

Achievement gaps – the continuing challenge

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In society we assign people to groups. Although rules for group membership are always somewhat arbitrary, and group boundaries are fuzzy (even for seemingly straightforward groups such as males and females), the creation of groups simplifies life by allowing us to assume that we know more about a person by knowing the group/s to which they belong.

Of course, there are also downsides. Seeing individuals as group members can make us blind to their individuality. Prejudging can lead to prejudice (words with identical etymological origins). Terrorism and armed conflict depend on the ability to see fellow humans not as individuals, but as members of a group with the presumed characteristics of that group.

In education we assign students to groups. Our reason is the same – we assume that we know more about a student by knowing the group/s to which they belong. When we create groups based on demographic characteristics, we find that some groups have higher average achievement levels than others. For example, urban students generally have higher achievement levels than rural/remote students. Girls tend to outperform boys, particularly in language-rich subjects. Non-Indigenous students outperform Indigenous students, and students from high socioeconomic backgrounds outperform students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In some cases, achievement gaps are the equivalent of two or more years of school.

One response to this observation has been to assume that the closing of achievement gaps requires *group-based* solutions – for example, special initiatives aimed at boys (or girls), educational solutions for Indigenous students, or government programs targeted on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. However, there is limited evidence that group-based solutions of these kinds have been effective in closing achievement gaps. For example, the literacy and numeracy gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous 15-year-olds in Australia were unchanged between 2000 and 2012. The gaps between low and high socioeconomic students also were unchanged. Even where changes have occurred over time (for example, in the relative performances of males and females, or in Indigenous participation rates), it is not clear that group-based educational solutions rather than broader societal changes have been the cause.

So why are group-based solutions not more effective in closing achievement gaps? Part of the explanation is likely to be that group-based solutions are not relevant to all members of a group. It would be wrong to think that all Indigenous students have similar learning needs. It would be equally wrong to assume that all boys, all girls, or all students from low socioeconomic

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backgrounds have identifiable but similar learning needs. Initiatives and programs designed for particular groups are not likely to be helpful to all members of those groups.

Another part of the explanation, I suspect, is that effective educational practice is effective regardless of group membership. In other words, we have overestimated the importance of finding and providing group-specific educational solutions. What works for some students tends to work for all students. Highly effective teaching practices tend to benefit all students, regardless of the groups to which they belong. Rather than attempting to develop and implement solutions for defined student groups, a more effective strategy for closing achievement gaps may be to work to ensure that evidence-based best practice is implemented as widely as possible in every school and every classroom.

A related question is whether focusing on demographic groups is not only ineffective but also counterproductive in closing achievement gaps. There is often a small step from observing a correlation – for example, between socioeconomic background and achievement – to treating this observation as an ‘explanation’. And from ‘explanation’, it is another small step to ‘expectation’ and beyond that to ‘excuse’. School principals who have led significant improvements in low socioeconomic areas often report that their first challenge was to confront low expectations based on students’ backgrounds. More subtly, concluding that students in a particular school are performing well ‘given their socioeconomic backgrounds’ or ‘given the proportion of Indigenous students in the school’ reflect reduced expectations based on group membership.

And there are other ways in which schools set expectations based on group membership. One of these is to prejudge students’ learning needs based on their age or year group. Schools continue to be organised on traditional lines with students being assigned to year groups, and teachers delivering the curriculum specified for each year group. However, in learning areas such as mathematics and reading, students in the same year group vary in their achievement levels by as much as five or six years of school. If teachers treat all students in the same year of school as equally ready for the same curriculum, then some lower-achieving students are likely to be left behind and some higher-achieving students are unlikely to be challenged and extended.

Expectations also are set when students are grouped by ‘ability’ and labels such as ‘remedial’ and ‘gifted’ are assigned. The definitions of such groups are inevitably arbitrary; the students in them inevitably have different learning needs; and the educational expectations of included and excluded students are inevitably different. When students are streamed by ability, some students can be locked permanently into lower-level streams that place a ceiling on what they are able to learn and how far they are able to progress. This can exacerbate achievement gaps.

The alternative to seeing students in terms of groups is to see them as individuals. Underpinning this alternative is a belief that, while individuals are at different points in their learning and may be progressing at different rates, every learner is capable of making further progress and eventually achieving high standards if they can be motivated, engaged and provided with appropriate (well-targeted) learning opportunities. Under this approach, starting points for teaching and expectations for learning are established individually rather than inferred from group membership, and excellent ongoing progress is expected of every student regardless of their current level of achievement or the group/s to which they belong.

There is no simple solution to the challenge of closing achievement gaps, but part of the answer may lie in paying less attention to group membership in our educational efforts.

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