

The Problem with Evidence: Public Schooling Is About a Place, Its History, and the Lifeworlds of Those Involved

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ABSTRACT

Accountability as the ultimate rationale for education reform premises its efforts on equitable student achievement that results from quality schooling and teaching. However, historically stable achievement gaps expose this policy as failing by its own measure.

I argue that three narrowings of student achievement lead to conceptual limitations of the functions of schooling and the breadth of what students achieve in schooling as well as the attribution of so-called student achievement to schooling alone. Second, I show the two-fold misconstruction of achievement gaps that claim to reflect individual differences but are a mirror image of gaping historical disparities in funding, resources, education experiences and economic security that have accumulated. I conclude that research and policy that focuses on achievement gaps, therefore, emphasizes those disparities and replicates them by assigning responsibility to the individual, as well as to schooling.

INTRODUCTION

Even though the idea of accountability has a long history in education, accountability as the ultimate rationale for education reform is barely 20 years old.¹ It appears as though it has come to encompass all ongoing policy discussions about schooling and school reform, both in the U.S. as well as in German-speaking Europe. Both education traditions – the one *Curriculum* and the other *Didaktik* – share patterns of educational thought and policy-making even though they conceptualize teaching and schooling in very different ways. The respective adaption of policy ideas is a well-known pattern, historically time-delayed and valuable to understand and predict the waves in which education policy comes and goes.

These parallel patterns are a result of a long-standing history of traveling ideas between Europe and the U.S. Some educators brought back their experiences to adapt and utilize them. Others, such as J. F. Herbart, for example, saw their work exported to the U.S. and expanded far beyond their original conceptual intention.² Further examples include the travels of Horace Mann,

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¹ Heinz-Dieter Meyer, Daniel Tröhler, Davis Labaree and Ethan Hutt. “Accountability: Antecedents, Power, and Processes.” *Teachers College Record* 116, no. 9 (2014): 1-12. <https://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 17547, Date Accessed: 5/6/2019 1:54:50 PM.

² Kathleen Cruikshank, and Michael Knoll. “Herbart in Amerika. Vom Anfang und Ende eines einflussreichen Reformkonzeptes. 1886-1901.” *Bildung und Erziehung* 47, no. 2 (1994): 149-164. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7788/bue.1994.47.2.149>

John Dewey and the group of about 50 U.S. educators, who studied in German Jena between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and whose ideas became the roots for the U.S. Herbartian movement.³ A far more current exchange of *Curriculum* and *Didaktik* began in the late 1990s at a conference in Oslo where U.S. and German scholars of education started a conversation that stretched over more than a decade and manifested in a variety of publications.⁴ I find myself continuing their effort, most recently in the form of an invited symposium titled “Curriculum and Didaktik: A symposium on historical and contemporary understandings of curriculum theory formed through the interaction of German and America traditions” that took place September 2018 at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. I, too, seek to understand how two traditions of educational thought conceptualize of schooling and its functions.

This impetus drives my interest in the discussion of current accountability school reforms that manifest as No Child Left Behind as its paradigmatic U.S. example that continues today as the “Every Student Succeeds Act.” Similar policy efforts have shaped school reforms in Germany and Austria since the late 2000s, different in form as they are embedded in socio-geographically specific traditions but driven by the same idea: creating equal opportunity in and through schooling by closing what they call the student achievement gaps through better quality schooling and teaching. This endeavor of translating perceived social problems into educational challenges⁵ dates back to the first third of the 20th century and has persisted since then, gaining great momentum during the Cold War and manifesting in the Nation at Risk report of 1983 that outlined the perceived dangers of a supposedly broken school system. Today’s well-documented persistence of those very same so-called achievement gaps,⁶ therefore, alarms accountability proponents because those gaps expose accountability policy as failing by its own measure.

³ Gjert Biesta and Siebren Miedema. “Dewey in Europe: A Case Study on the International Dimensions of the Turn-Of-The-Century Educational Reform.” *American Journal of Education* 105 (1996): 1-26.

⁴ Ian Westbury, Stefan Thomas Hopmann and Kurt Riquarts, *Teaching as a Reflective Practice. The German Didaktik Tradition* (New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 2000)

⁵ Daniel Tröhler. “The Medicalization of Current Educational Research and its Effects on Education Policy and School Reforms”. *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 36, no. 5 (2015): 749-764.

⁶ Eric A. Hanushek, Paul E. Peterson, Laura M. Talpey and Ludger Woessmann. “The Achievement Gap Fails to Close.” *Education Next* 19, no. 3 (2019)

THE THREE NARROWINGS OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Based on the body of work that deconstructs the conceptual premises of accountability policy,⁷ I first identify at least three narrowings of student achievement in schooling. Secondly, I outline the ways in which so-called student achievement gaps are problematic and harmful. The first narrowing identifies student achievement as the core of accountability discussion, making it seem like the one and only purpose and function of schooling. Other equally important functions such as enculturation and socialization disappear from discussions as well as from curricula as schools' foci hone in on ways to bring about student achievement in recognizable ways. Turned around this means that student achievement is assumed to equate the quality of schooling, limiting schooling to its qualification function. The second narrowing limits students' achievements to academic achievements in the form of test scores, graduation rates, growth measures, supposed teacher quality indicators based on their classes' test scores, etc. Non-academic achievements such as students' contributing to the community in and outside of school, taking on responsibilities for peers and mentee students, representing peers etc., are not recognized by school accountability even though they are crucially relevant to what makes "a place called school."⁸ The third narrowing takes away achievement from students completely in attributing so-called student achievement measures to be results of schooling. Test score rankings then serve as a basis for parental school choice, school district funding and teacher and principal appointments because they claim to reflect the quality of that particular school. These assumptions of causality are not only misplaced in complex social systems such as schooling, but they also lead to the three narrowings outlined above that limit the functions of schooling, reduce the students' various accomplishments as well as diminish what happens in schools.

