

The Gap in Conceptualizing Achievement in America's Public Schools: An Analysis of the Achievement Gap

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Introduction

The achievement gap is often defined as the difference in academic achievement of minority and/or low-income students and their White and/or more affluent peers. Its status is evaluated through state standardized assessments, mandated under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), as well as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

The achievement gap has been at the forefront of educational debates, as well as utilized to justify school reform since the late 1990s. Various educational groups (e.g. The Education Trust), models (e.g. no-excuse charter schools), as well as practices (e.g. merit pay) have taken root and developed in the last two decades, vowing to close the achievement gap. In the name of the achievement gap, the educational landscape has transformed considerably (Dahlin & Cronin, 2010).

Since the achievement gap has been utilized to justify a plethora of reforms, it is critical to re-analyze our understanding of the phenomenon, as well as our understanding of educational equity in a broader sense. As such, this paper studies the way that equity has been conceptualized within the education system, including how the achievement gap has been defined, measured, and addressed by practitioners and researchers, ultimately examining strengths and limitations, with implications for more effective ways of addressing the issue.

In order to meet this goal, this paper is divided into five sections: Introduction, Understanding Past and Current Conceptualizations and Reforms, Examining Strengths and Limitations, Exploring Alternatives, and Conclusion.

Understanding Past and Current Conceptualizations and Reforms

This section features a historical account of the education system pertaining to equity. It demonstrates that the public school system was founded and operates in an inequitable society. Since the civil rights movement, there has been an attempt to understand and address within-school inequities by focusing on inputs or gaps of opportunity and outputs or gaps of achievement, often along racial lines. Initially, studies and reforms that targeted educational equity framed, defined, analyzed, and addressed the issue by centering on inputs, slowly shifting focus to outputs, especially in the form of the achievement gap. This shift has transformed the educational landscape, particularly in the last two decades as neoliberal education reforms have been implemented in an effort to address the achievement gap.

The American education system was founded and continues to operate in an inequitable society, often mirroring its injustices. Public schools first opened in Boston in the 1600s and steadily became established throughout the country, with free elementary schools open in all states by the late 1800s. As such, many schools were established in the context of a society that practiced slavery. Many states in the South had laws that forbade education to enslaved African Americans. Even when slavery was abolished in the 1860s, schools remained segregated, with African American schools receiving less funding, limiting access to adequate resources, facilities, and teaching. Even when *Brown vs. Board of Education* declared segregation unconstitutional in 1954, integration proved difficult amidst white flight to the suburbs (Rury, 2013).

Equity in the education system has been studied and addressed rather fervently since the civil rights movement. After *Brown vs. Board of Education* ordered desegregation of America's schools in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act outlawed racial discrimination in 1964, space was created for federal measures to implement studies and reforms that attempt to understand issues pertaining to the intersection of race, equality, and education, as well as attempt to equalize educational opportunities for students from historically marginalized groups. One of the largest educational studies in history, with a sample of 650,000 students, entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity* or the *Coleman Report*, was commissioned by the Department of Education under the authority of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to explore the topic (Coleman et al., 1966). In terms of reforms, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed

in 1965, establishing various services for students from low-income families, including the establishment of Title I funding, a program that distributes federal funds to schools located in high-poverty areas in an effort to ameliorate inequities that surface within a system funded through local taxation (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Rooted in the civil rights movement, studies focusing on educational equity concentrate on race as a central variable. *Equality of Educational Opportunity* compared opportunities of minority students within the public school system to that of their white counterparts, providing details about levels of racial segregation, differences in resourcing, including curricula, facilities, and academic practices, as well as analyzed differences in achievement utilizing standardized tests (Coleman et al, 1966). Today, although an achievement gap technically occurs when any one group of students outperforms another, with the difference in average scores being statistically significant, the focus on achievement gaps continues to be along racial lines. Considering America's history of racism and the field's roots in the civil rights movement, studies exploring educational equity, past and present, focus particularly on drawing comparisons between Caucasian and African American students.

