

# 'Achievement gap' cannot be closed, solution lies in transforming how we educate, professor writes

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The "achievement gap" is the focus of much discussion of American education. How to help poor and minority students reach the same level of achievement as wealthy and majority peers is the subject of much debate. A University of Kansas professor has authored an article that the achievement gap cannot, in fact, be closed, and even if it were, it would not end inequality. The problem instead lies within an educational system that focuses on deficits and a meritocracy that does not actually reward or properly measure merit, he argues.

Yong Zhao, Foundation Distinguished Professor in educational leadership and policy studies at KU, has authored an article arguing that it is necessary to transform American education instead of simply changing the current paradigm to achieve educational equality. The article was published in the Journal of Social Issues.

"My argument is that it's a fake meritocracy," Zhao said of the American education system. "The assumptions of a meritocracy are all wrong. We've convinced people of this rigged meritocracy and told the poor and disadvantaged that if you play in this system, you can be successful. But the system is set up against you."

The American education system is set up as a meritocracy that posits anyone can succeed through a combination of their own ability and effort. Zhao argues there are four key assumptions in such a meritocracy

and that all are false.

- A society/authority can correctly identify merit
- There are ways to accurately measure merit
- Merit is only individuals' innate potential plus efforts
- Everyone has the same opportunity to develop the merit.

Standardized measures such as the SAT and IQ tests have attempted to identify merit but have proven extremely unreliable in predicting who will be successful and have other problems such as testing bias and a narrow set of measures. There are also no merits that cut across all domains. What counts as merit for a scientist is not the same to an artist, for example, and no merits are of absolute value to every potential career. The third assumption fails because merit as has been measured can be inherited. Family income, for example, is the most significant influencer of test scores. That relates to the fourth assumption as well, and it is well-known that not all [students](#) have the same access to high-quality education and equal resources, Zhao said. Those born to advantaged families have access to better schools, teachers and resources, where the [achievement gap](#) begins.

The problem is exacerbated by an education that focuses on deficits. Students all begin school with the assumption they are deficient in certain areas and that these deficits must be fixed, Zhao said. This ensures continued inequality as some students spend their time focusing on deficits, missing out on other educational opportunities, while their peers continue to progress. The solution lies in changing how we view merit.

"Attempts to close the achievement gap are futile unless the merit is redefined," Zhao wrote. "As long as merit remains defined as outcomes of one or two types of standardized tests or existing education credentials, the gap is not likely to be closed. It is theoretically

impossible to close the gap not because poor and minority children are inherently incapable of learning but because they start much worse off than their wealthier and Caucasian peers in the measures used to define [educational achievement](#) such as reading, math and 'appropriate' school behaviors."

The good news is that the deficit-driven paradigm can be changed. By focusing on students' strengths instead of their weaknesses, educators can broaden curriculum, help students achieve their full potential while receiving a full education and serve more as life coaches than teachers of remedial material, Zhao said.

Advances in technology have both changed the effectiveness of our educational approach and provided opportunities for a new way. After the Industrial Revolution, an education that gave everyone the same preparation for manual, mechanical jobs worked, according to Zhao. But now that those types of jobs are largely gone, that approach is no longer effective and focusing on each students' strengths to help them develop the necessary skills for a wide range of new and emerging careers is possible.

"The traditional school was designed to teach the average student. Education needs to get diverse, and we need to think about how to make education adjustable, so that it fits everyone," Zhao said.

Another encouraging sign is that policy can create change in education. National policies such as No Child Left Behind and Common Core have had largely negative effects on American education, but they did bring about changes in the way schools do business in quick order, Zhao said. Policy that effectively focuses on shifting away from deficit-driven [education](#) could have equally rapid success. He specifically recommends policy that:

- Stops defining children by their weaknesses
- Stops practices to fix deficits
- Looks for strengths in students
- Supports strengths and passions
- Lets basic skills in reading, math and other areas follow interests, passions and strengths.

Such change in policy and practice will not be easy, but decades of inequality and ever-increasing educational challenges show there is not time to wait or room for further attempts to close the achievement gap in the current educational paradigm.

"While the root causes of the 'achievement gap' are complex and demand more than what schools can truly do to close it, we're faced with kids today in front of us. We can't wait," Zhao said. "Are we going to let two or more generations go by without helping? Society shouldn't define the kids in front of us in the classroom."

**More information:** From Deficiency to Strength: Shifting the Mindset about Education Inequality. [zhaolearning.com/2016/10/08/fr ... ducation-inequality/](https://zhaolearning.com/2016/10/08/fr...ducation-inequality/)

Provided by University of Kansas

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