Exploring equity gaps in education: Toward unity, not uniformity

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Research and practice in education and development has, in recent decades, been consumed with equity gaps. From World Bank reports about "Closing the gap" (De Ferranti et al, 2003) to calls from UNICEF (2010) about "Narrowing the gaps," to national explorations of achievement gaps (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015), it seems organizational bodies, institutions, and individuals are consumed by reducing gaps in education. But what are gaps? Gaps necessarily signify a divide, a rift or a space between entities; conceptualization of the gap itself influences both the ends and the means of research and action, in terms of how it might be bridged, filled, or simply recognized in education research, policy, and practice. And who defines the gaps? Who is involved in the production and reproduction of the gaps? Who is most affected by the gaps? These and other questions serve as meaningful prompts, albeit at times in competition, for broader debates about the purposes and assumptions of schooling and learning around the world.

Adding further complexity, "reducing gaps" may not always yield positive outcomes. Eisner (2003) questions the implicit assumption that "the aim of schooling is to get all students to the same place at about the same time" (p. 650). He posits that this increased standardization denies the broad spectrum of talents and skills that students possess, but may not be valued by school norms and encourages massification of results. While all students may reach the desired benchmark(s), thus seemingly reducing the gap, does this genuinely promote the true capabilities of all students? Moreover, renewed attention to deficit thinking in schools and educational research reminds us to consider deeply the ingrained cultural funds of knowledge so often ignored in efforts to reduce gaps (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Snyder & Nieuwenhuysen, 2010; Thaman, 2012). Indeed, the conceptualization of a "gap" is most often itself deployed in a deficit sense: to be bridged, to be closed, or to be minded. However, some gaps may be seen as desirable, even necessary, spaces from which we can step back from, and take stock of, familiar as well as new or "strange" approaches and tensions.

As globalized forms of education continue to deepen and extend, the 2016 Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) conference provided a unique opportunity to consider, from various vantage points, the wealth of gaps in achievement, funding, quality, policy, teaching, systems, and beyond. Educators and scholars in Oceania, and the OCIES society, have long explored these relationships and spaces and continue to navigate common and diverse perspectives and practices (Sanga, 2012; Thaman 1993, 2012; Welch 2016). The 2016 OCIES conference built upon these foundations and extended the exploration of gaps, what they do or do not signify, how or if they should be solved, the consequences of creating, maintaining, or reducing gaps, etc.

This special issue of the *International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives* includes several papers from the 2016 conference submitted to the journal. Each paper explores one or more gaps pertaining to the field of education. Broadly advancing research and practice toward the twin goals of equity and unity, the papers interact with gaps in achievement, gaps in research, gaps in educational provision, gaps in theory, gaps in methodology, and more. Combined, the special issue also aims to reduce the gap between more senior researchers and their junior colleagues. The issue's first paper is from a senior scholar—one of the keynote speakers—and the remainder of the issue is comprised of papers from more junior scholars, including many early career researchers. This range represents ongoing work, begun in recent years, by members of OCIES, toward broader inclusivity and diversity. These characteristics constitute a recurring theme in all of the articles that comprise this special issue.

The first paper, based on a keynote address from the 2016 OCIES conference by Professor Frances Vavrus, critically questions the discourse of gaps themselves. She argues that the language used to describe educational gaps limits our imaginations of both the causes and solutions for reducing the gaps we deem problematic. Vavrus builds on work by Ladson-Billings (2006), who posits that the conceptualization of "education debt" more appropriately acknowledges the histories of exclusion and oppression—and the concomitant need for educational repatriation—than the metaphor of education gaps. She then draws on longitudinal research from Tanzania to examine the multi-scalar debts that accrue across international, national, and individual levels, and to explore the ways in which we, as a community invested in comparative and international education, may "declare our object and offense to them, and work with organizations addressing the historical, political, spatial, and semiotic relations that produced and maintained them." The article concludes with a powerful call for us as educators, practitioners, and researchers to pursue equity and unity in Oceania and beyond.

Mousumi Mukherjee's paper examines theoretical perspectives of the concept of inclusive education. More specifically, the paper makes a case for particularly engaging with Rabindranath Tagore's "Southern Theory" of Inclusive Education for contextual meaning-making. Mukherjee does so in order to "draw on indigenous historic and cultural traditions to identify a commitment towards inclusivity, as a way of broadening meaning-making of inclusive education within the Indian context", noting that "Tagore was on principle opposed to any kind of segregation based on nationality, class, caste, race, religion, ethnicity, gender and other markers of social difference." Mukherjee exhorts us to engage with this "opportunity for deeper understanding of pedagogic issues related to inclusive education," and, ultimately, to "generate possible solutions to educational problems within the context, rather than just ideological critique of the concept of inclusive education as hegemonic Western imposition."

Brent Edwards Jr and Inga Storen offer in their paper an original examination of the work of the World Bank in education policy reform in Indonesia over two decades. The authors adopt a perspective of "critical international political economy" to balance "a focus on material and ideational factors" in their incisive and succinct analysis of key areas of the World Bank's influential work in Indonesia. In their analysis of four key phases of World Bank education work—the community governance program; sector-scale-up; government reaction/increased funding; and non-financial influence—Edwards and Storen take us beyond consideration of the realm of material influence. The work takes up core issues of injustice, as manifest in exacerbated inequity and inequitable

distributions of power between influential actors in education and development with resonance well beyond the Indonesian context of their article.

Finally, the paper by Ritesh Shah, Alexandra McCormick, and Matthew Thomas takes a reflective turn, and reports on analysis that explored the pedagogies and structures of comparative and international education in two universities of the greater Oceanic region. The authors locate their trio-ethnographic pilot study of CIE teaching within the context of recent changes to the OCIES society, and within the greater Australia, New Zealand and Pacific islands in the Oceanic region. In this article, they consider some implications for their own teaching in CIE and, potentially, for moving toward reconciling regional understandings of CIE pedagogy. The authors offer comparative evidence from their curricula, pedagogy, and students, and posit their aims, hopes, and possibilities for extended future work that may contribute to existing decolonizing movements in the Pacific and, ideally, beyond.

Together these papers serve as a critical call to question the nature of gaps themselves, and to continue to work in spaces that could serve to bridge divides that are both perceived and real. Diverse in scope, analysis, and geography, the papers are united collectively by their concern for equity and their exploration of salient questions about how gaps are framed, addressed, measured, produced, and reproduced. This special issue seeks to make a modest contribution to recent research on equity gaps in education towards the creation of powerful, transformative, and tailored learning experiences for all.

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