EDUCATION DEBT AND ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

In a second step, my analysis now focuses on the use of achievement gaps, and I take up what Gloria Ladson-Billings proposed in her Presidential Address⁹ as part of the American Educational

⁷ see for example David C. Berliner and Sharon L. Nichols, *Collateral Damage* (Massachusetts, Harvard Education Press, 2005); David Labaree, *Someone Has To Fail* (Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2010); Stefan T. Hopmann. "No Child, No School, No State Left Behind: Schooling in the Age of Accountability." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 40, no. 4 (2008): 417-456.; Diane Ravitsh, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (New York, Basic Books, 2010); Gail L. Sunderman, *Holding NCLB Accountable: Achieving Accountability, Equity, and School Reform* (California, Corwin Press, 2008) and many others

⁸ John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1984)

⁹ Gloria Ladson-Billings. "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding

Research Association's annual conference in 2006: a reconceptualization of achievement gaps as education debt. She identifies the four dimensions of education debt – historical, economic, socio-political, moral - along perpetuated systemic inequities that are the historical “legacy of educational inequities (...) formed around race, class, and gender”¹⁰ and economic “patterns of inequitable funding (that) has occurred over centuries.”¹¹ The socio-political aspects manifest in “the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civic process”¹² and finally culminate in moral debt as a “social responsibility”¹³ to make sure that systemic issues are no longer handed down to the individual responsibility of those who are already burdened with existing social disparities. Stefan Hopmann in his work calls this the “social conscience” of the researcher that needs not to be left behind.¹⁴

Against the background of the four aspects of education debt, discussing student achievement gaps becomes highly problematic in at least two ways. One, it is clear that given the misconception of student achievement, the highly publicized gaps are not at all a reflection of individual ability but a result of socio-cultural contexts, resources, limitations and hence students' systemic dis/advantages. While accountability policy charges schools and students with the consequences of lacking test results, fixing social structures is in fact outside of what schooling can be tasked with even though the educationalizing of social problems¹⁵ has been a central characteristic of schooling in the U.S. since its beginnings. Second, existing gaps are also not a reflection of individual differences between students but a mirror image of gaping historical disparities in the four areas that Gloria Ladson-Billings delineates in her work. These disparities are accumulated inequalities that have accumulated over decades if not centuries and affect all social institutions and schooling no less. As a direct result of this insight, it follows that research and policy based on achievement gaps emphasize those disparities and replicate them by assigning responsibility to the individual rather than to the social institution tasked with public education for

Achievement in U.S. schools.” *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (2006): 3-12.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 5

¹¹ *ibid.*, 6

¹² *ibid.*, 7

¹³ *ibid.*, 8

¹⁴ Stefan T. Hopmann. “No Child, No School, No State Left Behind: Schooling in the Age of Accountability.” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 40, no. 4 (2008): 417-456.

¹⁵ David Labaree. “The Winning Ways of a Losing Strategy: Educationalizing Social Problems in the United States.” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008): 447-460.

everyone, regardless of individual characteristics.

CONCLUSION

So what are implications of the narrowings and reframing supposed achievement gaps as education debt? As regards schooling policy, I argue for backtracking historically to a time before the age of accountability¹⁶ in order to widen those narrowings and re-establish what public schooling ought to do: to benefit the actual people it serves. It follows that both education policy and education research need to account for those people, their contexts and their experiences through methodologies that are able to reflect their diverse lifeworlds. That burdens research designs with more than just method decisions but conceptual considerations about the way in which data are used, people are described and causation is assigned. The responsibility is to explore the specific, local schooling conditions in a given place, its history and the lifeworlds of those inhabiting it. Capitalizing on the specificity of their experience means representing it in each research step to give voice to the multitude of lifeworlds.

By the same token, my argument does not justify what David Labaree has recently described as justice warriors or technicians¹⁷ in education research that is either more self-referential and self-reflective than substantial or more focused on the methodologically clean descriptions of technicalities than a solid argument grounded in our field of education and its theories. To my mind, education policy research needs to go beyond the single case in order to contribute to international scholarly conversations about schooling and school reform. Equally, the way researchers use language plays a pivotal role in moving toward the education debt paradigm: Purposeful wording that is aware of the inclusions and exclusions of its terminology and scholarly inquiry that employs language accordingly will be central to the task.

Education research of the coming decades needs solid placement within education theory so to become multi-faceted and multi-measure, piecing together an elaborate and differentiated understanding of the experience of schooling under accountability in order to retake its seat at the table of education reform in general and school reform in particular. It holds education policy and

¹⁶ Stefan T. Hopmann. "No Child, No School, No State Left Behind: Schooling in the Age of Accountability." *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 40, no. 4 (2008): 417-456.

¹⁷ David Labaree. "We're Producing Academic Technicians And Justice Warriors: A Sermon on Educational Research, Part 2." *International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 9, no. 1 (2019): 123-126.

policy-makers accountable for the effects on the lifeworlds of those involved in schooling, those that schooling is there to benefit. The applied concept of education debt can contribute to putting the voice of education back into discussions about schooling and its purposes.

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