In addition to focusing on race, studies and reforms addressing educational equity consider inputs or gaps of opportunity and outputs or gaps of achievement, with attention shifting from the former to the latter in recent decades. Initial studies and reforms tended to focus on inputs or gaps of opportunity. *Equality of Educational Opportunity* examined inputs in the form of resourcing and outputs in the form of achievement in an effort to compare and contrast educational experiences along racial lines, ultimately highlighting the importance of inputs, as evident through the title of the study (Coleman et al., 1966). Similarly, initial reforms focused on inputs, attempting to provide opportunities in the form of resourcing, as exemplified through distribution of Title I funding solely based on need and the establishment of various programs for low-income families in the 1960s, such as Head Start, an early childhood education initiative.

In time, focus shifted to outputs or gaps of achievement. When the National Commission on Excellence in Education's *A Nation at Risk* highlighted shortcomings of the education system in 1983, holding it responsible for failures in the American economy, standards-based reforms followed (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Standards-based reforms called for attention to outputs in the forms of measurable standards for students, detailing what

they need to know, understand, and be able to do at specific points of their academic careers, eventually relying heavily on standardized assessments to measure student standing in relation to specific standards, as well as to hold teachers and schools accountable. The nation fully embraced standards-based education and its focus on outputs when ESEA was reauthorized as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. NCLB demands that students demonstrate proficiency on standardized tests and that their schools are held accountable for results, with Title I funds no longer distributed solely based on need but, also, contingent on performance, and sanctions implemented as bold as school closures in times of consistent struggle on standardized assessments (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The shift of focus to outputs in studying and addressing educational equity is evident through the study of discourse within popular media outlets, which began phasing out the term “equal educational opportunity,” and utilizing the term “achievement gap” instead in the 1990s. As David Berliner points out, the term “equal educational opportunity” appeared 86 times in the New York Times throughout the 1980s (1981-1990) and only 12 times two decades later (2001-2006). Conversely, “achievement gap” appeared a total of four times in the New York Times in the 1980s (1981-1990), and 217 times only two decades later (2001-2006) (Berliner, 2012).

As such, since the late 1990s, educational equity has been largely studied and addressed through the lens of the achievement gap, which, although sometimes referenced utilizing information regarding grade point averages, graduation rates, and dropout rates, is most commonly measured utilizing state standardized assessments, as well as the NAEP. States have been mandated by NCLB to assess students in Reading and Math on an annual basis in grades 3-8 and once in grades 10-12. They are also mandated to publicly report aggregate scores, as well as scores for subgroups, including racial groups. Although each state has its own standardized assessment, as well as definitions of “grade-level performance” and “adequate yearly progress (AYP)”, all must make AYP towards having all students (including each subgroup) eventually achieve proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Standardized test results, particularly when broken down by subgroup, provide state-specific information pertinent to achievement gaps. Meanwhile, the NAEP has been used to study the achievement gap on a national level as the assessment is administered uniformly across the nation to samples of students from grades 4, 8, and 12. Although the NAEP assesses a broader range of subjects (mathematics, reading,

science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, U.S. history, and Technology and Engineering Literacy) on a periodic basis, Reading and Math are at the forefront and have been utilized most in measuring the achievement gap (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Thus, state standardized assessments and the NAEP both tend to define the achievement gap in terms of results in two subject areas (Reading and Math). Both also present findings in terms of “proficiency rates,” indicating the proportion of students that scored at or above a certain level or threshold.

Attempted solutions to the achievement gap have always focused on similar domains of the education system, including preschool, instruction, and teachers (Porter, n.d.). Head Start, for example, was first made available to low-income children and families in 1965 and continues to serve as an early childhood education resource to about one million children and families per year (Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, 2015). Although there is a level of consistency, commitment to standards, outputs and accountability has intensified after the publication of *A Nation at Risk* and post-NCLB. While focus on teacher reform, for example, has been rather consistent historically in an effort to tackle educational inequity, programs such as Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) were not developed until the turn of the 21st century. TAP demonstrates commitment to outputs and accountability, as well as embraces market principles of competition and efficiency by linking teacher pay to teacher evaluations and student test scores (Teacher Advancement Program Foundation, n.d.).

