# Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

**0105**

**L1** | Beaumaris Lounge
Chaired by Ruth Walker

Thu 12 Dec 2019

14:15 - 14:45

The inequality gap: a realist critique

Suellen B. Shay[1]

[1]*University of Cape Town , Cape Town, South Africa*

**Research Domain:** Access and widening participation (AWP)

**Abstract:** As higher education has globally massified, the benefits have not been equally shared. Higher education has expanded without equity of success manifest in what is called the "achievement gap" or the "attainment gap". Like all metaphors, the 'gap' is problematic. The study seeks to develop an empirical and conceptual understanding of the performance gap on 'high risk courses' at a South African elite institution. It seeks specifically to understand for whom is the high risk course (not) working, and why? The study draws on theoretical tools from Basil Bernstein and Karl Maton to move from description to explanation. The study reveals a long-standing contestation, or 'code clash', in what the courses value. Some students succeed despite this 'code clash'. Others are casualties of the 'clash'. This would suggest that addressing the contestation in the regulative discourse of the curriculum structure points to a promising solution for high failure rates.

**Paper:**

**Motivation**

The motivation for this paper is the reality that as higher education has globally massified, the benefits have not been equally shared. Higher education has expanded without equity (McCowan 2007, Shay 2017, Balbachevsky, Sampaio & de Andrade 2019). Increasing formal access to higher education for historically under-represented groups has not resulted in 'parity of participation' (Fraser 2009). In response to this many Anglo-American-Australian higher education systems are now 'tracking' this inequality and there is a growing body of studies, policy and advocacy focused on what in the US is called the "achievement gap" or in the UK, the "attainment gap".

One of the premises of this project is that like all metaphors, that of the 'gap' is problematic. What does it mean to 'close' or 'fill' the gap? The intention of the metaphor is to focus on differences between student groups using neutral rather than deficit language. 'Closing the gap' may frame the

problem as, how do we get low achieving groups to rise to the level of high-achieving groups? At best the term is a 'red flag' pointing to the persistent ways in which inequalities of race, class and various forms of privilege are mirrored in HE's access/success patterns. At worse it may inadvertently create a blind spot towards other conceptions of the problem and thus other solutions.

In South Africa there is ample evidence of a persistent racially differentiated performance gap along a wide range of national indicators including participation rate, retention and completion (VitalStats 2016). While there have been improvements, the sobering reality is that 25 year after apartheid, the overall participation rate for 2016 is only 18%, with a 50% participation rate for students classified 'white' (down from 57% in 2011) and a 16% for students classified 'black' (up from 14% in 2011).

One of the premises of this study is that more insight at the course level into why students fail/succeed, may bring a better understanding of performance gaps at institutional and even national level. This in turn will lead to more informed solutions. The focus of this paper is the problem of performance of students on 'high risk' courses: these are first year courses with persistent failure rates and high enrolments. The data for this paper will draw on a suite of first year Mathematics and Economics courses.

The study asks the realist question, 'what is (not) working, for whom, in what circumstances and why?' (Pawson 2013). It seeks specifically to understand for whom is the high risk course (not) working, and why? It seeks to identify underlying mechanisms which shape the patterns of outcomes. The outcome of the study is to have a better empirical and conceptual understanding of the performance gap from the point of view of the curriculum structure. The long-term outcome of the study is data-informed proposals for curriculum change that will improve students' experience of learning, and impact on institutional retention, completion and throughput.

**Theory**

This study draws on critical realism as an ontological framework (Sayer 2006) which offers a stratified reality or depth ontology with distinctions between the real, the actual and the empirical. The real is the realm of objects, structure and powers. These structures and powers have causal effects irrespective of whether we observe them or not. The actual is the domain of events or sites where things happen. The empirical is what we observe, what we experience.

In a nutshell, Sayer (2006 ,11) notes, "the lesson here is that the world should not be conflated with our experience of it". If we want to understand and act in and upon our world for change, we need to view the events of our time cognizant of the underlying structures and mechanisms. The empirical realm of the 'achievement gap' needs to be understood for its causes.

From this realist perspective, the study draws on a range of theoretical tools borrowed from Bernstein and Maton for deeper exploration of the empirical data moving from description to explanation.

The project takes a mixed methods approach with several sources of data: 1) a quantitative historical analysis of 'high risk' course performance (2015-2017) on a range of variables including demographic, school performance, and entry-test performance, 2) current student engagement data (this is data available via the Learning Management System, for example, the use of lecture video recordings, 3) qualitative data of current students' experience on the course through course evaluations to formal focus groups and interviews. There is also a highly iterative process of engaging with the academics who teach on the courses.

**The findings**

The quantitative evidence does provide evidence for a racially differentiated gap between the performance of students self-classified as 'white' and 'black'. This is in fact the case for all of the high risk courses being investigated. Black students are over-represented in the failing bands and under-represented in the distinction bands.

But this does not give us the full story. This is the empirical 'tip' of the critical realist 'iceberg'. Further mining of the quantitative and qualitative data gives additional insights to the question 'for whom is the curriculum structure (not) working and why?'. What the study reveals is a long-standing contestation within the regulative discourse/s of the course, or what Maton refers to as, 'code clash'. The data reveals a profile of students who can succeed in the course despite this 'code clash'. But a significant proportion of a different profile are casualties of the 'clash'. This would suggest that addressing the contestation in the regulative discourse of the curriculum points to a promising solution for high failure rates.

**References**

Balbachevsky, Sampaio & de Andrade (2019). Expanding Access to Higher Education and its (limited) consequences for social inclusion: The Brazilian Experience. Social Inclusion, 7(1), 7-17.

Bernstein, B. 2000. Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research,

critique. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Fraser, Nancy. (2009). *Scales of Justice: Reimagining political space in a globalizing world* New York Columbia University Press.

Maton, K. Forthcoming. Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of

education. London: Routledge.

McCowan, T. (2007). Expansion without equity: An analysis of current policy on access to higher education in Brazil. *Higher Education, 53*, 579-598.

Pawson, R. (2013). The Science of Evaluation: A Realist Manifesto. London: Sage.

Sayer, A. (2006). Realism and Social Science. London: Sage Publications.

Shay, S. (2017). Educational investment towards the ideal future: South's strategic choices. *South African Journal of Science, 113*(1/2), 1-6.