

50 Ways to Close the **Achievement** Gap THIRD EDITION

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Introduction

50 Ways to Achieve High-Performing Schools

Abandoning Simplistic Mindsets

The achievement gap problem, the most complex and compelling educational dilemma facing schools in the twenty-first century, has no universal solution; instead, there are “solutions” in combinations, because the problem is multicausal, historical, and multidimensional. This fact is not easily understood, because educators, legislators, foundations, think tank pundits, and policy wonks often frame the problem as unidimensional. When problems are so framed, their solution is similarly framed. But the fact that no single solution has shown itself to be viable anywhere over an extended time period suggests that something is missing. The most important piece that is missing is how the problem is conceptualized or framed.

The first important step to take in confronting the achievement gap problem is to abandon the idea that one single thing, or even a few things in combination, will crack this apparently baffling educational conundrum. And the very first factor to confront is that there is no single “achievement gap” but many kinds of gaps. Using a national educational longitudinal data set, Carpenter, Ramirez, and Severn (2006) found “not one but multiple achievement gaps, within and between groups” (p. 120) and “gaps between races may not be the most serious of them” (p. 123). Data from such research as this should provide convincing evidence that there are no silver bullets, flashy new curricula, technologies, computer

programs, textbooks, programs, administrative arrangements, or salary incentives that will solely be able to deliver an effective response.

Instead, the way to think about the achievement gap(s) issue is to conceptualize all of the possible causes of the gap(s), group them in some intelligible manner, and systematically begin to eliminate them as causes. When this is done, educators can begin to see that although perhaps most situations in which the gap(s) becomes manifest contain some common elements, others are about combinations of elements whereby arrangements are contingent on context, that is, “it all depends” on the interaction of teachers and students, actions and reactions to teaching, curriculum and curriculum surrogates (textbooks), and various types of assessments in use. Understanding what “it all depends” means is what this chapter is about.

THE PLAYERS AND THE CHALLENGES

Leaving aside for the moment the sociopolitical role of schools in perpetuating or changing a given social structure (a theme to which we will return), schools as specific kinds of human work structures define, divide, and allocate work tasks to a variety of actors within them to fulfill their societal mission. Within a democratic society, and particularly within American society, where authority is dispersed and diffused among at least three major governmental levels and where the values behind schooling differ rather widely and sharply on some issues, the perspective on the achievement gap and its causes is controversial because it is contested (see Fuller & Rasiyah, 2005).

Many parents of children of low-income groups see schools as inhospitable to their children’s success. They see school staff as indifferent at best, hostile at worst (see Sleeter, 2005). They often see their children in broken-down schools in need of great repair and their children not having access to the latest technology or a rich curriculum. The stark contrast whereby children of the suburbs attend bright and modern schools with greatly expanded curricular offerings and crammed with technology reminds them that they are not considered as important as the “rich white folks” on the other side of the city or county line (see Monahan, 2005).

Teachers find themselves under escalating pressure to improve test scores and to pay attention to centralized curricula. These curricula often are indifferent to teachers’ insights and that have embedded in them reforms to which teachers are expected to be compliant implementers (see Brooks, 2006), even when they see the disparities in the assumptions of the tests and find the constraints working against their best efforts to lift achievement as a whole outside of the narrow confines of the multiple-choice, lowest contract bidder award for mass-produced assessments. Teachers who at one time found teaching intrinsically rewarding in helping children learn and grow find an increasingly repugnant test preparation industry embedded in accountability legislation that is limiting their professionalism and destroying their joy in continuing to be teachers (Bushnell, 2003).

Politicians and legislators continue to bring to the equation their own set of biases. If they are from the private sector, they generally see the achievement gap question as one of the lack of motivation on the part of administrators and/or teachers believing that they have no incentives for improving schooling. Believing that the issue is simply a lack of willpower, they pass legislation that increase rewards and punishments, that install merit pay plans based on improved test scores, trying to get the attention of personnel within the schools to focus on “results,” and their definition of *results* is primarily improved test scores (Emery & Ohanian, 2004). Finding that schools are resistant to the changes they sometimes propose, they then move to create “alternative schools”: “end run” agencies designed to bypass the laggards. They subscribe to the idea that the public schools have no incentives to improve because they are a monopoly, a perspective advanced by the late Milton Friedman (1962).

This bias on the part of the for-profit sector believes that competition is the lever for school improvement. They see the issue as a run for money in a fluid marketplace where profits come to those who find a way to maximize return and lower costs. In fact, a recent report released by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce rated the respective states on educational reform with an index regarding “return on investment” (see J. Archer, 2007).

Bottery (2004) commented that transforming an educational problem into one framed by a supplier–consumer relationship built on the profit motive “is likely to subordinate and transfer values as goodwill, sincerity, fairness, as they are primarily used as instrumental values to service a commercial relationship” (p. 70). The transformation of these values within a for-profit mentality are oblivious to the concept of a public agency designed for the commonweal instead of a group of stockholders who want to make money (see Houston, 2006).