As the education system embraces market principles of accountability, competition and efficiency in an effort to close the achievement gap, it conforms to a neoliberal ideology. Lipman (2011) defines neoliberalism as:

an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses of ideologies that promote self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchments of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social goods and withdrawal of government from social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient (p.6).

The privatization and competition that Lipman refers to are contemporarily stark in the education system. Practices such as merit pay, high stakes standardized testing, and school choice create competition among students, teachers, and schools. They also privatize the educational landscape

as many charter schools seek funds from investors; states contract with private companies to acquire specific services, including standardized assessments; and certain districts shift tens of thousands of dollars from public schools to private industry as they provide students with vouchers.

In conclusion, the achievement gap has been addressed by focusing on instructional and teacher reforms that conform to a neoliberal ideology. Although we are knee-deep in this movement, with New Orleans, for example, completely privatized as a school district as of 2014, this section of the paper demonstrates that reforms that focus on outputs and embrace principles of accountability, competition, efficiency, choice, and privatization have been introduced in the 1980s and gained momentum in the 1990s. Before then, educational equity was conceptualized and addressed differently - in terms of inputs. The shift occurred partially due to alarm raised by *A Nation at Risk* and the reauthorization of ESEA as NCLB, highlighting the power of framing and policy.

Examining Strengths and Limitations

As evident from the discussion above, the achievement gap has framed educational equity in terms of outputs, measures discrepancies in proficiency between students of different groups, and has been addressed utilizing various neoliberal reforms. This section examines the strengths and limitations of current conceptualizations and reforms.

Inequality is stark in the United States. It is greater than it has been at any time in the last century, with the top 20% of US households owning more than 84% of the wealth, and the bottom 40% a mere 0.3% (Fitz, 2015; Gordon, 2014). Although state-sanctioned segregation and explicit discrimination have been outlawed in the United States after the civil rights movement, inequality along racial lines continues to plague American society. The average wealth of white households is 13 times as high as that of black households (Harris & Lieberman, 2015). Given these grim statistics, it is commendable that those that have targeted to address the achievement gap in recent decades have drawn focus to inequity, particularly along racial lines, within our society. However, the way that equity has been framed, defined, measured, and addressed by these “reformers” has interrupted and in some cases, intensified, the injustices at hand.

First, the achievement gap frames educational equity in terms of outputs, a shift from earlier rhetoric of “equal educational opportunity.” This shift, propelled by *A Nation at Risk*, is limiting in that it centers on results, inherently pointing the finger at those responsible for gaps in “achievement,” primarily students, teachers, and schools, while ignoring structural inequities that limit specific groups, regardless of their achievement. By framing the issue in such a manner, responsibility to strive for equity falls on the education system, which is insufficient. Since inequity is not exclusive to the education system but pronounced through all sectors of society and reflected within the school system, it needs to be addressed through a set of broader, economic reforms. Framing equity by fixating on “achievement” conceals the urgent need for such reforms.

Next, one must be careful in solely relying on data pertaining to gaps in an effort to understand achievement. As Matthew Di Carlo (2012) indicates, achievement gaps are not reflective of student achievement as districts and states can have high achievement gaps but most students scoring at grade level, as well as almost nonexistent achievement gaps but most students scoring below grade level. “Gaps” only provide comparative information. Thus, in order to gauge student achievement in a broader sense, supplemental data is necessary. Furthermore, a “narrowing of the achievement gap” is not necessarily representative of successful policy since gaps can narrow when two groups decline in performance, as long as the higher-performing group decreases more rapidly. Similarly, a “constant achievement gap” is not necessarily representative of complete policy failure, as a gap does not change when both groups have strong results and similar rates of improvement. In essence, achievement gap data can be misleading at times and must be, at the very least, decomposed to serve a meaningful purpose.

