Catching Up

Recent health and social crises have highlighted stark inequities in our educational system and brought much needed attention to the long-standing, pervasive literacy gap, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Fortunately, there has been a renewed determination to narrow the gap by accelerating learning. The gap between the most accomplished and least accomplished readers at every level of education is significant. According to the latest statistics from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019a), the following percentages of students are reading below the basic level, which is a conservative estimate of grade-level reading:

- Grade 4: 34%
- Grade 8: 27%
- Grade 12: 30%

More telling than the statistics is the lack of confidence that underperforming learners have in their reading ability. In a questionnaire administered to the fourth graders, a large percentage of lower-performing students reported that they believed they would have difficulty with the following:

- figuring out the meaning of a word they don't know by using other words in the text;
- explaining the meaning of something they have read;
- figuring out the main idea of a text;
- finding text in a reading passage to help them answer a question on a test;
- recognizing when they do not understand something they are reading; and
- recognizing the difference between fact and opinion in a text. (NAEP, 2019b)

Increase in the Literacy Gap

Unfortunately, because of the disruption of learning caused by the pandemic, the gap has increased. For the overall population, there has been a significant decrease in rate of learning in both math and reading, with Black, Latinx, and students living in poverty suffering the largest decreases (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020; Renaissance Learning, 2021a).

Causes of the gap are many and varied and include poverty, racism, inadequate health care, inadequate instruction and resources, underserved populations, and widespread inequity. In a sense, the literacy gap is actually an opportunity gap. Segments of the population have not been provided with the learning opportunities they require. The focus of this text is on providing the resources and instructional steps that classroom teachers, intervention specialists, and literacy coaches can take to narrow the gap by accelerating progress. Special attention will be paid to Black and Latinx students, students living in poverty, and students who have reading disabilities, since these are the groups for whom the gap is widest and who have been most adversely affected by interruptions to learning.

In fact, students living in poverty, which is the largest group of underserved students and includes disproportionate numbers of Black, Latinx, and struggling readers, make just as much progress in elementary school reading as do middle class students. In 1982, two sociologists and an educator began what came to be known as the Beginning School Study in order to explore how social structure helps or hinders young children's schooling. "The purpose was to observe many outcomes—not just failures and problem behaviors, but evidence of satisfactory school performance and personal well-being" (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014, p. xvi). They followed 790 randomly selected Baltimore first graders for 23 years through elementary school and into adulthood (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997; Alexander et al., 2014). They discovered that children living in poverty started first grade behind their middle-class peers. However, they achieved the same rate of progress that the middle-class children made during the school year. As the researchers commented in their text, "The major finding of the book is that schools themselves go far toward mitigating inequality but are not perceived as being capable of doing so" (p. 15). Unfortunately, during the summer months, children of poverty fail to gain ground and may even lose ground, as much as 2 months in most studies. Thus, as the years go by, unless the initial gap is compensated for and the summer loss halted, the students fall farther and farther behind.

The issue then is that schools serving children living in poverty and other underserved populations must do more than schools serving the middle class. Extra effort and resources need to be devoted to coping with the initial beginning school gap and the summer slide.

Roadmap to Closing the Gap

The purpose of this text is to provide a roadmap for boosting literacy achievement. The focus is on building phonics, syllabic analysis, morphemic analysis, silent and oral fluency, and overall reading ability. Applying skills by reading meaningful materials is emphasized.

When beginning a journey such as this, it helps to have a means of transportation in addition to a map. In addition to creating a map, this text provides access to needed techniques, assessments, and materials. Although some commercial materials and programs are described, the emphasis is on supplying access to resources that are of high quality but are free and easily acquired so that budgets or logistics don't become an issue.

The emphasis is also on building on the resources that you already have. For instance, the text strongly recommends implementing a robust program of independent reading so that students can apply their skills. You may already have an effective program. If so, you can use recommendations in the text and related resources to strengthen your program's capability for closing the gap. Chances are you will find that because the gap has widened, more of your students are reading below grade level, so you will need both additional materials at lower reading levels as well as materials for boosting their reading levels.

Principles for Accelerating Progress

The following principles for boosting progress are based on an examination of the research on accelerating literacy, programs in which literacy gaps have been narrowed or closed, and personal experience with below-level readers.

Have High Expectations That Gaps Can Be Closed

The first principle is the belief that gaps can be closed and the students whom you work with will succeed. This belief will spill over to your students, who may have lost faith in their ability to learn the skills they need. In their extensive study of classroom instruction in grades 3–12, researchers from TNTP (formerly the New Teacher Project; 2018) found that having high expectations closed the learning gap by 5 months. Teachers who had high expectations for their students provided their students with more challenging assignments and the strong instruction and support they needed to complete those assignments. Success builds on success. When students see that they are being successful, they are more willing to put in more effort, which leads to more success.

