

Closing *the* Teaching Gap

Coaching for Instructional Leaders

Donald B. Bartalo
Foreword by Grant Wiggins



Contents

Foreword	vii
<i>Grant Wiggins</i>	
Preface	ix
My Beliefs About Instructional Leadership	x
Eight Fundamental Tenets for an Instructional Leader	xii
Connecting Your Work and Experience	xv
About the Book	xvi
Learning Extensions	xxiii
Acknowledgments	xxvii
About the Author	xxix
Bridge to Chapter 1	xxx
Chapter 1: The “Teaching Gap”	1
What Is the Teaching Gap?	1
Lessons From the Teaching Gap	3
Reinforcing the Need to Close the Teaching Gap	9
Journal Reflection	11
Try THIS: Gap Analysis	12
Leadership Team Activity	13
Bridge to Chapter 2	14
Chapter 2: Doing the Right Things	15
Data Informed, Not Data Driven	15
Developing Credibility	16
Finding Strengths in Others	17
Getting Into Classrooms	18
Knowledge, Not Packaged Programs	20
Learning From Master Teachers	21

Learning From Students	24
Not Enough Time?	27
Try It in the Classroom	31
Journal Reflection	33
Try THIS: Matter Over Time	36
Leadership Team Activity	36
Bridge to Chapter 3	38

Chapter 3: Creating Better Learning

Opportunities for Students 39

Teaching Methods and Learning Opportunities	39
How Do Students Learn Best?	43
Methods Versus Beliefs	46
The Culture of Teaching	50
Journal Reflection	64
Try THIS: What Is Behind the Method?	65
Leadership Team Activity	66
Bridge to Chapter 4	67

Chapter 4: Helping Teachers Learn More

About Teaching 69

Introduction	69
What Is Good Teaching?	74
Selecting the Best Teaching Methods	75
Mirror on Their Practice	79
Peer Review of Teaching	80
Peer Observations	81
Teacher-Led Teaching Circles	83
Teacher-Led Lesson Study	84
Teacher-Led Learning and Improvement	86
Journal Reflection	90
Try THIS: Practice What You Preach	91
Try THIS: Ask Teachers	91
Leadership Team Activity	92
Bridge to Chapter 5	94

Chapter 5: Successfully Leading Instructional

Change 95

Introduction	95
Aligning Practice and Beliefs	99

Changing Methods Where Students Are Not Succeeding	100
Developing a “Theory of Action” Perspective	104
Leading Change Perceived to Be Second Order	110
Overcoming Resistance to Desired Instructional Change	117
Strengthening Instruction	121
Journal Reflection	125
Try THIS: Bringing Theory and Practice Together	126
Leadership Team Activity	126
Bridge to Chapter 6	128

**Chapter 6: Developing Yourself as
an Instructional Leader 131**

Introduction	133
Who Am I?	134
Connect, Not Just Communicate	135
Persuading and Inspiring	138
Giving and Receiving Feedback	139
Reacting to Assessments and Standards-Based Accountability	143
Leading in a Time of Transition	144
The Need for Courage	144
Journal Reflection	147
Try THIS: What Is Your True North?	148
Leadership Team Activity	149
Bridge to Chapter 7	150

Chapter 7: Shared Instructional Leadership 153

Introduction	153
Strengthening Shared Instructional Leadership	157
Grade and Department Level	159
Collaboration	163
Working Relationships	166
Shared Instructional Leadership in Action	167
Aligned Instructional Leadership Team for School Improvement	169
Journal Reflection	174
Try THIS: Reality Check	175
Leadership Team Activity	176
Bridge to Chapter 8	177

Chapter 8: Closing the Teaching Gap	179
Learning From Success Stories	179
When Is Good Instructional Leadership Going On?	207
Leverage Your Strengths: X's and O's	210
Closing the Teaching Gap	214
Try THIS: Give Yourself Credit	217
Leadership Team Activity	218
Final Reflection	219
Answers to In-Your-Head Quizzes	221
References	223

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Foreword

We all know the knock against education books and articles—nice ideas, but how practical is this? What can you *do* with it? Well, Don Bartalo has delivered: while built on a coherent framework of eight important reform tenets, the book is jam-packed with one good practical strategy after another for how to turn good ideas into effective and manageable action.

Nor are the practical ideas trivial or insufficiently detailed (as so often happens, even in books that aspire to be useful). He offers numerous useful tips on how to better manage time—a critical ability of school leaders. He describes in detail how key activities (such as Master Classes and developing a local belief system about learning) can be conducted for maximal ownership. And he grounds the advice and protocols in sophisticated ideas made accessible, such as his treatment of the theory-in-action work of Chris Argyris and colleagues.