Further delving into issues concerning measurement, achievement gaps are measured in terms of proficiency, obscuring inequities that NCLB was designed to eliminate. Asking readers to imagine track and field athletes and non-athletes to jump over a 12-inch hurdle in an effort to assess proficiency and achievement, Dahlin and Cronin (2010) provide a tangible analogy, highlighting that even when students meet a certain threshold that is considered to be “proficient” on an exam, it does not mean that all students are achieving equally. The athletes, in this example, are likely to have jumped higher but were simply not able to demonstrate due to issues concerning measurement. As such, even if schools are successful in eliminating the

proficiency gaps that are assessed utilizing standardized exams, true gaps in achievement are still likely to persist .

As alluded to by Dahlin and Cronin (2010) with the analogy presented, proficiency levels are often set to illuminate basic skills in limited areas. Assessments measure basic skills more than critical thinking, focusing only on Reading and Math. This is an abandonment of the original intent and design of the NAEP. The early design committee recommended that ten subjects be included, as well as assessments of behavioral outcomes through interviews conducted in a citizenship portion of the exam (Wilder, Jacobsen, Rothstein, 2008). These early designs have been abandoned due to cost and “achievement” has been studied through proficiency in basic Reading and Math. With studies, such as that of Christopher Jencks (1979), reporting that character traits play a more significant role in adult success than test scores, our way of assessing the achievement gap seems convoluted.

Original NAEP designs were not only more expansive in terms of subject area but also population tested. Young adults, as well as 17 year olds (attending and not attending school) were included in the sample, providing valuable information on progress towards equity. As Wilder, Jacobsen, Rothstein (2008) indicate, assessing younger populations alludes to eventual outcomes, with some skills measured that may decay after formal schooling. Meanwhile, assessing older populations measures outcomes, including deep skills sustained by students.

Synthesizing the critiques above, although the study of the achievement gap draws attention to inequity along racial lines, which is urgent given contemporary realities, there are significant limitations with its framing and measurement. By fixating on “achievement,” the spotlight is on reforming students, teachers, and schools, concealing the need to address inequity in a broader, primarily economic sense. In addition, there are limitations with measurement due to fixation on gaps and proficiency, basic skills and limited subject areas, as well as scarce sampling. Considering all of this, although it is undeniable that contemporary American society is inequitable, with inequities pronounced racially and reflected within various sectors, including education, it is difficult to decisively state that our particular understanding of educational equity is on point. Most concerning is that despite these limitations in framing and measurement, a plethora of neoliberal education reforms have been implemented, vowing to close the

achievement gap, ultimately transforming the educational landscape across district and classroom-level, at times intensifying the problems that they intended to ameliorate.

The educational landscape has been transformed on a district-level through NCLB with closures of traditional public schools and proliferation of charters in several low-income areas. By 2013, 70 large or mid-sized cities closed schools, averaging 11 buildings per district (Strauss, 2013). Attempting to close the achievement gap through accountability, NCLB mandates schools that struggle with AYP to first draft an improvement plan and devote 10% of Title I funding to teacher development. If the struggle continues in consecutive years, schools face corrective action and eventual closure, with the hope that students re-enroll in more effective institutions. However, in reality, research demonstrates that closing schools rarely helps students, and at times even hinders academic progress. In some cases, as schools close, students are transferred to comparably or lower-performing schools (Strauss, 2013). In addition to directly impacting students, school closures have at times transformed communities by polarizing its members whose children are enrolled in different schools that compete for local space and funding. Clashes between community members over school space have been common in cities throughout the country, spanning from New York to Los Angeles (Rolland, 2010; Romo, 2014; Shell, 2012). Since schools that struggle with AYP tend to be located in communities with low-income minorities, these changes and clashes have impacted African American and Hispanic children, families, and communities most.

