teach First.*

**Abstract**

*This paper explores third-party attempts to alleviate educational inequality in London by focusing on the Teach First scheme. To provide a background of the rationale behind Teach First, a review of the existing literature on the relationship between education and poverty was carried out. In addition, visual analysis of the BBC Three documentary ‘Tough Young Teachers’ and in-depth semi-structured interviews with current and prospective applicants were conducted. This enabled the critical analysis of the perceptions of the scheme and the motivations of those who have applied and/or have taught with the initiative. Our results suggest that potential teachers in the Teach First scheme perceive it as being conducive to achieving educational equality. However, the largely self-interested and non-altruistic motivations of our participants illustrate the disparity between the aims and reality of Teach First. Moreover, the underlying factors that contribute to educational inequality tend not to be addressed by the scheme due to the multidimensional nature of poverty and inequality. Consequently, this paper suggests that the Teach First scheme needs to be modified in order to align the values of its participants and the organisation and that the scheme should be further supplemented elsewhere such as through governmental policies.*

**Keywords**

*Educational inequality; London; Teach First; Poverty*

**Introduction**

Education has an important influence on the persistence of global poverty and inequality, with this paper focusing on the neoclassical theory of poverty and inequality which places emphasis on its multifaceted nature (Santos, 2011). Within this, we will investigate the impacts of education because findings from various studies strongly suggest that education has the ability to constrain or facilitate social mobility. As Sen (1999) describes, education has an important impact on development and the eradication of poverty by enabling positive social change, significant economic production and the improvement of people's’ subjective well being. His argument correlates to Roberts who states that “the primary determinants of a country’s standard of living is how well it succeeds in developing and utilizing the skills and knowledge, and furthering the health and educating the majority of its population” (p. 202-209, 2011).  Furthermore, Santos (2011) illustrates the complex relationship between the lack of educational equality and the persistence of poverty. She suggests that low-income families are denied access to areas in which schooling is of a higher calibre, thereby leading to the creation of a poverty trap. As a result, the British government has sought to change the educational system to reduce the levels of poverty and inequality by introducing schemes such as Teach First (hereinafter TF), first launched in 2002.

TF aims to eliminate such educational inequality by sending high achieving graduates to schools in low-income communities. Since its inception, the popularity of the scheme has grown steadily with 1,231 TF teachers attending 359 schools in London (Teach First London, 2016). However, it has recently been the subject of criticism with comments focusing on the questionable motivations of the graduates and their perceptions of the scheme. Consequently, this paper will aim to provide a critical analysis of the perceptions and motivations of current and prospective applicants of the TF scheme. This will be achieved through visual analysis of the BBC Three documentary ‘Tough Young Teachers’ and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Ultimately, this paper hopes to uncover how the varying perceptions and motivations of this group of people affect the effectiveness of the scheme in alleviating poverty and inequality.

**Literature Review**

Perceptions of the scheme are extremely varied. The existing literature in support of the scheme states that the initiative has positive in-school and partner university support by facilitating the increased upward social mobility of both the teachers and pupils (Allen and Allnut, 2013). This is reinforced by Hutchings’ et al. (2006) perceptions, as he perceives the scheme in a positive light because of the way in which the TF teachers deliver high quality lessons and create and strengthen extra-curricular activities, leading to the development of educational ability, skills and confidence of pupils’ which will enable them to better access life opportunities (such as employment) in the future. Moreover, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED, 2011) describes TF as outstanding in every category and that their presence leads to spillover effects into other schools, therefore raising the quality of teaching and education in under-achieving schools and reducing educational inequality.  The empirical evidence also helps to create positive perceptions of the TF scheme. As Allen and Allnut (2013) state, the only existing quantitative study of TF finds consistently positive and substantial impacts on attainment, with the addition of approximately 1/3 of a GCSE grade per subject from two years onwards after joining the programme.

