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Mind the Gap: Just Be Sure It's the Right One

Working in education policy as I do, I hear the term “achievement gap” as much as a dietician might hear “obesity” or a court-appointed counselor might hear “recidivism”. In fact, the opportunity to have some small impact on closing the achievement gap is why I get up in the morning. So when it comes to such a fundamental issue of professional purpose, I ask myself whether my peers and I are looking at the right numbers. For example, when we say achievement gap, do we really mean only the differences in reading and math test scores?

The question of what to focus on is not just a professional or academic question, and the achievement gap isn't just something I research but something I have lived. When I was eight years old and a prospective third grader, my family immigrated to the United States, arriving in a small town in northeastern Pennsylvania with no funds to our name. These two facts—immigrating and lack of funds—stuck me with two classifications that are still essential to today's achievement gap discussions: First, I was an English language learner, a designation I would lose in a few years, and, second, I was a free and reduced-priced lunch student,

a designation I would hold all the way through high school. I immediately found myself in a reading class with the “slower” students and understood that expectations for me and my peers in that class were not high. Like my peers, I struggled.

I find persistent achievement gaps for these and other groups very concerning, but they raise a broader question about the efficacy of relying solely on math and English achievement numbers to define a complicated problem. If education systems close the achievement gap in tests for reading and math, could they declare success? I would hope that the answer is no. Closing the achievement gap is not an end. At best, closing the gap is the means by which we will signify that all K-12 students, regardless of background and circumstance, have the opportunity to achieve their fullest potential in postsecondary education, careers, and life. Testing in math and English is only a starting point in assessing whether education is helping students in this way.

The premise underlying current measurement of the achievement gap is fundamentally flawed for three reasons:

- **It is an incomplete picture.** The tests to diagnose the achievement gap provide

an incomplete assessment of the problem. First, in their focus on English language arts (ELA) and math, they neglect disciplines in areas of rising national demand such as science, technology, civics, and the arts. Even in those two subjects, analysis indicates that exam questions in most states lack rigor. The RAND Corporation found that only 2 percent of math items and 20 percent of ELA items on current state tests measure higher order skills.¹ It is no surprise then that research has found that K-12 test scores are by no means the only indicator determining postsecondary success and can even be counterproductive to this goal.²

■ **It is misaligned with economic shifts.** Even if the tests were more rigorous, sole reliance on them should be considered outdated. According to economists Richard Murnane and Frank Levy, the last 40 years have been marked by a decline in jobs requiring rote skills and an increase in demand for complex skills. In 1970, Fortune 500 companies rated writing, computational skills, and reading as the most important skills students should master—by 1999 the top three skills were teamwork, problem solving, and interpersonal skills. Even new tests such as PARCC and Smarter Balanced cannot fully measure these sorts of skills.

■ **It understates the full range of student talents.** Last, and perhaps most important, defining achievement gaps by a narrow measure is as disempowering as it is ineffective. The approach advantages certain types of learners—namely auditory learners—at the risk of providing needed and deserved affirmation for everybody else. As Sir Ken Robinson said, the system leads to “many creative, highly talented people thinking they’re not.”³

These factors have proved true not only in research but in my own experience. The day I realized that I overcame an achievement gap was not when I started scoring as well as my peers in pop quizzes, or did well on the Pennsylvania state tests, or even when I scored well enough on the SAT to get into a good college. The days I knew that I had made it included the day I completed my senior project, conducting original research and interviews leading to a

report on nonprofits serving youth in north-eastern Pennsylvania. It was my first day in college, when I knew I had the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to pursue and succeed in my chosen path. It was the day I made a meaningful contribution as an intern in a congressional office. Those days were important because the real achievement gap for me was never a matter of test scores and always a matter of my capacity to meet my own potential.

There is a better way to support that potential and measure success for all students—not just those who have been traditionally disadvantaged—and some states are taking the lead. Examples include program reviews for arts and humanities in Kentucky’s Unbridled Learning accountability system, California’s inclusion of student engagement within its state Local Control Accountability Plans, and New Hampshire emphasizing performance assessment measures as a means to evaluate student success.⁴ If states continue not only to advance new measures of success but disaggregate them across race, income, disability, and language proficiency for both students and schools, they will have a much better sense of how well they are closing the most important achievement gap of all: educational opportunity. Using these new numbers as a starting point, they can then invest in interventions that close the opportunity gaps between groups of students. In the process, they will close the gap between state measurements of success and how parents like mine conceive of success for their children: the ability to meet one’s full potential. ■

¹Kun Yuan and Vi-Nhuan Le, “Estimating the Percentage of Students Who Were Tested on Cognitively Demanding Items through the State Achievement Tests,” Working Paper (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Education, 2012).

²Anne Hyslop and Bill Tucker, *Ready by Design: A College and Career Agenda for California* (Washington, DC: Education Sector, 2012); Vanessa Hein et al., “Predictors of Postsecondary Success,” (Washington, DC: American Institutes of Research, 2013).

³Ken Robinson, “How Schools Kill Creativity,” TED video, 19:24, filmed February 2006, http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity/transcript?language=en.

⁴“FAQs on Kentucky’s New Assessment and Accountability System for Public Schools,” <http://education.ky.gov/comm/UL/Documents/FAQs%20on%20Kentucky.pdf>; “Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP),” <http://downloads.capta.org/edu/e-school-finance/LCAP.pdf>; “NH Performance Assessment Network,” <http://www.education.nh.gov/assessment-systems/>.