In addition to relocating students and somewhat polarizing communities, school closures have exposed students to varying, at times contradictory curricula. Louisiana has embraced choice, competition, and privatization to a great extent, with all public schools closed and replaced by charters in New Orleans by 2014 and vouchers available to thousands of children throughout the state, shifting millions of dollars from public education to private entities. Private schools that accept vouchers follow very diverse pedagogies, despite being funded publicly. New Living World, located in Ruston, for example, teaches utilizing instructional DVDs. There, students spend most of the day watching TV in rather bare classrooms. Differences are pronounced in terms of content, as well- some teach biology by focusing on creation, while others teach evolution; some teach social studies by focusing on political parties rather neutrally, while others warn that liberals are a threat to the global economy (Simon, 2012). Ironically, in

some parts of the country, a movement designed to raise achievement in very specific subject areas has abandoned common standards altogether.

Students that attend private schools through voucher programs are not the only ones that have experienced alteration of instruction and curricula. Since standardized assessments are high-stakes tests, students, teachers, and administrators are under massive pressure to meet proficiency in Reading and Math and have, therefore, drawn focus to results. Fixation on results has narrowed curricula, with attention devoted to content on standardized assessments, specifically Reading and Math. Studies indicate that there has been a 47% increase on focus in language arts and 37% increase in Math. To devote more time to the two subjects tested, other subjects and activities have been neglected or scrapped altogether, including Social Studies, Science, Art, Physical Education, and Recess (McMurrer, 2007). In some cases, “teaching to the test” has entailed complete disregard for developmentally appropriate practice, with students spending extensive amounts of time taking practice tests (Taylor, 2015). With instruction focused on the test, educators often feel that their autonomy and professional decision-making are restricted, while pressure has led some to transfer to non-testing grades or resign from the profession altogether (Goodnough, 2000; Monk, et al., 2001).

In conclusion, the achievement gap has been limiting in framing educational equity and its measurement is pronounced with several flaws, contributing to the implementation of subpar reforms in low-income areas. The education system in low-income areas has been transformed considerably with principles of accountability, competition, efficiency, choice, and privatization embodied in school closures, charters, and vouchers. Although it is important to keep in mind that not all low-income students, families, and communities have been impacted negatively by these changes, there have been negative side effects, which include: shifting of students between schools, division within communities, inconsistency in standards, narrowing of curricula, disregard for developmentally appropriate practice, as well as restriction of educators. Amidst neoliberal reform and these side effects, the achievement gap, as measured through state-standardized assessments and the NAEP, still persists. As the nation awaits the overdue reauthorization of NCLB, the need for reform is clear.

Exploring Alternatives

Taking into account the shortcomings in contemporary framing and measurement of educational equity, as well as reforms that attempt to address it, this section presents ideas for alternatives.

In terms of framing, since the 1990s, much attention has been devoted to educational equity through the lens of the achievement gap, casting outputs in the spotlight while inadvertently downplaying the importance of inputs. Both need to be considered in defining, measuring, and addressing educational equity in order to capture and address the issue in a complete, thorough manner. While much attention has been devoted to closing the achievement gap, gaps in funding have widened. Although there is lack of consensus over the size of the gap between rich and poor districts because of a range of formulas that calculate spending per student, it is evident that the gap has grown since the turn of the century and continues to do so. The widening of the gap is partially attributed to the recession, which contributed to declining property taxes and cuts to state budgets, impacting low-income districts dependent on aid most (Barshay, 2015). In addition to discrepancies in funding, differences in curricula are pronounced between rich and poor districts, as well. Research indicates that children from working-class families are more likely to be exposed to a curriculum that is mechanical and involves rote behavior, with very little decision-making or choice, while children from wealthy families are more likely to be exposed to a curriculum that expects them to reason, solve problems, and create intellectual products (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Anyon, 1980; Ravitch, 2010). As evident from this paper, current reforms often accentuate these differences as pressure to meet AYP often leads to the narrowing of curriculum and “teaching to the test” in schools that serve children from low-income families of African American and Hispanic descent.

