

## #96 Mind the Gap: Why It's Time to Stop Talking about the Achievement Gap

**Jennifer Berkshire** Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

**Jack Schneider** And I'm Jack Schneider.

**Berkshire** And Jack, let's just get this out of the way. Things are really bad.

**Schneider** Yeah. Things, things are, things are not good. If people in the future are listening to archived episodes, then I am going to wager that they are in a better place than we are now. And that's actually, it surprises me to say that, that I am betting that the future will be better than the present.

**Berkshire** Well, one of the things that's kind of surprising about this episode is that it's actually not bleak.

**Schneider** No, this is like, this is, this is like my happy moment of the week getting to talk about this.

**Berkshire** So our, our most recent episode featured the runners up of our graduate student research contest, Mimi Lyon, and Adam Kirk Edgerton. Definitely check that episode out. If you haven't heard it already, it was great.

**Schneider** And if you haven't listened to the episodes featuring last year's winner and runner up, those are also available in the archive. The winner last year was Elisa Castillo and the runner up was Barry Goldenberg.

**Berkshire** So this episode we're going to be highlighting the winner of the contest and his name is David Stevens. And I think people are going to be kind of surprised that that our winner is focused on data.

**Schneider** Yeah, it's like a, I mean, this in the nicest possible way, it's like a super nerdy topic. So maybe that explains why I was so drawn to it initially. I actually had read some of David's work a year or two ago and was really pleased to see him submit for the contest. And was even more pleased, Jennifer, that you were the one who was most excited about his submission. One of the things that I think is interesting about David is that like many of our other featured graduate students on our contest, he's got teaching experience as a K-12 teacher, but he also has experience being a central office employee who has really been in charge of managing data systems. And so I think he has a great insider's perspective on how present systems currently work, what their flaws are and what the potential is for remaking them and revamping them. And I think he's then got his researcher perspective which is really interesting in which couples with that, in this really natural way to talk about what are the alternatives that we should be considering.

**Berkshire** And Jack, I'm imagining that as people listen to this and check out the other episodes you just mentioned, that they're going to be thinking, how can I submit my research for the graduate student research contest? And good news. We're definitely going to be holding it again, look for an announcement this fall. And, and as I think, I think you'll hear from David, all you need is an interesting question.

**Schneider**

[Music]

**Berkshire** So let's start with a little backstory. That would be my backstory of course. If you've been listening to this show for a while you've probably picked up on the fact that I'm not exactly a data person. In fact the whole data-driven discourse leaves me cold. All of this is to say that for me to select as the winner of our Grad Student Research Contest a project that is fundamentally about data says something. So let's meet our winner shall we?

David Stevens is a graduate student at the University of California Berkeley in the Graduate School of Education's Social Research Methodologies program. But his path to becoming a researcher and to the project that brought him to this podcast started in a K-12 classroom nearly 25 years ago.

**David Stevens** So my pathway into graduate school is probably not the traditional one in the sense that I'm probably...I'm older than most of my classmates. I started my career in education as a science teacher teaching in the Washington DC area, and then finished up a graduate program in working with students with disabilities. And then when we moved out to Berkeley, I started out as a special education teacher and in the transition I'd kind of learned that working with kids over time was something that I found really satisfying. And I always kind of had this thing for the, the underdog and so on. And so that kind of, I was drawn to that population.

**Berkshire** David kept teaching. He took on some administrative responsibilities. Education reform was in the air which meant there was a lot of talk about the achievement gap and David says that it just didn't sit right with him. By looking at student achievement through the singular lens of race a lot of other factors were being missed.

**Stevens** When we're in this time of transition and our high school, we were getting all small learning communities and there was a lot of debate about where resources should go, and so on. I felt like we needed a better way to kind of look at our data. And so we started thinking, well, what are the many different aspects that contribute to students either doing really doing really well or perhaps struggling? And we started, you know, analyzing all the different variables that we look at data by. And we noticed some very clear patterns.

And from there, we kind of broke those, those variables up into where the demographic variable was associated with academic success or higher performance. We said, okay, that's, that's a tailwind. You know, thinking something, that's going to push the students along and make academic progress and success more likely. And then those associated with underperformance, those are academic headwinds.

And so we started looking more at those academic headwinds and looking at students who were really struggling. We saw that, wow, the more headwinds a kid has, the more they struggle and the inverse being true. If kids who have pretty much no academic headwinds, they were just fine. So from there, I came up with this thing that I called the Academic Support Index, knowing that we wanted this to be framed around how we're going to support students, how we're going to allocate resources to improve the outcomes for all students. From there, we started playing around with it and that's where it all came from.

