

Closing the Literacy Gap

Gunning, T.G. (2006)

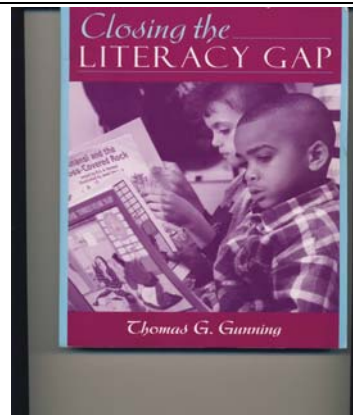
Pearson Education Inc.

Pp xi – 228

ISBN – 0- 205 – 45626 –x

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the No Child Left Behind Legislation, this book is timely in that it provides a variety of recommendations and suggestions to close the literacy gap. Thomas G. Gunning, the author of this book, *Closing the Literacy Gap* has been involved in the teaching of reading and writing for 20 years and has authored numerous books on literacy. Gunning targets as his readers educators in general and specifically those who are seeking to close the gap between achievers and non-achievers. The book would be welcomed by teachers, from kindergarten onwards, school administrators, coordinators, subject specialists, reading specialists, and special education teachers. Gunning tells right at the beginning that the suggestions in the book can be implemented by just one teacher or one school or one district. The 'snowball' effect of the implementing of these suggestions will result in additional learning. The book takes the view that it is possible to close the gap if the best possible literacy program is created, implemented and optimized.

SUMMARY

The book is divided into 12 chapters and at the end there is a reference and index. Chapters 1-3 establish the extent and causes of the gap and anchors it in schools with high levels of poverty to illustrate what they have done to help their underachievers. Chapters 4-9 will focus on the building blocks to help close the gap. These include language development skills, thinking skills, schematic knowledge, extensive reading, phonological awareness and word analysis before ending with affective factors to consider. Chapters 10-11 examine additional resources to utilize and organizational components to help close the gap. Finally, Chapter 12 draws on all the elements introduced in the earlier chapters to show how a program of literacy development can be structured and implemented.

Chapter 1—The Literacy Gap—establishes the existence and breadth of the gap and examines factors that cause the gap. This introductory chapter focuses on the 'persistent, pervasive, and significant disparity in educational achievement and attainment among groups of students' (p.1). The gap exists among and between students of different socio-economic backgrounds, racial, ethnic and political groups, economically advantaged and disadvantaged, privileged and less privileged and gender. NCLB has had a dramatic impact in that it has helped to expedite measures and push schools to make necessary improvements to help their students. Poverty is seen to be a significant factor that causes the gap. Poor health care, increasing mobility, limited literacy, limited resources in society coupled with schools coping with economically, educationally disadvantaged students, less qualified teachers, insufficient materials, inadequate funding, low expectations perpetuates and widens the gap.

In Chapter 2—Programs that Close the Gap—Gunning turns his attention to schools with high poverty levels to illustrate how they have managed to raise proficiency levels and achievement levels amongst learners. These 90/90/90 schools (Reeves 2000), have 90% or more students who are eligible for free or reduced price lunches, are members of ethnic minority groups and have attained academic standards in reading or another area. These schools illustrate that assessment is a blueprint for instruction not judgment because under-achieving students are provided with additional practice and instruction until they achieve proficiency. Gunning outlines that these successful schools have effective teachers and a balanced approach to all areas of literacy. To promote effective teaching Gunning recommends developing the necessary expertise in teachers, an effective administration to support teachers, meeting the needs of each child, and a common purpose, smaller groups as opposed to large classes, inculcating higher level thinking skills, a supportive coaching style, collaboration, flexibility and determination. Gunning then discusses the first step in creating an optimal program by looking at a vision, goals objectives and needs assessment.

Chapter 3—The role of Assessment in Closing the Gap—examines the important role of assessment in improving literacy levels. A successful program should match students' needs with appropriate materials and this means having to first determine levels of materials students can handle. Appropriate devices should be applied to ensure students are screened and those needing additional assistance are identified. Continuous program monitoring should be a regular feature in the program to help diagnose learner difficulties and problems and to measure learning outcomes.

In Chapter 4—Building language—Gunning talks about the importance of language as the basis of reading and writing. To quote from the text, “To close the literacy gap you must close the gap in language” (35). It is evident that language is best developed with talk and high quality instruction can be extremely useful to this end. Building language skills includes enhancing vocabulary skills. Considering the fact that children enter school with varying levels of vocabulary there is a need for a program to help reduce this disparity. After assessing what students know a suitable vocabulary program can be implemented utilizing a variety of techniques like reading aloud, text talk, wide reading, vocabulary notebooks, spurring interest in words, vocabulary activities, using imaging and setting goals.

Chapter 5—Building Higher level Thinking Skills and Comprehension—suggests ways in which higher level thinking skills and better comprehension can be fostered among learners. The author states most programs to close the gap emphasize basic skills and while these may improve test scores they do nothing for educational gains. Effective programs should equip learners with useful strategies like comparing, classifying, determining main ideas, making inferences, logical conclusions, predicting and evaluating. To teach higher order thinking skills a focus on comprehension can be useful. An effective way to foster comprehension is to use techniques like ReQuest, Reciprocal teaching, Questioning the Author, Accountable Talk, Using Question-Answer Relationships (QAR).