In terms of measurement, current drawbacks range from issues related to metrics of proficiency, assessment of basic skills and limited subject areas, as well as convenient but incomplete sampling. Dahlin and Cronin (2010) propose an alternative model of assessment that deviates from reliance on proficiency by describing distribution models. By displaying distributions of scores for various groups of students alongside one another, the following data is captured – overlap between groups, relative number of high and low performers in each group, and information regarding performance of all students. In addition to featuring distributions of

scores, Dahlin and Cronin (2010) describe the value of utilizing growth index scores, which are contextualized by providing information about achievement according to student age and ability. Growth index scores are calculated by finding the difference between student growth and typical growth for students that achieved the same beginning score. Such an approach provides more complete information about achievement gaps than reliance on proficiency, which simply highlights the percentage of students that meet or exceed a rather arbitrary threshold that varies by state. While Dahlin and Cronin (2010) provide ideas regarding *how* to assess more effectively, older NAEP designs and international assessments provide ideas as to *what* and *whom* to assess in order to truly understand achievement. Incorporating elements of older NAEP designs has potential to expand the number of subject areas and skills tested, as well as ameliorate issues pertaining to sampling, ultimately capturing information related to student standing in terms of varied skillsets, character traits that are critical to real-life success, as well as retention and application of skills post-graduation. Studying international assessments, such as Finland's National Assessment of Educational Progress and Matriculation Exam, also creates potential for direction in assessing multiple subject areas, as well as critical thinking skills (Sahlberg, 2014).

Finally, reforms have complimented conceptualizations of educational equity by focusing on outcomes, utilizing standardized test results to justify changes in the education system. Despite changes embodied in school closures, as well as the proliferation of charters and vouchers, the achievement gap persists when measured utilizing the strategies that have been critiqued within this paper, as well as when analyzed through grade point averages, high school dropout and graduation rates, and college enrollment rates (Kids Count Data Center, n.d.; Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, Rashman, 2009). Given the limitations of contemporary measurement strategies and side effects of reform, it is important to shift attention from scores on standardized assessments and investigate effective practices that have assisted students in attaining high grades, graduating high school, enrolling and graduating college, and securing jobs.

A review of research within this area highlights the power of preschools, experiential learning, mentors, and individualized instruction. In terms of preschool, the notable High Scope Perry Preschool Study, which commenced in the 1960s, demonstrates the effectiveness of high

quality early childhood programs, indicating that those that attended were more likely to display academic achievement, graduate high school, less likely to violate the law, and earn higher salaries as adults (Schweinhart et al., 2005). With preschool utilized as a way of addressing educational equity since the 1960s, why do stark inequities persist within the system? Although benefits of high quality programs are clear, not all eligible children have attended Head Start, partially due to lack of funding. Also, not all preschool programs are considered high quality (Espinosa, 2002). Furthermore, in addition to access to high-quality preschool programs, there is a need for experiential learning, mentorships, and individualized instruction throughout academic careers. A study by Civic Enterprises for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation demonstrates that most students that drop out cite boredom as the primary reason and link it to lack of real-world, experiential learning. The study also highlights a positive relationship between successful student outcomes and access to mentors, as well as individualized instruction, often within small classroom settings (Bridgeland, Diulio, & Morison, 2006). Krueger and Whitmore (2001) explicitly state that smaller classes could help close the black-white achievement gap. Similar conclusions regarding the effects of mentors and individualized instruction have been established and reiterated in many studies, including Ashtiani & Feliciano (2012), Finn, Gerber, & Boyd-Zaharias (2004), Hoxby (2000), Kahlenberg (2010), Rimm (1995), Smink & Schargel (2004), Swanson (2004), alluding repeatedly to effective practices in targeting educational equity.

Although practices focusing on preschool, experiential learning, mentorships, and individualized instruction demonstrate potential in targeting educational equity, they need to be supplemented with broader reforms for ultimate results. Studies indicate that grade point averages and drop out rates are not solely shaped by factors within the school system but also by family and economic variables. About 28% of women dropped out of school in 2002 because of pregnancy and another 20% of students did so to support family (Dalton, Glennie, Ingels, and Wirt, 2009). Various accounts, such as Guo's *Why Poor Kids Don't Stay in College* demonstrate the obstacles that students from low-income families face in pursuing their education, with many working multiple jobs, taking time away from studying, and still struggling to afford textbooks, rent, and tuition (Guo, 2014). Considering that the education system does not exist in a vacuum and that outside of school realities impact students within, most promising reforms are holistic, accounting for issues such as teenage pregnancy and economic inequity.