Caught in this maelstrom are school administrators. First charged with the maintenance of the institution, their stabilizing role is often maligned, because without stability there would be no organization to change, only one to bury. Balancing stability and change is no easy administrative task. A huge amount of energy is invested in making sure the school ship does not roll over or sink. Students have to be educated even under the most trying of circumstances and even when programs may be weak and the institution itself financially strapped.

The context of schooling, especially in urban settings where students are often most at odds with the middle-class culture and prevalent school routines, where school staff are often the least prepared to deal with the alienation of the communities in which they work, is the ground zero of public education (see Lucas, 1999). Poverty and social alienation, despair, anomie, violence of all kinds, drugs, domestic abuse, and gang cultures overlay school routines and practices. Administrators working in this environment are very hard pressed to envision or lead the kind of internal transformation required to close the achievement gap. And often, these school settings are the ones most fractious politically, where school boards are representative of the larger

community divisions and controversies, where members are the least schooled in the art of compromise, and personal and political agendas are pushed with strident urgency.

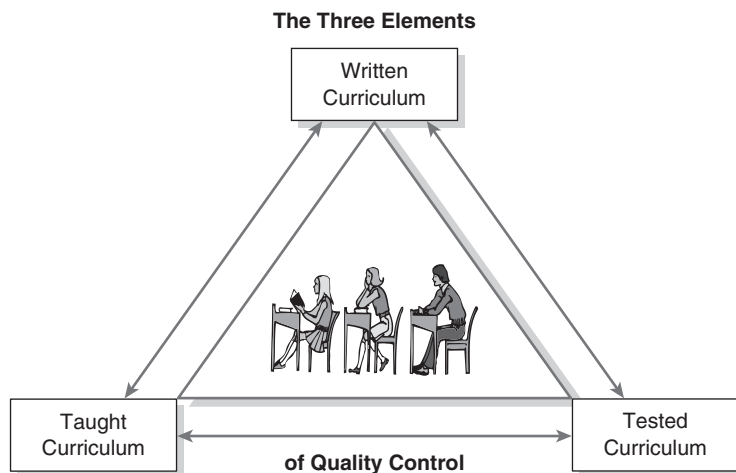
The clamor for “instant fixes” far exceeds the capacity of the schools to comply even when the desire is present and the complexity of the tasks somewhat clear. Too often, the demand for such fixes takes on the most egregious forms of micromanagement of the school administration imaginable. Added to this volatile mix is the inevitable cult of the personality of either the superintendent or individual board members. The cult of personality is the temptation to see the achievement gap as an issue that is responsive to the charisma of the leadership as opposed to the kind of internal, transformed work patterns that is the real nexus of the problem. It is to this issue that we now turn.

THE BASIC CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURE THAT FRAMES THE PROBLEM

The basic conceptual frame upon which all of the six standards and the 50 strategies are elaborated in this book is shown in Figure 0.1. This frame was first enumerated by English (1978) and later expanded (1987, 1988; also see English & Larson, 1996).

Schools and school systems are an example of one kind of human work organization. As such, schools are created not to turn a profit but to render an important social/cultural function of reproducing the most important values of any given society. Originally in the Western world formal schooling was reserved for the social elites, but with the creation of mass democracies and

Figure 0.1 The Three Elements of Quality Control



expanded voting franchise to nearly everyone, the function of the schools has been to prepare students to live and work in them. As the nature of work has changed, social alternatives for those who were ill prepared in schools has decreased, forcing the schools to keep students longer and to focus on enabling them to be more economically viable in a changing marketplace (see Labaree, 1988).

Today, the rhetoric about maintaining an international competitive edge in a global market place dominates much of the criticism from the commercial sector, even as it is recognized by some that the lack of a competitive “edge” is not an educational problem but a business problem (see Cuban, 2004). We see the achievement gap problem not fundamentally as a commercial problem with indexes of return on investment but as a moral one, and we believe that resolving the achievement gap issue is fundamentally about realizing the promise of public education as a ladder to the good life for all children, even as the evidence suggests the schools have never served the poor at any time very well in U.S. history (see Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brantlinger, 2003; Katz, 1973; C. Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Parenti, 1978; Tyack, 1974).

Within schools, the *written curriculum* consists not only of curriculum guides, curricular frameworks, and courses of study but also of a wide range of *curricular surrogates*. In most schools, a plethora of documents may be in use. Collectively, we call this group of documents *the curriculum in use*, but it is rarely a solitary document. Linking the curriculum in use to the extant teaching and the *tests in use* so that there is a focused linkage among all three is the definition of *quality control*. In this case, the measure of quality is how each of three components provides the basis for the definition of assessment results or outcomes. There is clearly a danger here, which is if the *tests in use* are cheap, one dimensional, culturally biased, and low-level indicators of the educational process, then looking good on them is counterproductive to providing quality education. We say much more about this later in the book, because we do not assume that a simple curriculum–test congruence is all that is necessary. We like very much John Dewey’s (1964) distinction written over a half century ago on this matter:

If you want schools to perpetuate the present order, with at most the elimination of waste and with such additions as enable it to do better what it is already doing, then one type of intellectual method . . . is indicated. But if one conceives that a social order different in quality and direction from the present is desirable and that schools should strive to educate with social change in view by providing individuals not complacent about what already exists, and equipped with desires and abilities in transforming it, quite a different method and content is indicated. (pp. 174–175)

With this caveat in mind, the six standards by which the 50 strategies are grouped in this book are shown in Figure 0.2. The key linkages to the other elements of quality control shown in Figure 0.1 are also described in Figure 0.2.