As helpful and numerous as are the rich array of suggestions and their theoretical backing, Don has done something deeper here—something of signature importance in any book that aspires to be truly helpful: the book gives readers the courage to act. There is a can-do spirit that pervades the text; there is a no-nonsense optimism that led me to think—yes, *that's* do-able, *that* would work, even as a somewhat untested principal I could surely do *that*. In tone as well as in substance, therefore, this manual will enable readers to move forward with challenging reforms in the strong belief that change *is* possible.

By offering one useful action after another, by weaving in words of wisdom from veteran educators, by helping the reader see the link between concrete tips and overarching ideas and theory of action, by closing the book with one excellent and detailed

success story after another, the book can perhaps best be summed up by an advertising slogan used by a large home-improvement chain a few years ago: you can do it; we can help.

No serious school leader should be without this book!

—Grant Wiggins

Understanding by Design, coauthor

Schooling by Design, coauthor

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BRIDGE TO CHAPTER 1

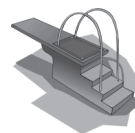
This book has been designed to be your coach. If you take an active role as a reader and respond to the many invitations to apply new thinking and learning to your work, it will help you to use proven instructional leadership methods and strategies to improve teaching and learning. The challenges you face as an experienced or as an emerging instructional leader with responsibilities for raising academic achievement during a time of unprecedented accountability demand your full attention. Let the book help prepare you as a highly effective instructional leader.

Since this book is about improving instructional leadership and closing the teaching gap, it is essential that the reader understands what is meant by the *teaching gap*. The purpose of Chapter 1 is to define the teaching gap and to explain how closing the teaching gap parallels the path to becoming a better instructional leader. The idea of a teaching gap was first introduced by Stigler and Hiebert (1999), and so it is important to make sure that the reader has at least a working knowledge of their research findings and principles of improvement. What follows is a summary of Stigler and Hiebert's conclusions about improving teaching together with some direct implications for instructional leaders.

CHAPTER ONE

The “Teaching Gap”

“The teaching gap we describe refers to the differences between the kinds of teaching needed to achieve the educational dreams of the American people and the kind of teaching found in most American schools. Although many of the American teachers we observed were highly competent at implementing American teaching methods, the methods themselves were severely limited.



The teaching gap becomes even more significant when one realizes that while other countries are continually improving their teaching approaches, the United States has no system for improving. The United States is always reforming but not always improving. The most alarming aspect of classroom teaching in the United States is not how we are teaching now but that we have no mechanism for getting better. Without such a mechanism, the teaching gap will continue to grow.”

—*The Teaching Gap*, Stigler and Hiebert,
2009 (pp. xviii–xix)

WHAT IS THE TEACHING GAP?

The Teaching Gap, by James W. Stigler and James Hiebert (1999, updated in 2009), is based on a comparative analysis of two international studies of teaching (Third International Mathematics

and Science Study—TIMSS). Although they studied mathematics teaching, the research of Stigler and Hiebert (1999) was selected to anchor this book because it represents the most in-depth look at teaching ever assembled. For this reason, the findings of Stigler and Hiebert (1999) have direct application for improving the teaching methods in any subject area. The major findings from their first comprehensive video study of classroom teaching in Japan, Germany, and the United States, summarized below, have implications for instructional leaders.

Finding #1: Teaching, Not Teachers, Is the Critical Factor (pp. 10–11). Americans tend to focus on factors of competence (e.g., more rigorous certification process) rather than the methods used by teachers in the classroom. Even the best teachers, the ones judged the most competent, cannot be effective if the methods they are using do not promote better student learning. Put simply, it is what teachers say and do in the classroom that makes the difference in learning. For example, teaching methods include the decisions and choices teachers make when establishing the role of the students, how students solve problems, asking questions, explaining concepts, assigning homework, lecturing, teaching mini-lessons, giving demonstrations, setting up learning experiences and activities, and facilitating projects. The methods used greatly impact results. This finding is significant for an instructional leader to understand because there is a great need to help teachers learn more about teaching from their own experience and work in the classroom. The challenge for you as an instructional leader is to learn how to help teachers learn more about teaching—traditional professional development will not do it. “By seeing teacher learning as necessarily tied to the study of teaching, U.S. educators can begin to change the culture of teacher training” (Stigler & Hiebert, 2009, p. 33).

Finding #2: Teaching Is a Cultural Activity (pp. 11–12). The international video studies revealed that while teaching methods vary greatly from country to country, the teaching methods used by teachers in the same country are very similar. Stigler and Hiebert learned that much of what happens in the classroom is determined by what they called the “DNA of teaching.” The teaching methods are handed down from generation to generation through a *cultural code* that is present in most classrooms. This code is the main reason