**Berkshire** Of course as David was coming up with his Academic Support Index he probably didn't envision a day when a pandemic would force schools to shut down. But those headwinds and tailwinds he was just describing? We can really see them now. And the pandemic is threatening to blow up the gap between students who are struggling against the wind and those who are being pushed along by it.

**Stevens** The current situation is like an accelerant. And any of those headwinds that a student face are now going to be accelerated by this current situation. So if your parents did not graduate from high school, for example, there probably are not always, but they're more likely to have difficulty navigating this online world with a certain amount of technical prowess is going to be really important. And your socioeconomic status is going to impact how well you're able to access these online classes. Do you have high speed internet? Do you have a computer or some program, you know, some platform for each of your children, so it can go on simultaneously or they can have to take turns and that's going to happen in families who are, you know, have greater headwinds and families who don't. So it's going to exacerbate all the current existing inequalities that we have.

**Schneider** One thing that I really like about your project is the language that you use. I think the language of headwinds and tailwinds can actually improve the public conversation, which presently really revolves around the so-called achievement gap. I'd be interested to hear you talk a little bit about that language and its meaningfulness to you.

**Stevens** Yeah. So one of the things that I really like about this framework is that headwinds and tailwinds they're outside the locus of control of teachers, right? Or the headwinds, for sure, we can't change a student's socioeconomic status or their parent education level, but what is within the locus of control of educators are the tailwinds thinking where the power lies. It's an instruction. It's an equitable resource allocation. It's in looking at data in a way that actually is a little more sophisticated. So we actually are understanding which students are struggling. Now, you mentioned before that we tend to dichotomize schools is, you know, winners and losers

success or not success. Well in the ASI, in this index, we have a continuum. So there, we can say, where is this school situated? And it's, you know, average amount of headwinds and so on. And then we can start thinking about, okay, is this school getting sufficient resources to provide the tailwinds, to counteract those headwinds that students experience?

**Schneider** The thing that really bothers me about the language of the achievement gap is first of all, how narrow it is. It really presumes that the major problem in public education is the fact that standardized test scores are lower among certain subgroups than among others. And I find it really distracting with regard to the broader aims of equity. And then additionally, I find it troubling because it really frames the achievement and the intellectual capacities of students, of color and low income students and all historically marginalized students as being in a kind of deficit, right, that these students are lacking in some way. It isn't that they lack broader social and economic support that their more privileged peers have, it's that there's some gap that puts them on the wrong side of it. And their more privileged counterparts are simply higher achievers at the moment who they ought to be chasing after. And I just, again, I'd just like to hear you talk a little bit more about this and how you think your project addresses it.

**Stevens** When we talk about the achievement gap, we tend to look at it through either the racial lens or through the socioeconomic ones. Those are the majority of the ways it's used. The problem with that framing - I mean there are many problems with it - but one of them is that there's many other factors that are disproportionately in different populations than others. For example, socioeconomically disadvantaged, significantly more common in students of color parent education level. There's been all kinds of historical practices that limited people's access and that's disproportionate amongst people of color. When we just frame it as a racial thing, without including all these other factors it's kinda designed to put white students on top and students of color on the other side of that gap. And that to me, it doesn't, that's a highly problematic way to be looking at it.

**Berkshire** So Jack, our previous episode highlighted the runners up of our contest. We heard from, we met Mimi Lyon and Adam Kirk Edgerton. And we sort of framed that as their research, journey's beginning at this moment of kind of peak anti-teacher fervor, but it was, they really started their teaching careers at the peak of achievement gap fever too. And when you think about the whole, that the concept of the achievement gap has held over education policy and all the particular interventions over the last decade plus, and as you were talking just now and listening to David, talk about the ASI sort of disrupting this, I couldn't help, but remember there's a new study out from a professor at university of Southern California by the name of David Quinn, where he finds just the constant media fixation on the achievement gap actually impacts the way that people perceive the intellectual capabilities of students, of color and low income students. And I thought, you know, this is just remarkable that all the chatter about the achievement gap turns out to have put us in a worse situation than maybe where we started.

**Schneider** This is contrary to what we often hear from supporters of high stakes tests who often make the case that No Child Left Behind and its successor legislation, the Every Student

Succeeds Act had this tremendous upside, right? That whatever the consequences, whatever the price we paid, we ended up focusing more on the achievement of low income students and students from historically marginalized racial groups. And this was a net good. And I think that we have enough scholarship at this point that we need to begin to really ask serious questions about that, because I am not convinced when I look at the research that we're in a better place now with all of this talk about the achievement gap and the lower performance on standardized tests, but it's often framed simply as lower academic performance by students of color, by low income students by students identified for special education by English language learners.