However, the scheme has come under increasing criticism recently, with many developing negative perceptions of the scheme. Research has highlighted the disruption the scheme causes due to the way in which experienced teachers are often displaced from schools and departments due to the influx of TF teachers (Gov.uk, 2013). Moreover, the short timeframe of the scheme limits the potential of teachers to reach their optimum teaching levels. This is extremely important with regards to the scheme as teachers are least effective in their first year of teaching (Allen and Allnut, 2013). Studies also suggest that due to the lack of tenure of the teachers on the scheme, teachers are unable to make a positive long lasting impact (Muijs, Chapman and Armstrong, 2013). Disruption also occurs because of the high teacher turnover rate and recruiting costs. The aforementioned negatives suggests that TF may benefit the teachers more than the pupils’ of the scheme as the teachers leave with transferable skills and are able to use the programme as a platform of which they are able to gain access to higher-paid and more influential jobs. This is reflected by the low retention rate of the programme as only 40% of TF participants were teaching five years after starting their course (Freedman, 2014). This number is lower compared to the overall teaching industry which is at 50%, therefore illustrating that TF teachers do not remain in the system as long as the traditional PGCE candidates (Gov.uk, 2013).

While this initiative does attempt to tackle the issue of poverty through improving education, its efforts are heavily impacted by factors outside its control. As Aizer et al. (2012) describes, inequality in educational outcomes is partially embedded in an individual from birth due to socio-economic factors. For example, maternal stress during pregnancy is thought to affect pupil performance through the direct effect of psychological stress on the foetus. Moreover, in early childhood, a caring home environment fosters cognitive development (Goodman et al, 2010) and stunted through neglect and family stress – a factor which is known to be related to low family income (Evans and Garthwaite, 2010). It is during this period that educational inequalities develop rapidly (Goodman et al, 2010); by age five, children from households with no working parents are between four and 10 months behind their richer peers in terms of cognitive development indicators (Jones and Schoon, 2008). Finally, expectations set by parents are also likely to influence individual attainment (Davis-Kean, 2005). This indicates that the schemes positive effects on education are limited to a certain extent.

In light of the literature presented, it is clear that perceptions of the scheme are not unified. It is extremely important to consider the perceptions of potential and current applicants of TF, as it could influence the ability of the scheme to reduce poverty and inequality in London. Their perceptions and motivations for joining the scheme can determine whether there will be positive or negative impact on education. In order to critically analyse the perceptions of potential and current applicants of TF, we will concentrate on three main themes: motivations, participants’ desired outcomes and the limitations of the Teach First scheme.

**Methodology**

To acquire a comprehensive view of the perceptions of the TF scheme in London, a mixed-method qualitative research approach was used. This allowed for comparisons between the proposed visions of the scheme and its actual realities. The approach consisted of visual analysis of the BBC Three documentary ‘Tough Young Teachers’ as well as in-depth semi-structured interviews with prospective/current applicants.

**Sample**

Owing to time constraints and the lack of established relationships with both the organisers of TF and its current and past participants, two types of samples were used due to our mixed-method approach. The BBC Three documentary provided a sample of six TF participants, five of which were in the first year of the scheme and one in the second year.

The other sample of participants, which were interviewed, were gathered using an opportunity sampling technique. This involved contacting TF headquarters and individuals who knew people who had experience with TF. Ultimately, our end sample group consisted of four participants. Three had applied to the scheme, with two being successful and are poised to start the programme. The final participant had attended a taster day with TF.

The main advantage was that all our interviewees had prior connections with us, allowing for potentially more open and truthful answers. Contrastingly, the opinions of the participants on the documentary may have been more skewed as a result of being filmed. Nevertheless, this does not make the data obtained any less valuable. On the other hand, an overarching limitation is that there is a selection bias in both our samples. For the interviews, the participants all came from similar backgrounds. Furthermore, although the small sample of interviewees allowed for more extensive results, the results are not generalisable. The same can be said for the participants featured on the documentary. However, as this paper only seeks to provide an insight into TF and its impact on educational inequality, our sampling size and technique is adequate.

