

Why We Say "Opportunity Gap" Instead of "Achievement Gap"

We've stopped saying "achievement gap" when referring to the difference in academic performance between students from low-income communities and those from affluent areas—and here's why you should, too.

By Theresa Mooney

May 11, 2018

SOCIAL JUSTICE



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disparity in academic outcomes between lower-income students—who often are people of color, non-native English speakers, and those living in rural communities—and their affluent peers.

In recent years, Teach For America has joined other organizations and education experts in shifting to the term “opportunity gap,” as we think this more precisely names the situation in our country. “Opportunity gap” refers to the fact that the arbitrary circumstances in which people are born—such as their race, ethnicity, ZIP code, and socioeconomic status—determine their opportunities in life, rather than all people having the chance to achieve to the best of their potential.

“Opportunity gap” draws attention to the conditions and obstacles that young students face throughout their educational careers. It therefore accurately places responsibility on an inequitable system that is not providing the opportunities for all kids to thrive and succeed.

While a shift in terminology will not solve the pervasive inequities students face, words have meaning. We believe it’s important to use language in a solutions-oriented way that promotes systemic reform and empowers communities to demand more.

A Systemic Problem—Not a Kid Problem

Simply stated, we believe the term “achievement gap” unfairly places blame on kids. It implies that children are not achieving as they should be, and that it’s their fault.

It’s important to note that “achievement gap” does have credible origins and implications. It rightfully suggests there are measurable outcomes, like standardized test scores, which can be connected to student learning, and that large subsets of students are not performing as highly as others are.



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Matthew Kramer

Former co-CEO, Teach For America

Unquestionably, there is a need to measure academic growth in our country. Schools and districts should be held to standards that demonstrate student learning—where no factor of identity determines outcomes. Yet we know that empowering children to achieve academically is the responsibility of adults. Low-income students don’t have lower tests scores because they lack ability or interest or because of the culture in their community. Rather, it’s because, well before they take tests, they face a lack of opportunity from systems, structures, and adults.

TFA’s former co-CEO, Matthew Kramer, wrote about this topic, saying, “We think the causes of these differences are unequal and inadequate educational opportunities, not inherent differences in capability or character.” Kramer’s piece came on the heels of an argument made by TFA alum Camika Royal (Baltimore ’99) in GOOD Magazine, [“Please Stop Using the Phrase ‘Achievement Gap.’”](#)

So rather than saying “achievement gap,” we believe there’s a need to frame the problem in a way that is accurate and allows us to hold everyone accountable for student outcomes. “Opportunity gap” implies that, when given the resources and opportunities they deserve, all kids can achieve. And most importantly, it does not place responsibility on kids for systemic injustices.

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“Achievement gap” also tends to oversimplify the problem of, and solutions for, educational inequity. Rather than making the issue about the lack of access children have to resources from the time they are born, it boils it down to just academic performance. The phrase can lead us to the work of closing gaps, instead of aspiring toward absolute excellence and equity for all children.

“By oversimplifying in this way, it contributes to us oversimplifying the ways we actually educate children, pulling us away from the whole child,” Kramer writes.

We know solutions that address the gap outside of school walls can influence outcomes for children. From better housing options to criminal justice reform to healthcare solutions, children in low-income communities deserve so much more than can be offered by their teachers and school leaders alone. Solutions must come from every sector.

We’re proud that TFA alumni continue to fight for abundant educational opportunities for all students from all different angles. From urban sports leagues to [international spring break trips](#) to [cradle-to-career services](#), alumni are working to create opportunities for students from disenfranchised communities. We know that opportunities like these—and countless other opportunities that our alumni have created—can positively affect students’ lives and can begin to fuel change in schools and beyond.

Yet systemic solutions that attack the gap from a local and national level are the best way to ensure fair, equitable opportunities for all students. If students from all backgrounds are given access to superior academic and sociocultural opportunities from birth, we believe that the gap in academic outcomes will begin to close.

This story was updated in August 2018 to add the mention of and link to Dr. Royal’s article.

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