And I find this to be related to another problem, which there's actually more new research out about. And that is that the, the focus on standardized test scores, which was really driven by all of this rhetoric around the achievement gap really led to a number of policies that were characteristic of the period and which, again, we are only beginning to discover the unintended consequences of this is very related to another problem, which is that the conversation about the achievement gap has sucked all of the oxygen out of the room and focused people on policies that they might otherwise not support. Were they not relentlessly focused on standardized test scores? And so if we look at just one example, and this would be the so-called no excuses charter movement, which was the darling of the reform community, as well as of the mainstream media throughout the early aughts, we can see that now that we are beginning to look a little bit more critically at those schools, we're finding that they have narrower missions that often they're engaging in pedagogies, which are racialized or carceral in nature.

And as new research shows the costs of that approach to education often outweigh the benefits, particularly when the benefits are really narrowly defined. And again, the problem with the language of the achievement gap is that it is tied so tightly to standardized test scores in math and English exams. And that, that really isn't a valid measure of what students know and can do. It's an incredibly narrow measure. And it doesn't include the vast majority of things that we actually want schools to do for young people. So, you know, I go back once more to the language that Gloria Ladson billings used as a kind of replacement for the achievement gap, which is the education debt. And if we focus instead on creating not only parody of opportunity, but also trying to equalize historic wrongs, right, that gets us a lot further towards the aim of equal outcomes for young people.

**Berkshire** OK back to David and the Academic Support Index. Way back when David and his colleagues were sitting through one of those data presentations, and his frustration set him on his path to creating the ASI. Well his goal was to figure out a way to get students the support they needed. But David was also thinking like a teacher. What if instead of data being a cudgel that gets wielded to remind teachers of where they're falling short, what if it was actually, well, helpful to them?

**Stevens** I think the ASI, because it came from teachers, I was a teacher in the classroom when we started developing this and it's really meant to serve the teacher's needs and the students' needs. So I think that's always been a really important thing. And some of the experiences I've

had with working with teachers on the ASI is one, they get it immediately. They understand, right? The student who's poor needs more than the student who doesn't need as much as the student who's poor and has a disability. And there's also an English learner, right? And the more headwinds the student has, the more they're going to need or they're going to struggle. So it makes sense to them. And one of the other things is that it's really helped us identify things that were really effective, that we didn't see it in the aggregate. But when we started looking at it, by this more precise lens we saw, Hey, you're actually doing really, really well. Or maybe we're saying, we can say, Hey, your class is empirically a class with a lot more needs than your other classes. That's why period six might be a lot harder than periods, two, three, and four.

**Berkshire** So by now you have a pretty good sense of the why behind the ASI. But how does it actually work? We mentioned way back at the beginning of this episode that in addition to being a graduate student David has also been working with the Berkeley, California public schools. They've been using the ASI to identify struggling middle schoolers and figure out a way to support them into and through high school. Here's what it looks like.

**Stevens** I think we're in about our seventh year, where we take a look at our students that are transitioning from middle to high school, and we combine the ASI with a rubric to kind of articulate some of the knowledge in middle schools and learn about students. We identify students that we think are going to struggle during that transition. And from there, we connect those students with intervention counselors that support them for four years. And the result is we take these students with lots of headwinds that we've identified, give them that additional resource, that additional support while they're in high school. And from our initial year, we lost about 40 or 50% of those students. In the first two years, we are now retaining those populations of students throughout high school equal to the school overall.

**Berkshire** Example # two - identifying which students are likely to struggle with tests and figuring out a way to make test taking less stressful for them.

**Stevens** We designed an intervention for tests where we took students, used their ASI, identified those that are probably going to struggle. We gave them an intervention. It was really, it was the intervention was just alternative testing. We didn't include any sort of test prep or anything like that. And what we got was very statistically significant improved performance from those students compared to a control that didn't get the intervention. The intervention was only just an alternative testing site. That's all because we thought that the test anxiety from students who may struggle testing in with students who are very high performing creates anxiety, they don't do as well for a variety of reasons because we targeted higher ASI students, the benefits accrued to students of color. And so in that example, we had a higher passing rate for the African American students who received the intervention, then the school overall. And so really all we did was give them an environment which they could do the work they were always capable of doing.

**Berkshire** There are more examples. Lots more examples. In recent years David has had the opportunity to test the Academic Support Index in all kinds of school districts - suburban, rural, large urban - and he's found that it is similarly predictive in all of them. And that got him thinking. School funding may be the most important support for students of all. So what if he could connect the ASI with school funding data to see who needs more resources vs where resources are actually going?

