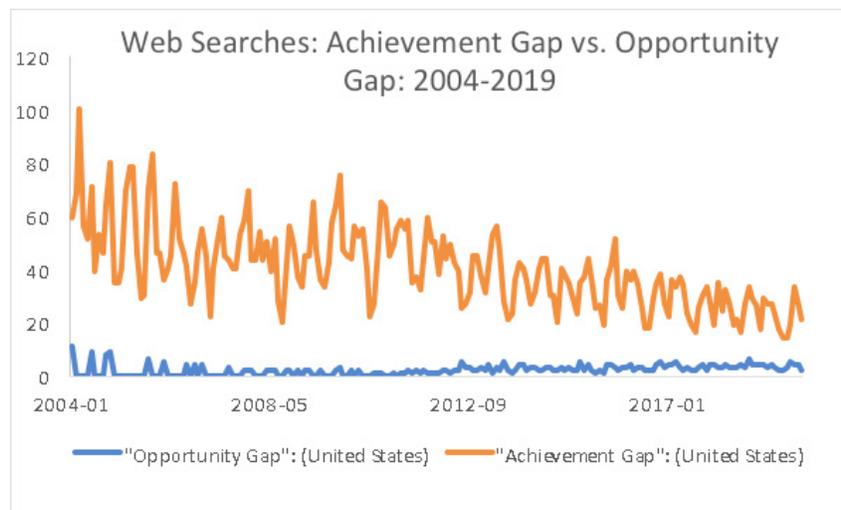




WILL 2020 BE THE YEAR OF ACKNOWLEDGING OPPORTUNITY GAPS?



Source: Google Trends, December 2019: Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means there was not enough data for this term.

It might be ubiquitous, but it's still a loaded term. When educators, policymakers, and parents emphasize the "achievement gap," they're focusing on results like disparate dropout rates and test scores, without specifying the causes. They are, often unintentionally, placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of the children themselves. Listeners adopt the toxic presumption that root causes lie with the children and their families. In truth, outcome gaps are driven by input gaps – opportunity gaps – that are linked to our societal neglect of poverty, concentrated poverty, and racism.

Yet placing blame on children and families is pervasive. A 2019 *EdWeek* survey of more than 1,300 teachers found that more than 60 percent of educators say that student motivation has a major influence on differences in Black and White educational outcomes. The survey also found that student motivation and parenting were cited about three times more often than discrimination as major influences on disparate outcomes of Hispanic versus White students.

In an edited book first published in 2013, *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, Prudence Carter and Kevin Welner explain how opportunity gaps arise. Attention to these inputs focuses us on the root cause of disparate outcomes, which boils down to inequitable access to opportunities to attend high-quality schools, as well as other resources including stable housing, food security, and adequate health care. From that book was born NEPC's Schools of Opportunity project, which recognizes high schools that strive to close opportunity gaps by providing equitable access to engaging and relevant curriculum, welcoming school environments, challenging learning, and needed services.

Anecdotally, opportunity-gap framing and – more importantly – measures designed to close opportunity gaps, do appear to be picking up steam. The state of Washington has an Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee that is responsible for vetting policies with the potential to impact opportunities to learn. Similarly, Oregon's HB 3427 is a multibillion dollar tax and education funding and educational change law dubbed the "Student Success Act," and is designed to directly address opportunity gaps. Leading candidates in the 2020 presidential election have refocused attention on closing opportunity and resource gaps creating inequalities inside and outside of schools. Even Teach for America, in a 2018 website post, announced its support for replacing "achievement gap" with "opportunity gap" because the latter phrase "draws attention to the conditions and obstacles that young students face throughout their educational careers," while "achievement gap" "implies that children are not achieving as they should be, and that it's their fault."

An analysis of Google search terms suggests that use of the phrase "achievement gap" has been trending downward in the past decade and a half. However, searches of "opportunity gap" have shown only a slight uptick. The 2019 *EdWeek* survey found that teachers who use the term opportunity gap (rather than achievement gap) to describe differences in average educational outcomes of Whites versus Hispanics or Blacks appear to think differently about the root causes of disparate outcomes. For instance, 43 percent of teachers who use the term "opportunity gap" say that, when it comes to differences in the educational outcomes of Black and White students, society bears more responsibility than individuals or the community. By contrast, just 27 percent of teachers who use the term "achievement gap" say society bears the lion's share of responsibility.

Of course, the use of the term is likely more of an effect than a cause of teachers recognizing society's role, but the change may be cyclical and reinforcing. Language really does matter when it comes to characterizing differences in the educational outcomes of student groups in such a way that counteracts this inclination. Let's hope 2020 is the year that "opportunity gap" thinking and acting catches fire, signaling that the causes and cures of disparate outcomes extend well beyond the children who experience them.

NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

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