**Research technique**

To enable comparison between the perceptions of the TF scheme and its actual realities and feasibility, a visual analysis of the BBC Three documentary was carried out and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The use of the former allowed for the realization of the changes taking place between the participant’s prior conception of TF and their view of it after having gone through the scheme for at least one year. This provided insight which would have otherwise been unavailable from our interviews, as our interviewees had not gone through the two-year TF scheme.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone due to practical reasons, namely the availability and location of our participants. Overall, interviews were chosen as it allowed for more description and insight into the participant’s perceptions of TF and motivations for joining the scheme. Furthermore, its semi-structured nature and the asking of open-ended questions ensured that there were answers that responded to our research question. This also allowed for flexibility, taking into account the dynamic nature of human perceptions. Furthermore, an intercoder reliability test was carried out in order to assess the reliability and significance of our results. Having three markers independently assess the interviews, this helps to remove the effects of researcher bias.

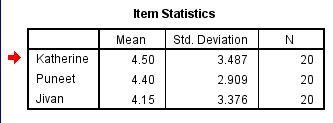
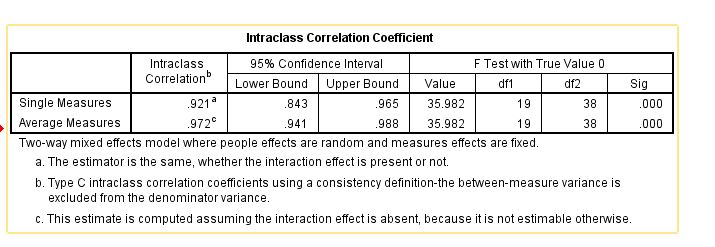


Table 1

Table 2

Based on the above table, the single measure intraclass correlation is 0.921, with a lower bound of 0.843 and an upper bound 0.965, which indicates a relatively low level of research bias.

**Findings and Analysis**

**Motivations: Altruism vs. Self-interest**

Motivations to join the TF scheme range from varying degrees of self-interest and altruism.   All candidates wanted to become part of the TF scheme for altruistic reasons, whilst some also clearly expressed self-interest and career furthering goals as a key motive. Altruistic and self-interest motivated goals were not mutually exclusive, and many participants described both altruistic and self-interested reasons for contacting the TF scheme. Participant 1 mentioned that one of his primary goals was “*to make a difference in the school he was assigned to*” and “*to improve the overall exam grade and prospects of the kids at the school*”. However, they also stated that they personally hope “*to gain transferable skills and to get a good breadth of experience, not only just in Teach First but also with the partner companies through different summer projects*”. They emphasize how after the two years, they “*may potentially move to either Goldman Sachs or PwC*”, indicating that they would consider continuing as a teacher if they “*enjoy teaching and finance isn’t a big issue*” for them.

Nevertheless, certain interviewees were clearly more determined to transfer to the private sector by using the Teach First scheme as a stepping stone. It is important to recognize that human perceptions change over time due to the subjectivity of human nature. The visual analysis of the documentary suggested that as time went on TF teachers experienced a change in their mindset over time, leading some to identify more closely with TF’s stated visions of reducing educational inequality whilst others became disillusioned in the scheme. The opportunity to work in the private sector provided by TF after the scheme was also mentioned by participant 2 who stated that TF “*allows graduates to develop leadership skills which are transferable to the private sector, which is pretty important*”. Furthermore, his motivations for joining the program was because “*the leadership benefits would be good for his CV*”, clarifying how they do not want to commit to it “*because the long term prospects aren’t that good*”.

Contrastingly, participant 4 was driven by altruistic motives, raising concerns about how educational inequality is a pervasive issue that needs to be dealt with and how TF strives to tackle these issues. They are highly motivated to become part of the TF vision to make an effectuate positive change in education.