Closing the gap doesn't have to be arduous or costly, and it can begin early. Using Khan Academy Kids for 20 minutes a day for 3 months, 4- and 5-year-olds

from low-income families made substantial gains in their emergent literacy skills. Scores on a preliteracy assessment moved up from the 34th percentile to the 47th percentile (Chary et al., 2020). As David Arnold, one of the researchers who conducted the experiment, commented, "We feel this new app from Khan has the potential to help level the playing field to benefit these kids" (University of Massachusetts–Amherst, 2020).

Boosting progress can be an individual effort. Each of us has the power to narrow the gap for students whom we come in contact with. By providing appropriate instruction and guidance, we can close the gap one student at a time.

Provide Additional Time as Needed and Use It Effectively

In a sense, time is the great enemy of closing the gap. Closing the gap means that students who are behind must make not only average progress but also progress over and above average so that they can catch up. There are two issues involved: arranging for more time and using time well. Schools need to set aside additional time for literacy instruction. In the elementary school, time set aside might range from 60 minutes to 2½ hours each day. However, that time should be protected. No announcements, no specials, no interruptions. In some schools, pullout programs are not held at that time, so children aren't leaving their literacy block to attend a reading intervention or other special programs. Literacy intervention should be additive in order to optimize its impact. The ideal is a 100/100 class: 100% of the students are on task 100% of the time. Even the best teachers fail to achieve that standard, but they do hit 90/90 (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2002). Through carefully planned routines and transitions, they're able to make the most of time.

Not too long ago, a school district in the State of Washington pulled off a near miracle in accelerating the reading achievement of its below-level students (Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007). Despite having a high percentage of students who were eligible for a free or reduced-fee lunch, the school district managed to boost the level of its students' reading so that 90% were reading at or above grade level. At the start of the intervention, just 57% of pupils were reading at grade level. The secret of their success? Added time and instruction. District professionals calculated that in the average classroom, students made a year's progress when 60–80 minutes were devoted to daily reading instruction. In general, students who were a year behind would need an additional 60 minutes or so of daily instruction to gain an added year. They would need a minimum of 120 minutes of instruction each day to gain a year's extra growth. Of course, this catch-up time could be spread out. It need not be presented in a block.

However, using time efficiently isn't the same thing as using it well. Although time on task is an essential component of an effective program, if the task is too easy, too difficult, or not educationally valid, the time is wasted. A more appropriate measure of time use is academic learning time. Academic learning time (ALT) is the

amount of time a student spends attending to relevant academic tasks while performing those tasks with a high rate of success (Berliner, 1984; Caldwell, Huitt, & Graeber, 1982; McLeod, Fisher, & Hoover, 2003). In other words, students engaged in ALT are learning or extending skills and strategies that would make them better readers.

Recently, I worked with Angela (pseudonym), a third grader who was significantly behind, but I was allocated just 20 minutes of instructional time, which was in addition to time spent in the regular classroom program. In a way, this was a blessing. It made me focus on what was most essential. I stressed the skills that assessment and observation indicated were most crucial. I was extra careful to make sure that I wasn't presenting skills or patterns that had already been mastered. When presenting a new pattern or new words, I listed them on the board and asked Angela to read any items that she knew. If she knew some of the words, we skipped those and focused on the ones she didn't know. If it turned out that she knew a skill I was about to present, we moved on to the next skill.

With time shortened, Angela was fully engaged for virtually every minute of the session. As a result, she made maximum progress in a minimum amount of time and ended up reading on a third-grade level. Despite having a significant difficulty learning to read, Angela gained a year and a half in 7 months.

Provide Explicit, Systematic Instruction

The more time spent with direct instruction, the larger the gains. As Fielding, Kerr, and Rosier (2007) noted, "Students learn more quickly with direct instruction than they do with seatwork, entry tasks, homework, and other teaching techniques involving non-eyeball-to-eyeball teaching or practice time" (p. 231). The district that Fielding and colleagues were describing implemented a four-part intervention program: assessment to find where the students are and what they needed to make progress, proportional increases in direct instructional time, teaching needed skills, and monitoring their learning to make sure they are learning needed skills and are making adequate progress. As noted above, a key element is providing proportional increases in instructional time. A third grader who is 2 years behind needs more additional instruction than a student who is just 1 year behind.

Provide Effective Practice

Systematic instruction needs to be complemented by systematic and adequate practice. High-quality practice activities for foundational skills include actively working with words in practice tasks, such as sorting and assembling words, but by far, the best practice is reading texts that incorporate the skills and words that have been taught. Students vary in the amount of practice they need. Knowing that students are behind and wanting to accelerate their progress, there is a tendency to push

ahead before students have mastered current skills, for instance, introducing long vowels before students have a solid grasp of short vowels. Reading programs typically provide the amount of reading material needed by the average learner. But some students need more practice and application. Working with students in an elementary school who struggled with their reading, I was fortunate to have a principal who provided me with an extensive library of children's books so that the tutors were able to supply students with the added reading material that they needed. As a result, the students made significant progress.