Figure 0.2 Quality Control, Six Standards, and Linkages to Close the Achievement Gap

Quality Control in Schools and School Systems		
<i>Curriculum In Use</i>	<i>Teaching</i>	<i>Assessment(s) in Use</i>
Standard 1: Establish a Well-Crafted, Focused, Valid, and Clear Curriculum to Direct Teaching	Standard 4: Use a Mastery Learning Approach and Effective Teaching Strategies	Standard 2: Provide Assessments Aligned With the Curriculum
Standard 3: Align Program and Instructional Resources With the Curriculum and Provide Student Equality and Equity	Linkage here to Standard 3 with alignment of resources for the classroom in the delivery of the curriculum	Linkage here to Standard 3 because assessment is usually the means to judge student equality and equity
Standard 5: Establish Curriculum Expectations, Monitoring, and Accountability	Linkage here to Standard 5 because it pertains to monitoring and accountability	Linkage here to Standard 5 because it pertains to accountability
Standard 6: Institute Effective District and School Planning, Staff Development, and Resource Allocation, and Provide a Quality Learning Environment	Linkage here to Standard 6 because it pertains to a quality learning environment	Linkage here to Standard 6 because it pertains to the effectiveness of resource allocation

ADVANTAGES OF FRAMING THE PROBLEM THIS WAY

The advantages of framing the achievement gap from this perspective are as follows.

1. The Problem Is Clearly a Complex and Systemic One That Defies Simplistic Antidotes

The basic problem in confronting the achievement gap concerns transforming the way educators and support staff conceptualize the work they do. So, in the beginning it is not about doing any one thing differently; instead, it is about changing *how we think* about the problem. Because there is no one thing that causes the achievement gap, but many things operating collectively in situated contexts, we have to think about approaching a complex, multifaceted problem in a diagnostic mode that tries to capture the variables and the key interactions and

then eliminating the major causative components one by one. Also, we have to envision this work as progressive and steady, informed by the understanding that it will be a combination of our actions that attains the results and that, furthermore, gains will not necessarily be uniform from year to year; instead, we should see steady gains year to year and expect some years to be more fruitful than others. We look for multiyear progress because organizations define the work to be done in a variety of ways, and one characteristic of organizations is stability. We see stability as a strength instead of a barrier, because once we alter the patterns of work it is reasonable to expect them to remain in place.

2. The Blame Game Becomes Unnecessary, Because Everyone Is Part of the Problem and Part of the Solution

Another key feature of conceptualizing the achievement gap in the manner described is that because everyone is part of the problem, everyone is then part of the solution. Also, because everyone is part of the problem, it makes no sense to engage in finger pointing or second-guessing. It just is not productive, and it clearly doesn't help. The idea should be to fix the problem and not fix the blame.

3. It Shifts the Focus From Fads to Foundational Issues

Once the achievement gap problem is seen as a matter of redefining the work and the work structures within school systems (see Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002), unproductive ways of defining and attacking the problem can be avoided. There are no quick fixes to shifting the definition of work and altering work structures and patterns in schools, so one can avoid spending time buying new technologies, new textbooks, programs that substitute for an effective curriculum, funding alternative schools, passing laws that up the ante for more rewards or punishments on the basis of test results, and finding new ways to re-fix the blame for the lack of progress based on who the students are or who their parents may be. The blame-the-victim game is totally unproductive and unethical, but it still goes on.

4. A New Sense of Realism and Hope Is Established

Not to be overlooked in framing the achievement gap problem in the manner we have chosen is that by grasping the complex and situated nature of its source and how to attack it we no longer have to bear the inevitable disappointments over the last promise made for the quick fix we thought might work. Instead, the problem is laid out in its complex form, we approach it more logically and more realistically, and we have a renewed sense of hope based on that realism. Our constituents no longer expect miracles and will begin to see that we are seeking a long-term strategy to remove the gap and that both practice and research support our choices.

SUMMARY

The achievement gap has been a long-standing issue in American public education (see Carpenter et al., 2006; Jencks, 1972; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ream, 2003). To date, no programs or approaches have erased it, although some actions in school systems have shown promise (see Snipes et al., 2002). In this chapter, we have set forth the basic conceptual frame to conceptualize the multidimensional nature of the gap issue and help define the means by which educators can begin to scope out a program of work and change to attack it successfully.