**Participants’ desired outcomes**

Furthermore, all participants believed that Teach First has the potential to reduce poverty and inequality. The Teach First scheme is seen to be “*focusing on resolving the problem that kids from disadvantaged backgrounds are disadvantaged further still in their education*” (participant 4) by putting top graduates in poor performing schools, which allow “*kids who don’t have access to good teachers like I did at my private school to have access to them in state schools*” (participant 2). Similarly, participant 4 explained that “*once you start to level out education and all students start getting better education, better grades, better understanding and networks to careers, you will start to see better equality in universities and in careers*”, but “*it takes longer to notice that*”.

Noteworthy is that participant 1 commented that Teach First is especially promising among all programs because it recruits young graduates, and “*young graduates can relate more to the millennium generation in terms of socioeconomic situations*” and “*have more social awareness*”. In addition, participant 1 mentioned that for Teach First to achieve its goals, teachers need to “*understand children’s needs, that they are individuals and need respect*” and think of themselves as “*a life mentor*” and “*a second parent*”.

Our findings revealed that the desired outcomes of our participants were predominantly self-interested. Although all interviewees agreed with the goals of TF, the majority stated they would leave after the two-year scheme. For instance, participants 1 and 2 highlighted they only applied to the scheme due to their inability to find other graduate roles, with participant 2 stating “*I personally applied to like a few companies before ... like KPMG and PwC and a couple of management consultancy firms but pretty much got rejected from them all.*” This is reflected in the documentary with only one out of six participants deciding to continue in the teaching industry.

The majority of participants stated that they would leave the scheme at the end of the two years in order to pursue jobs within the privatesector*.* Participant 1 stated that the reason they applied to the programme was because *“they train you to be a leader… they have partnership with a lot of companies that look for leadership skills, like PwC and Goldman Sachs. There is always an option to go back to the private and work for financial companies”.* On a similar note, participant 2 described how their primary interest was within the private sector and how they only applied to TF due to their inability to access these jobs, *“I personally applied to like a few companies before Teach First. So like I applied to accounting firms like KPMG and PwC and a couple of management consultancy firms but pretty much got rejected from them all*.” This reveals how although all our interviewees agreed with the goals of TF, most did not see themselves as being part of the project in the long-run. Rather, by using TF as a launchpad into other jobs which are mainly in the private sector, it implies that they believed that the responsibility involved in alleviating poverty through reducing educational inequality is not their own.

**Limitations of TF**

Most importantly, although TF aims to seek out graduates who share their vision of ending educational inequality, our interviews reveal that the feasibility of this is incredibly difficult. For example, although participant 4 truly believed in the TF vision and applied to the scheme solely to make a “positive contribution” in low-performing schools and children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, this was an anomaly compared to our other results. This is evident from other responses similar to the following  – “*most people I knew who applied to Teach First only did because they didn’t end up getting a grad scheme*”. Consequently, there is variety in the commitment of each participant on the TF scheme, which in turn affects its success - increasing the probability of it being suboptimal. Moreover, analysis of the documentary provides further insights into the experiences of TF participants. One revelation was that “*the first year was just about surviving*” (BBC Three Documentary, 2014). Not only does this highlight the difficulties many, if not all, participants face when placed in low-performing schools with little training, but also implies two other shortcomings of the scheme.

The first and more important flaw suggested by the documentary is that the training TF provides its successful applicants prior to the start of their two-year programme - a 6-week intensive teacher training course (BBC Three Documentary, 2014), is not adequate enough. This is because many of the scheme’s participants have little to no background in formal teaching and thus are severely inexperienced in dealing with the situations they will encounter in the profession.

The second flaw is that any positive impact TF participants may have on their students and the school is likely to be limited as it is only in their second year where they are able to make some sort of difference. Linking back to a previous point about the variety of commitment in TF participants and the high probability of them leaving the programme and the teaching industry after their two years, this further limits the long-term effects TF participants will have on educational inequality in general, and thus negatively impacting the achievement of  TF’s aims. Existing literature also supports this by suggesting that teachers need to have a longer tenure to have a significant and positive impact in the school they are in (Muijs, Chapman and Armstrong, 2013).

