
Introduction

More than ever, in today's climate of heightened expectations for our nation's schools, principals are in the hot seat to improve teaching and learning. This is a book written primarily for school leaders, specifically school-based administrators, by three authors who currently are, or have been, in the proverbial hot seat for many years. However, by the very nature of its contents, this book has important implications for vice principals, preservice principal candidates, special education specialists, school counselors, and classroom teachers. The book is designed to improve the education of elementary school children of low socioeconomic status (low SES children)—who far too often come to school with low school-readiness skills—by preventing their misidentification as learning disabled (LD).

When educators don't clearly understand the criteria for identification of learning disabilities, don't recognize the difference between learning disabilities and low achievement, nor employ the resources available to assist low achievers, the possibility of elementary school children being misidentified as LD is more likely. This not only places children in special education settings unnecessarily but also prevents timely intervention to what may be the root cause of the poor performance, which, simply stated, is poor school readiness.

The Child Trends Data Bank (2007) reported that, in 2004, the average per student cost was \$7,552, and the average cost for special education was an additional \$9,369 per student, or \$16,921. That means that in 2004 it cost more than twice as much to educate a special education student as it did a regular student. Greene and Winters (2007) noted that, from 1977 through 2003, spending on special education services almost doubled due to the fact that the number of students served by special education increased by 76%. With LD placements increasing from 796,000 in 1977 to nearly 3 million in 2003, LD represented a particularly costly segment of the special education budget. A recent report published by IDEA Data shows that from 2001 through 2005 nearly half of all special education placements were in LD. In 2005, 2,780,218 students (ages 6–21), or 45% of all special education

students, received LD services. According to IDEA Data, the cost that year to educate 5.2% of the total student population equaled 11% of the total education budget (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Between 1997 and 2004, a consistently higher percentage of children diagnosed as LD came from low SES households (Child Trends Data Bank, 2007). It's possible that the increase in the percentage of low SES students identified as LD is because their behaviors, learning styles, and attending patterns—which differ from those exhibited by middle- and upper-class White students—influence their inappropriate referral to special education. In some cases, differences in these behaviors may be misinterpreted as a learning disability rather than cultural and learning differences.

This book for school leaders is designed to improve the education of low SES elementary school children with low school-readiness skills by identifying workable strategies leaders can use to prevent these students' misidentification as LD. It's built on the premise that the time and money spent on special education services will be better used if we focus on the needs of children with low school-readiness skills before their deficits become so great that neither intervention nor remediation will work, and the children's self-perceptions are so badly damaged that they quit trying to succeed and accept failure. It does so by sharing practical research from classrooms and schools that are meeting the varying developmental and environmental needs of low SES students. The book takes an in-depth look at schools that have realized effective turnarounds in remarkable time frames, resulting in increased academic performance, community support, business partnerships, and significant decreases in student behaviors that distract from academic success. It includes specific examples of the successful implementation of strategies that work in real classrooms, schools, and communities.

This book is about optimism as a central tenet of elementary schools' day-to-day teaching/learning programs and school-community relationships. We, the authors, believe that optimism is strongly connected to hope for the future and crucial to providing children with a positive vision of their future. Unfortunately, many (parents, teachers, students, and school administrators) in today's school communities have a tremendous capacity for creative pessimism. They don't expect success for low SES children—that is, they exhibit "deficit perception" regarding such children. And because children inevitably endeavor to fit our words, actions, and deeds into narratives of their own, it's essential that we, the education community, ensure that we're not providing them with a view of their futures that corrodes hope, produces undue fear, and denigrates the value of the only reality they have.

This book is also about how to build trusting relationships throughout the school community—among teachers, students, administrators, the school staff, and parents. A school community should never be mired in pessimism

but move continuously forward in a process of engaging in reform to ensure the academic achievement of students. We believe that school reform, including the building of trusting relationships, is about more than just choosing a model. It's about people making real changes and being able to trust each other to follow through on these changes.

More important, this book looks at the role that administrators' and teachers' deficit perception plays in the overall teaching/learning dynamic when working with low SES children who have low school-readiness skills. This book answers critical questions about how to turn a school into an integrated school-community organization in which optimism and positive relationships are the focal point of the day-to-day teaching/learning environment—that is, how school administrators and teachers identify the learning needs of children with low school-readiness skills and how school administrators and teachers work cooperatively with parents to prepare children with low school-readiness skills to meet grade-level expectations while avoiding special education or retention.