**Stevens** Currently I am taking a look at state wide data for California on the Smarter Balance assessments. And I'm able to actually calculate the average ASI for each grade level within that school. And from there, we can look at the data and I'm seeing a really strong relationship between schools, average index score, and then their performance on these assessments. And so from there, I want to bring in some school funding to those models and see how much, how is school funding impacting that? So are the schools that have higher amounts of headwinds, are they getting additional resources? If not, that might be part of the explanation why those students aren't or those schools aren't doing as well as some of their other schools.

**Berkshire** Great idea right? Well David's pivot to thinking about funding and how it relates to his Academic Support Index was inspired by the work of another education researcher - one who you are very familiar with. David happened to hear this person on the radio and as luck would have it I happen to have the very clip he heard right here.

[NPR clip]

**Stevens** Well, it was in the middle of the night and I couldn't sleep. So I put on our local NPR station to hopefully send me back to sleep, but the story comes on and I got totally engaged in it. It was Jack talking about, I believe it was Baltimore schools and funding. And as I'm hearing, I'm thinking, 'Oh man, if they just could layer on the ASI to that, it would be a really interesting way to see is this the funding following the right students?' You know, California has a model, local control funding formula where we give additional funding to English learners, students in foster care, socioeconomically disadvantaged. No one's going to argue against that, but it misses a lot of students. When I've looked at my index versus the state model, I see that we would actually redirect a lot of money because it gives us a more precise understanding of which students are struggling.

**Berkshire** So Jack, I think everyone in our vast listening audience is wondering the same thing right now. How does it feel to find out that your late night appearance on NPR was part of the inspiration for David's research?

**Schneider** Well, Jennifer, I am going to do what good politicians do. And I'm going to answer the question. I wish I had been asked rather than the question I was actually asked. And the question I wish I had been asked is exactly the question you just asked, just minus the snarky tone. And so I will, I will answer it earnestly and say that this is something that I feel really

strongly about. And it's something that I think we do a pretty decent job of advocating for on this show, which is an engagement with the public by scholars in education. That it's something that I think broadly we fail to train scholars to do while they're in graduate programs, but it's something that's of critical importance because if scholars aren't out there making research based arguments about what should be happening in our schools and helping explain to the public what is happening in the schools based on evidence, then other people are going to fill that gap, look at the number of quote, unquote, think tanks out there.

And I say that knowing that there are real think tanks, but then there are these sort of fakey think tanks out there in education and quote unquote thought leaders out there. And the consensus that they are often able to build by simply talking to each other in a complete vacuum absent of scholars and researchers. I find that to be really problematic and that we have literally thousands of experts who are really good at figuring this stuff out, but who are often less good at talking into microphones or, you know, writing up EDS. And so it's something that I feel really strongly about.

**Berkshire** Back to David. As you've been hearing him talk about the Academic Success Index you've probably picked up on the fact that he is something of an evangelist for this work. Well part of what he's hoping to do is convince teachers who feel so alienated by the accountability discourse that there is another, better way.

**Stevens** A number of years ago, California in our accountability system would give us a report. And they'd say, here are some similar schools that you can compare yourselves to. And that was always so problematic and dismissed by teachers because there was no such thing as similar schools, but what there is is similar students, but just in different proportions, if we really want to find out where we're seeing success, whether it's for schools or for evaluation or for intervention, understanding of research, it's really important that we're looking at similar students across sites and as, or whether it's the intervention of the controller or whatever. So I think having a model that lets you look at these students in a way that compares within schools, those different ASI levels, I think that's going to give us a much deeper understanding of where we're seeing success.

**Berkshire** In many ways David's work began out of frustrations with the limits of a data-driven approach to education. But he never lost his faith that evidence really matters.

**Stevens** I think that in education it's really important that we always take time to step back and look at what we're doing. And we want to become evidence-based to the greatest extent possible and not at the cost of losing the humanity in teaching and the creativity or any of that stuff. But I think it's important that we really try and figure out what's working because that is the gift that we can give the children that we teach.

**Berkshire** Congratulations to David Stevens for winning our Graduate Student Research Contest. Now if you want to know more about David's work he has a website:



academicsupportindex.com. And Jack and I will be right back to discuss our own headwinds and tailwinds and to reveal the subject of this episode's In the Weeds feature for our Patreon subscribers. A little hint: I'm going to let Jack hold forth on a subject that's near and dear to his heart.