**Conclusion**

Through our visual analysis of the BBC Three documentary and in-depth semi-structured interviews we have found three key themes as being prevalent throughout and are inextricably inter-related. Our primary finding is that despite the TF scheme positively impacting the levels of educational attainment in poor-performing schools, it is also unintentionally contributing to the persistence of poverty and inequality in London. This is because educational inequality is not fully being rectified due to two major factors. Most importantly, it is due to the hidden motivations of the participants, which are revealed to be predominantly based on self-interest from our results. This contradicts hugely with the actual visions of TF. Secondly, TF thus far has been unable to lower the turnover rate of teachers and improve the perceptions of the teaching industry. Ultimately, this results in the scheme primarily benefiting its participants - the ones in more privileged positions. On the other hand, the supposed beneficiaries of the scheme - poor-performing schools and students coming from socio-economic backgrounds, experience a limited positive impact.

As a result of our findings, TF does help to improve educational attainment and somewhat reduce educational inequality in London, but due to the lack of longevity of their participants, the scheme is not as effective as it could be. Therefore, this paper recommends modifications to the scheme, such as incentivising longer participations. Furthermore, the scheme should be supplemented elsewhere, for example through governmental policies affecting the domestic life of its citizen, to combat the other underlying issues facing educational inequality in London and therefore poverty and inequality.

**Bibliography**

Aizer, A., Stroud, L. and Buka, S. (2012). *Maternal stress and child outcomes: evidence from siblings*.

Davis-Kean, P. (2005). The Influence of Parent Education and Family Income on Child Achievement: The Indirect Role of Parental Expectations and the Home Environment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19(2), pp.294-304.

Evans, W. and Garthwaite, C. (2014). Giving Mom a Break: The Impact of Higher EITC Payments on Maternal Health †. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 6(2), pp.258-290.

Freedman, S. (2014). *How many of our teachers stay in the classroom? | Teach First*. [online] Teachfirst.org.uk. Available at: https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/blog/how-many-our-teachers-stay-classroom [Accessed 9 Jun. 2016].

Goodman, A. and Gregg, P. (2010). Poorer children’s educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?.

Gov.uk. (2013). *Statistics: school workforce - GOV.UK*. [online] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-school-workforce [Accessed 9 Jun. 2016].

Hollingworth, S. and Archer, L. (2009). Urban Schools as Urban Places: School Reputation, Children's Identities and Engagement with Education in London. *Urban Studies*, 47(3), pp.584-603.

Hutchings, M., I. and Smart,, U., Mendick, H., Menter, I. and Smart, S. (2006). Approaches to teacher training on the Teach First programme.

Jones, I. and Schoon, E. (2008). Child behaviour and cognitive development (in eds Hansen, K. and Joshi, H., Millennium Cohort Study Third Survey: A User’s Guide to Initial Findings: Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education. *Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education.*.

OFSTED, (2011). *Teach First initial teacher education inspection report*.

Rebecca, A. and Jay, A. (2013). Matched panel data estimates of the impact of Teach First on school and departmental performance. [online] Available at: http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/REPEc/pdf/qsswp1311.pdf [Accessed 9 Jun. 2016].

Roberts, L. (2011). Mechanics of economic development. *Journal of Monetary Economics*.

Sanchez-Martinez, E. and Davis, M. (2016). Economic Theories of Poverty. *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*. [online] Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/economic-theories-poverty [Accessed 9 Jun. 2016].

Santos, M. (n.d.). Human Capital and the Quality of Education in a Poverty Trap Model. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. New York: Knopf.

Teach First, (2011). *Teach First. Ten Years of Impact .*. [online] Available at: https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/sites/default/files/press/pdf/TF\_ImpactReport\_201235835\_1728.pdf [Accessed 9 Jun. 2016].

Teachfirst.org.uk. (2016). *Teach First |*. [online] Available at: https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/ [Accessed 9 Jun. 2016].

The Importance of Teaching. (2010). *Department for Education*. [online] Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\_data/file/175429/CM-7980.pdf [Accessed 9 Jun. 2016].

*Tough young teachers*. (2015). [video] London: BBC.