Discussing Bias in Education Research with Saro Mohammed

Today's podcast episode features Sarojani Mohammed, the founder of Ed Research Works. Saro fights the injustice of knowledge-hoarding by making deep, meaningful connections between research and practice to expand equal access to educational opportunities, and improve outcomes, for all learners. We had the opportunity to highlight some of the background information on education research by discussing questions like - What should we ask for from research about students with disabilities and what is an example of how bias can transform education research?

Mentioned People/Resources:

Sarojani Mohammed at Ed Research Works: https://www.edresearchworks.com
Follow Ed Research Works on Twitter: https://twitter.com/edresearchworks
Sarojani Mohammed's personal website: www.sarojani.com

Transcript of the podcast episode:

Gabrielle Oates: Hello everybody and welcome back to the Educating All Learners Alliance podcast. For today, I'm here with Saro Mohammed, who's the founder of Ed Research Works. And so Saro, in her work, she fights the injustice of knowledge hoarding by making deep and meaningful connections between research and practice, in order to expand equal access to educational opportunities and improve outcomes for all learners. So we are happy to have her on the podcast today. Hey, how are you doing?

Saro Mohammed: Thanks I'm good. I'm so glad to be here.

Gabrielle Oates: I discussed in your background, you talk about your research, you talk about educational equity and so in diving into the research lens of things, what are some things that we should ask for from the research about, particularly, students with disabilities?

Saro Mohammed: So I think we're at a crossroads of sorts in terms of the research on students with disabilities. We actually know quite a bit about several different types of disabilities and how we can best serve those students. I think what we should be asking for now is a deeper focus on what researchers like to call the outliers or, you know, those students, perhaps in tier three or receiving special education services that aren't responding to intervention, for example. Just an acknowledgement that each student is an individual and their needs and, you know, what might make sense for them and what might be effective for them might be very different from other students. So

a shift in focus from understanding the average and understanding efficacy broadly to narrowing down, and you know, getting much more specific for individual students.

Gabrielle Oates: That's a good point. I'm sure it can be hard for researchers to make that shift from seeing a whole population as one, as opposed to each individual so that's interesting. Well, I guess, in terms of some of those biases that may comeup, what is an example of how having them can transform education research?

Saro Mohammed: Yes, so focusing on a group very broadly, relying on randomization and quantification in order to remove bias, ironically enough, it can actually that approach can actually allow bias to perpetuate. And so, an example that I like to talk about in an urban school district - this happened, maybe around 2010 or so - there was an urban school district that had a number of struggling readers coming into middle school. And so they defined struggling readers as sixth graders, so incoming sixth graders, who were reading at a third grade level or below. And so they were finding that this group of students., unsurprisingly, there were not progressing very well in middle school, and so they wanted to support these students by providing an intervention that would help them catch up with their reading so that they would be able to access other parts of the curriculum.

And so they had read it, you know, about a one on one tutoring as a very promising reading intervention and decided to pilot test this for a year. So every single sixth grader who was incoming to sixth grade with a reading level of third reader below were assigned an adult tutor and they worked with this reading tutor for one hour a week for the entire school year, so both semesters. And because this was a pilot and because this is a pretty intensive and expensive intervention, they wanted to have a sense of was it working or was it not. And so what they did was they, you know, measured everyone's progress in sixth grade in reading across the entire year. And at the end of it they had an external evaluator. It was very rigorously designed. They were using the screening and benchmarking tool in order to understand students progress in reading. And what they found they were actually disappointed by.

The official finding of the evaluation was that those students who received a tutor, or who had tutoring for the year, made one year's growth in reading across the year. And so that was actually no different to the other sixth graders who did not have a tutor who, on average, also made one year's growth in reading across the year. So they decided the intervention did not work. The treatment

group could perform exactly the same as the comparison group and they discontinued the intervention.

And I think what folks don't realize is, if you had asked the students, and teachers of the students who were struggling, what their experience was, they probably would have come to a very different conclusion. Because when you think about it, if you start sixth grade reading at a third grade level or below, that means that on average you've only made half a year's reading growth in the previous six years of school, right? So what they experienced was actually a doubling in their rate of reading progress across the year having this tutor.

And I don't know about you, but I'm sure to me if I were struggling in a content area and somebody doubled my rate of growth, with an intervention, that would feel pretty successful to me. And so by, you know, trying to be very objective and by removing the evaluator from the study and not really asking not involving the teachers and students that were receiving the intervention - what does success mean for you? How successful did this feel to you? - you actually lost an opportunity to really have a lot of acceleration of progress in reading for your most struggling readers.

Gabrielle Oates: Yes, I love that example so much and like you said it just emphasizes that even who you're asking for this research can affect the results so it's important to consider all the different lenses. I love that. That was an actual example from a real school, right? Hopefully, they did continue and get that additional support.

Saro Mohammed: I don't believe they did, which is very sad right? That's how when we over rely on certain things in research and we don't really acknowledge people's individuality, that we can end up with biased results.

Gabrielle Oates: That's true. Just to go in a little deeper to that point, has that affected special education students, this year, even more than others?

Saro Mohammed: Definitely! So I think one of the things that iIve observed in this past year is that the communities that have, I don't want to say thrived, but maybe survived the pandemic best in terms of K 12 education, are the communities that had the resources to determine for themselves what their needs, were and how to meet those needs. And when I say resources, I mean everything from finances to the political will to, you know, school districts support or school system support all the way through. And so that looked very different for different communities, even within a single

school system right, it might have been learning pods or it might have been 100% in person school with a lot of social distancing measures or it might have been cohorts of students, where some students were in school at different times and so they'd never interacted with each other groups of students. But the point is, when you are able to at the community level right get down and figure out for this specific community, what are the needs that you have and how will, how can we best meet your needs, I think that's when school systems were really able to pivot quite quickly and continue serving, especially those students who were receiving special education services. And so I think that's another example of when actually having the community lead the sort of research or the more academic discussion, having the community lead that discussion about needs and wants and opportunities for meeting those needs, then you end up with a very different answer than you know a group of administrators sitting down in the district office trying to figure out like, how do we provide services for students, you know, on such and such an IEP, for example.

Gabrielle Oates: And they may not have the visibility to know.

Saro Mohammed: Exactly, yeah. And they're trying to make a single decision for a group of students that might actually be quite diverse, even within a shared diversity - let's put it that way right. You know they they're trying to make a broad decision and it's hard. I mean, I understand that, but there's not going to be one answer that works for everyone.

Gabrielle Oates: I like that. That sentence, I feel like, encapsulates everything. There's not one answer. Awesome, well thank you so much for joining us. This is so great and I love that example you provided, and so, if people do want to follow up on your research and with you, where can they go find you?

Saro Mohammed: On Twitter my handle is @EdResearchWorks. You can also find my company website at www.edresearchworks.com or my personal website at www.sarojani.com. And I would love to chat with you, so if you reach out to me via email, which is available on both those sites, I will definitely respond.

Gabrielle Oates: We'll include those links in the show notes of the episode. So definitely scroll down and click in to contact Saro. Thank you so much for joining us!

Saro Mohammed: Thank you for having me!

Gabrielle Oates: And of course, for more information on the Educating All Learners Alliance, you can go to educatingalllearners.org and find us on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook at Educating All Learners. Our twitter handle is @educateall_org. Until next time, this is the Educating All Learners Alliance podcast!