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Introduction

Close the achievement gap: Simple strategies that work

Introductory comments

There comes a time in a person's life when they realise a purpose that is far greater than any they have been presented with before – a purpose that serves more than their material needs, more than the needs of their family, their community or their own physical well-being. This purpose becomes clear on a spiritual level. It does not serve a need but shows itself as a moral imperative, clearly defined. This book is such an imperative.

It is impossible to paint the picture of impoverished children with a single brush full of one colour from society's palette. Impoverished children come from the poorest circumstances anyone can imagine. They come from the urban centres of our cities where suburbs form visible boundaries that skirt around the cities' exterior edges. They come from the country, hidden away in the hollows of mountainous terrain and the expanse of wide-open fields. Children of poverty come from towns among the rugged desert landscape.

Poverty is the root cause of their circumstances; and, more importantly, poverty creates a debilitating mindset that affects the survival and the success of these unfortunate children. Poverty creates a mindset about the innate abilities, the background experiences and the apparent willingness of these children to learn.

**Poverty creates a
debilitating
mindset.**



This mindset is so firmly in place, it is next to impossible to change it. In fact, the hardest hurdle to overcome in educating the children of poverty is this unshakable belief that they are not as capable as children born to more advantageous circumstances.

In a sentence, teachers, parents and even the students themselves have low expectations for academic success. Teachers don't teach these kids as much, parents don't attend to their schooling as much and students don't strive to achieve as much. And, in the end, as outrageous as it may sound, these low expectations become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

These data on the achievement gap tell part of this story of low expectations and the children of poverty in the discussion that follows. Yet, even with these data clearly stated, the fact is that all students can achieve, will achieve and should prove these data wrong in schools of quality.

Society must come to believe that it is possible for all students to achieve, for, when a given population decides it is possible, it truly is. Children not only learn, children not only survive, but children thrive in these settings of high expectations, no excuses and rigorous academic environments.

Achievement gap facts

Facts defining the achievement gap

- 45% of Australians have low literacy skills. This means they have difficulty coping with information demands of everyday life and work in a modern society. Source:

Nationmaster.com, retrieved 8 September 2005 from www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Education-in-Australia.

- 80% of Aboriginal children are illiterate. Source: Marshall, A., 2004, *The Real Solution to the Aboriginal Disaster*, Australian News Commentary.
- There are up to 1.3 million children living in poverty in Australia. Source: Community Affairs References Committee, 2004, *A hand up, not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty*, Commonwealth of Australia.
- By Year 3, 27% of students are not meeting national literacy standards. This percentage increases the longer students stay at school. Source: Castleton, G & Mc Donald, M., 2002, *A decade of literacy: policy, programs and perspectives*, Brisbane: ALNARC, Griffith University.
- 53% of students from low socio economic backgrounds fail to meet national literacy standards by Year 5. Source: Castleton, G & Mc Donald, M., 2002, *A decade of literacy: policy, programs and perspectives*, Brisbane: ALNARC, Griffith University.
- 44% of students from non English speaking backgrounds fail to meet national literacy standards by Year 5. Source: Castleton, G & Mc Donald, M., 2002, *A decade of literacy: policy, programs and perspectives*, Brisbane: ALNARC, Griffith University.
- Literacy is no longer defined in terms of a basic threshold of reading ability mastered by almost all of those growing up in developed countries. Rather, literacy is now seen as how adults use written information to function in society ... Source: Castleton, G & Mc Donald, M., 2002, *A decade of literacy: policy, programs and perspectives*, Brisbane: ALNARC, Griffith University.



- The grade four reading slump is a myth. It's a slow decline, getting further behind. Source: Barbara Taylor, personal communication, 12 July 2003.
- Achievement on literacy hasn't risen for 70 years. Source: Joyce, 1999, p. 129.
- Speaking is the number one skill for getting a job. Reading, writing, listening and speaking skills are needed in the work place. Speaking is often overlooked and is critical for job interviews.
- The only behaviour measure that correlated significantly with reading scores is the number of books in the home; 61% of low-income families have no books at all in their homes. Source: U.S. Department of Education, retrieved 24th April, 2003 from www.firstbook.org/about/factsonliteracy.html

Effects of the achievement gap

- Parents with professional jobs speak about 2153 words an hour to their toddlers; those in poverty only about 616. A five-year-old child from a low-income home knows 5000 words, while a middle-class child already knows 20,000 words. Source: Hart and Risley, 2003.
- 40% of all mathematics errors on state tests are reading errors. Source: Joyce, 1999, p.129.
- There is no grade six maths test ... it's cumulative; it's is a 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 test. Source: Barbara Taylor, personal communication, 12 July 2003.

40% of all mathematics errors on state tests are reading errors.

- Reading: Primary school: 90% narrative text; Secondary school, 90% informational text. The change in the type of reading affects the



students' scores. Source: Barbara Taylor, personal communication, 12 July 2003.

- Informational text for Grade 1: 3% of reading (2.6 min./day); in Grades 2 to 5, 19% of reading. The amount of time spent reading informational text impacts student achievement. Source: Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez, in press.
- Compared to university graduates, people who don't complete high school are three times as likely to be unemployed. Source: Community Affairs References Committee, 2004, *A hand up, not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty*, Commonwealth of Australia.
- The risk of poverty increases with lower qualifications. Source: Community Affairs References Committee, 2004, *A hand up, not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty*, Commonwealth of Australia.
- Unskilled employment opportunities now make up only 40% of all available jobs. Source: Community Affairs References Committee, 2004, *A hand up, not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty*, Commonwealth of Australia.
- 60% of adult prisoners [NSW] are not functionally literate or numerate. Source: Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, Aust, retrieved 2 June 2005, www.lawfoundation.net.au/access/prisoners/background.html
- 90% of young people in custody [NSW] did not complete Year 9. Source: Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, Aust, retrieved 2 June 2005, www.lawfoundation.net.au/access/prisoners/background.html