In conclusion, the shortcomings in framing and measurement of the achievement gap can be ameliorated by incorporating a focus on inputs in the form of funding and curriculum, as well as utilizing distribution and growth index models for measurement, coupled with study of older NAEP assessments and international exams. Similarly, reforms need to focus on inputs and address a broader scope, focusing on variables such as preschool, curriculum, class size, mentors, and realities outside of school that shape student experience within.

Conclusion

Each section within this paper serves a unique purpose. *Understanding Past and Current Conceptualizations and Reforms* contextualizes the field of educational equity through a historical analysis that indicates the novelty of current conceptualizations of the achievement gap. *Examining Strengths and Limitations* describes the limitations of such conceptualizations, as well as the reforms that tend to follow. Lastly, *Exploring Alternatives* provides ideas that are positioned to change the way educational equity is framed, measured, and ultimately addressed. In essence, within this paper there is an effort to contextualize inequities within the education system, pinpoint problems in current conceptualizations and reforms, and explore ways of potentially ameliorating them. In doing so, the relationship between framing/defining, measurement, and reform surfaces, as does the important role of policy in defining each of them.

This paper demonstrates the relationship between the way educational equity is framed, defined, measured, and addressed. Framing and measurement seem to pave the way for specific reforms and practices in general. While educational equity was framed with a focus on inputs in the 1960s, reforms (such as ESEA and Head Start) focused mainly on inputs, as well. *A Nation at Risk* and NCLB, on the other hand, embraced the framing of educational equity in terms of outputs, contributing to shifting rhetoric to concentrate on the achievement gap. Since then, practices within the classroom fixate on results, with most time devoted to study of tested subjects and general “test prep.” Given this relationship between frames, definitions, measurement, as well as reform and practice, the contemporary fixation on outputs is limiting conceptually and practically. With pressure to deliver specific results on standardized exam, it becomes difficult to teach real-life experiential curricula, which are promising in encouraging students to continue their education.

Recognizing the connection between frames, definitions, measurement, and reform is pertinent as the nation awaits the overdue reauthorization of NCLB. Although the Act was to be reauthorized in 2007, the House and Senate passed bills to reauthorize NCLB this past July. The House version is called the Student Success Act (SSA) and the Senate version is called the Every Child Achieves Act (ECAA). Since two versions have been passed, the House and Senate must combine ideas into a single bill for voting (Schneider, 2015). SSA and ECAA share common ground by retaining annual testing but removing federal sections attached to results, encouraging states to decide their own accountability systems. Through the elimination of federal sanctions attached to results, it seems that SSA and ECAA avert from punitive mandates endorsed by NCLB. However, with closer analysis, it becomes evident that both acts greatly preserve the legacy of NCLB by retaining annual testing and encouraging states to continue measures of accountability. The responsibility for accountability seems to simply shift from federal to state level. In addition to upholding accountability, the federal government encourages privatization within SSA and ECAA by allocating funds towards strengthening charter school programs, ultimately continuing support of neoliberal education reform (Education and the Workforce Committee, 2015; Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, 2015).

In order for SSA or ECAA to promote sufficient change, policymakers cannot simply tweak elements of NCLB. Doing so retains current frames and measures, ultimately limiting educational reforms and practices. Instead, it is necessary to take a step back and ask overarching questions about education, educational equity, the achievement gap, and contemporary reform. What is the purpose of education? Is the purpose uniform for all student groups? In an effort to make it uniform, has educational equity been framed, measured, and addressed effectively? In exploring facets of these questions, it is my hope that this paper broadens conversations about educational equity, diversifying narrow rhetoric that fixates on outputs, ultimately contributing to much needed change.

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