In addition to identifying educational and administrative strategies for working with low SES children, this book goes a step further and addresses the change management, staff selection, and performance management strategies necessary to the effective implementation of the needed educational strategies. The goal of this book is to present practitioners with workable strategies that are practical, low cost, and immediately applicable to the school environment.

Linking What Is Known to What Is Unknown

There are two terms that are often used interchangeably, *background knowledge* and *prior knowledge*. For the purpose of assessing the foundation of our students, we should consider the differences between these two terms. Prior knowledge takes into consideration the totality of students' learning and experiences. It's not content-area specific and is overarching. Prior knowledge is related to the environment, home language, cultural customs, religious beliefs, and family dynamics, to name just a few contributing factors. Background knowledge has a more finite meaning and is directly associated with the background knowledge a child has in relation to a specific topic. This may be a child's experience with the zoo, traveling on a train, reading maps, and so on. One of the teachers we observed told us that it's important that we accurately assess both of these areas of understanding in our students because there's a definite demarcation in the educational process of children when they stop learning to read and begin reading to learn. The amount of prior and background knowledge students have can be directly linked to the success they'll have in committing new learning to long-term memory where it can be stored and manipulated for continued use across the curriculum.

Elementary school students are confronted daily with new content and struggle to associate it to something in their schematic framework in order to organize and comprehend incoming information. To transition effectively from the learning-to-read stage to the reading-to-learn stage, children need strategies for associating new material with learning already in place. By associating new knowledge with existing understanding, students gain the ability to construct new meanings, change previous perceptions, and develop new frameworks to support higher levels of thinking and use of knowledge. When students lack adequate background knowledge, or are not provided with the stimulus needed to enable them to access this knowledge, they begin to encounter difficulties participating in and progressing through the general curriculum.

Education researchers have suggested that by assessing students' previous knowledge with a background questionnaire, a pretest, or other method (Angelo & Cross, 1993), you're taking a learner-centered approach to your teaching (National Research Council, 1999). If you know what they know, you're much better able to connect the course content to their previous knowledge. The process begins with some key questions because the contemporary view of learning is that learners construct new knowledge and understanding based on what they already know and believe (Cobb, 1994). The teachers we observed acknowledged that the responsibility for assessing the degree of background knowledge that's present is theirs. They said that they begin by asking themselves these questions:

employees and job applicants and all selection criteria and employment decisions must be based on job-related standards. In other words, any criteria used, information required or interview questions asked must be directly related to required job performance or be justified as a BFOQ [bona fide occupational qualification] for a particular job. (p. 79)

Any question you ask in an interview must, by law, address a BFOQ and/or the job description for the position you're filling. And whatever questions you ask in an interview you must ask of all candidates. You can't adjust the questions you ask based on any differences you perceive in their names, addresses, physical characteristics, and so on. To fill a position in a multicultural school, you can certainly ask all of the candidates whether or not they are fluent in a second language, but you can't ask an Asian-appearing candidate whether or not English is her first language. You can't ask a young woman whether or not she has children at home or intends to start a family soon.

Taking this a step further, even though your wish list might include adding more male teachers to your faculty, gender is *never* a BFOQ, and you can't limit your interviews and employment consideration to male candidates only. While you may wish for more Spanish-speaking teachers in your building, you can't limit your interviews or overall selection process to candidates who speak Spanish, unless the position you're filling is that of a Spanish language teacher.

Throughout the interview and selection process, it's up to you to ensure that the process is fair and in full compliance with antidiscrimination laws. Limit all of your questions and discussions to issues that are directly related to the school, its programs, and the particular requirements of the position you're filling.

Need a Second Opinion?

Sometimes you may need to be sure that the candidates you're interviewing will fit with the other members of a team. If this is your situation, it's fine to include members of that team in the interview process. We suggest that as team members who might provide you with the best input, consider using a parent, a staff member, and one or two teachers. And, if you decide to use an interview team, prepare the other members of the team as you have prepared yourself. Have them read the candidates' resumes and discuss the interview questions you've developed with them. Clarify with them what their role in the interviews will be and the information about the candidate on which it's most important for them to focus. And finally, make sure they know, before the process begins, the relative weight their opinions will have on the final