Chapter 6—Building Background through Informational Reading and Writing—sets the tone for Chapter 7. Informational texts are seen as vital for underachieving students in particular. Such texts enable learners to pick up the language of expository writing and learn new content.

Livingston et al (2004) tells us “The proliferation of new nonfiction books holds children’s attention, develops their curiosity, and contributes to their knowledge base, spurring future investigations into informational reading” (89). The chapter goes on to suggest a variety of ways to foster the reading of informational texts. Extensive reading can help deepen knowledge learners get from texts and help them to draw on that knowledge. Using content area materials to develop background knowledge and foster comprehension is another interesting way to foster the reading of informational texts. Aside from informational texts writing can be a useful skill to develop language skills as it is essentially a literacy tool. In writing learners not only increase content knowledge but they also develop thinking and writing skills. The author suggests the use of a common rubric to help provide clear standards for writing and assessing; increasing amount of time spent on writing, encouraging different kinds of writing tasks and more importantly providing the necessary guidance and instruction in writing. To illustrate these ideas a model program is described to show how it can be organized and implemented successfully.

Chapter 7—Using Extensive Reading to Close the Gap—focuses on the most effective initiative to optimize a program provide necessary practice – the reading abilities of all students. Extensive reading can be used to build background knowledge, vocabulary and reading skills and fluency among learners. The author maintains the importance of motivating the learners by providing them materials that are appropriate to ensure they obtain maximum gain and. A number of suggestions are provided to encourage reading among learners like book discussion groups, high quality instruction, using quizzes, and the role of libraries.

Chapter 8—Phonological Awareness and Word Analysis—Gunning posits ‘phonological awareness and letter knowledge are essential building blocks for beginning reading’ (117). This chapter focuses on activities to foster phonological awareness and word analysis like rhyming, blending, detecting beginning sounds, and segmenting words into sounds. Two approaches to phonics instruction are discussed sound by sound and in rime-on set patterns and strategies and activities to help readers deficient in phonics presented. Phonological processing Gunning argues is important as is word learning skills, morphemic analysis, contextual analysis, glossary and dictionary use. Word analysis skills ranging from phonics and phonological awareness to contextual analysis and dictionary skills are essential elements in an effective literacy program.

Chapter 9 is referred to as discussing the ‘heart of the program’ (xi)—The Effectiveness of Affective Factors. The earlier chapters focus on the technical aspects or how to of the literacy program but this chapter explores the *can do* that is necessary for a successful program. Having high expectations and trying harder, doing better are important in helping to close the literacy gap. What makes a program work is when teachers do not accept ‘failure from our students, having high expectations and being able to vocalize those expectations to students’ (147). Quality instruction means a teacher who cares, accepts no excuses and refuses to allow students to fail. High expectations and a caring attitude will result in a motivational curriculum and program. Providing students with tasks and activities they can carry out is important as is being aware of factors which impede student learning.

Chapter 10—Using Added Resources to Close the Gap—shifts to examining other sources that can be utilized. Tutoring by trained professional, volunteers, peers, cross age peers often provides students a boost to help them attain success. Schools can also do their fair share by offering extra hours for literacy instruction; conducting summer schools and equivalent

programs. The author also looks into the possibility of starting education early to gain more gap-closing time.

Having discussed all the skills and sources that can be exploited Chapter 11—Organizing to Close the Gap—talks about measures to put into motion a literacy program. These include the setting up of a literacy committee, having regular meetings with teachers, organizational factors and the roles of para-educators, test preparation, technology. In addition, the learners themselves need to take responsibility for their behavior and the classroom should encourage positive learning behavior. Special Education is also given prominence to ensure appropriate intervention is in place to benefit students.

In the final chapter—Creating a Literacy Improvement Plan—the author pulls together all the elements discussed from Chapters 1–11 to plan a program of improvement for students and a program of professional development for staff. This process of creating a literacy improvement program should begin with the creation of a mission statement from which goals and objectives are created. Then suitable activities can be introduced to meet students' needs. From time to time assessments have to be run to ensure students are making reasonable progress. This constant monitoring will mean revising the program if a particular objective is not being met or addressed. To ensure teachers possess the skills to run these programs professional development must be a part of the improvement program. Definite steps are outlined to help design suitable professional development program. This chapter does illustrate that it is possible to put together a successful literacy improvement plan that can help close the literacy gap.

EVALUATION

Closing the Literacy Gap is a book that is easy to read as it is organized well and written in a structured and easy to read style. The book provides numerous recommendations and feasible suggestions for closing the literacy gap. What is interesting about the book is that while it informs it also helps by providing checklists for educators wishing to assess and plan a program. These checklist provided at the end of each chapter is especially useful because it enables educators to determine the strengths and weaknesses of various parts of the literacy program. This sort of step-by-step assessment enables educators to identify parts of their program that need to be rethought and implement a different program if necessary. The author draws on his personal experience in designing a literacy program and the numerous examples of various literacy programs that have been extremely successful are provided throughout the book. In addition, the personal perspectives and model programs work like success stories urging the reader to explore in detail the implementation and optimization of a literacy program.

This book is a must have for all educators, whether they are classroom practitioners or administrators. It is an especially valuable resource to help in the planning, designing and implementing of a literacy improvement program. While the NCLB may have provided the boost needed in the USA for such a program, the recommendations and suggestions Gunning provides can be utilized by any educators in any part of the world who wants to improve achievement levels of students.

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