[Music]

**Berkshire** Jack, the experience of recording now, two episodes with our graduate student research contest winners first, the runners up Mimi Lion and Adam Kerch Edgerton. And now our grand prize winner. David Stevens has just been so rewarding. And I think I've been also quite surprised by it that we, we really didn't go into it with, you know, any sense that we were interested in. People's sort of personal journeys and that we wanted research questions that that came out of their experiences, their formative years as teachers, we just, we wanted, you know, we, we wanted research. That was interesting. And then if you make the first cut, then you send in, we ask people, why is your research pod worthy and make that case for us in a brief audio snippet? So we listened to that. And instead what we got were these three really compelling stories about people grappling with the excesses of a particular moment in the education reform animals. And I ended up learning so much and coming away feeling really inspired about the, you know, what's what's ahead. And I feel really privileged to have gotten the opportunity to share such exciting research.

**Schneider** Wow, Jennifer, that was, I think the most earnest I have ever heard you been. It's like you have become so hard bitten and sarcastic that there is no room left over on that edge. And so you've just, you've come full circle and started over as a sort of dewy-eyed believer. But, but in all seriousness, I have been responding the same way and it's making me think of a conversation that I organized between a couple of leading senior Black scholars. And this is for a separate project. I'm now the co-editor of *History of Education* quarterly. And one of the things we're trying to do there is bring historians and scholars from other subfields together to have these conversations. And what came out of that conversation for me is how deeply personal the research that these scholars have been doing over decades has been to them.

And when I say deeply personal, I don't mean that they are pursuing their research in any more subjective fashion than anybody else. What I mean instead is that the questions that they're asking are driven by a way of seeing the world. The research that they are pursuing is rooted in a deep context of personal experience. And when I put that alongside what we've been hearing from the winner and runners up of our Graduate Student Research Contest, it makes me feel even more strongly about the importance of diversity in the research labor force, right? Diversity among scholars, because the different ways that we are seeing things, and I don't just mean racial diversity or gender diversity, but even things like, you know, having teachers and non-teachers, people from different professional backgrounds, having people of different age cohorts who, you know, came up as teachers in different contexts, that all of this shapes the way that we see the world and it shapes the questions that are of interest to us. And we just end up with more interesting work as a result.

**Berkshire** The other thing I really like is that there are some real practical implications from David's work that we were just hearing about. For example, I think of you as having come into this podcast responsibility with some pretty serious headwinds. Thanks to my interventions, you're doing pretty well,

**Schneider** Right? Which means that I actually should be more appreciated than you are, that, that our listeners should give me a higher overall rating than they give to you.

**Berkshire** Well, Jack, I know that these past two episodes highlighting the outstanding research of our guests has forced you to play sort of a backseat role. And we haven't really gotten to hear as much from you about your particular field of expertise. And so I thought that as a special treat during our In the Weeds...

**Schneider** I really wish people could see your face while you're saying this, Jennifer.

**Berkshire** I'll let them imagine it as a special treat. I thought that in the In the Weeds segment we do for our Patreon subscribers, that I would really let Jack Schneider shine. So it just happened that recently the results of the annual PDK poll came out, which, which takes sort of the thermometer of public attitudes regarding public education. Jack had a very smart and interesting thread on Twitter. And I thought that in the behind the curtain, In the Weeds that we could sort of go through that, because there are some surprising, even confounding things about the way that people perceive public education. Does that sound okay to you Jack,

**Schneider** Despite your patronizing tone there, Jennifer, I happen to love the PDK poll enough that I will join you on the other side of the paywall to discuss it. But before we do that, let me take this opportunity to remind our listeners that there are lots of ways for them to support the show that don't involve their purses and wallets and pocketbooks. If you like the show, go on and give it a rating wherever you got it, Stitcher, iTunes, someplace else that helps people find the show share it with colleagues, friends, or family, send them an episode that you liked and let them know that they can subscribe to the show.

**Berkshire** And if you would like to take the leap and join us on the other side of the paywall, all you have to do is go to [patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast](https://patreon.com/haveyouheardpodcast), and you'll see a whole list of all the cool extras you can get just by sending a couple dollars our way every month. And of course you get our eternal gratitude. We do a custom reading list for every episode and we do a special segment called in the weeds. And today Jack is going to be holding forth about polling data. It sounds very exciting to me, Jack.

**Schneider** It is exciting, but I will have to convince you of that once we jump over the paywall. Let's wrap this up. Thanks for listening everybody. I'm Jack Schneider.

**Berkshire** I'm Jennifer Berkshire. This is Have You Heard.