Provide High-Quality Materials on the Appropriate Level

Along with providing students extra reading material if they need it, it is absolutely essential that the material be on the appropriate level of difficulty. In general, students should recognize 95–98% of the words in a text, with 98% being the preferred rate of accuracy. An accuracy rate at 90% and below, which is the word recognition criterion for frustration in many systems, means that the students are meeting so many unknown words that they would have difficulty understanding what they were reading, would have difficulty using context clues, and would probably feel frustrated.

There is a continuing controversy about whether students should be provided with reading materials that are on their grade level or reading level. This issue is critical. Because of interruptions in schooling, there has been a significant increase in the number of students reading below grade level. The preponderance of evidence indicates that students do better when they are functioning on or close to their reading level. In a study of below-level readers who were also second-language learners, the key factor in the amount of progress they made was the number of texts each student read at 98% or higher accuracy (Ehri, Dreyer, Flugman, & Gross, 2007). Conversely, reading texts at the 90–97% level had a negative correlation with progress. The authors of the study concluded, "The reading achievement of students who received Reading Rescue tutoring appeared to be explained primarily by one aspect of their tutoring experience—reading texts at a high level of accuracy, between 98% and 100%" (p. 441). As Allington and Gabriel (2012) note:

> Research shows that reading at 98 percent or higher accuracy is essential for reading acceleration. Anything less slows the rate of improvement, and anything below 90 percent accuracy doesn't improve reading ability at all. . . . When students read accurately, they solidify their word-recognition, decoding, and word-analysis skills. Perhaps more important, they are likely to understand what they read—and, as a result, to enjoy reading. (p. 11)

Hattie and Yates (2014) caution that our minds have limitations and when these limitations are exceeded, shallow thinking results. They recommend following the

"Goldilocks principle of providing tasks that are neither too easy, nor too hard" (p. xiii).

This doesn't mean that students shouldn't read challenging text. All students should have the opportunity to read texts that stretch them. It is important for students to be taught to read challenging text so that they experience growth, especially if they are reading below grade level. Even if reading below-level texts, they should be asked higher-level questions that deepen their thinking and understanding.

Although the research indicates that reading reading-level text is the preferred approach, there are occasions when students will encounter texts that are above their reading level. They may need to read required on-level subject matter texts. As Shanahan (2019) points out, previewing potentially difficult vocabulary and other scaffolding techniques can provide accessibility to text. Stahl (2012) reports the successful use of shared reading to scaffold the reading of advanced text. In shared reading, the class reads along with the teacher and the students may also read along with a partner. However, Stahl cautions that this should not replace small instructional-level reading groups or independent reading. If the text is digital, students might also make use of embedded glossaries and text-to-speech or read-along features.

Most educational materials and many children's books have their readability levels indicated. Sites such as AR Bookfinder™ and Titlewave® provide readability levels for most children's books. However, at the early levels, readability measures are most effective if they indicate the foundational skill level needed to read the book. For instance, books would be classified as being on a short-*a* level or long-*e* level, meaning that students would be able to read short-*a* books if they have learned short-*a* patterns and long-*e* books if they acquired long-*e* patterns. Go to *buildingliteracy.org* (the Free Resources tab) to find *Books Leveled by the Decodability-Index* for a listing of books and articles leveled by the skills needed to read them and also an instrument for leveling books in this way. Of course, the difficulty of the materials that students read should increase as they gain in skill so that students are continually moving into more advanced skills and are reading at higher levels.

Foster Self-Teaching

Providing materials on the appropriate level is especially important because it enables self-teaching, which is a critical process. According to the self-teaching hypothesis, once novice readers can segment words and blend sounds into words and have acquired some basic phonics skills, they can build their word-recognition skills through reading (Share, 1995). Coming across a word that is unfamiliar such as *sack*, they use their knowledge of *s*/s/, *a*/a/, and *k*/k/ and read the word. They add to their repertoire of known patterns the *ck*/k/ spelling, which is further reinforced when they meet words such as *back* and *pack*. Context is often used in self-teaching to check decoding. For instance, a student struggling to learn the final-*e* pattern

reads the word *pine* as *pin*, but then sees that the word *pin* doesn't fit the sense of the sentence "The bird made its nest in a pin tree" and rereads it, substituting *pine* for *pin*. This encounter helps build the student's grasp of the final-*e* pattern. This is an example of why extensive reading is such an important part of building decoding skills. It gives students a chance to apply and build on their skills and make corrections. They apply what they know to learn more. But it doesn't work if the text has too many challenging words and the student is unable to use context as an assist.

Self-teaching begins early. It may start at about the time that students have learned most of the consonant correspondences and short vowels. Self-teaching in increasingly more advanced forms continues for a lifetime, but is especially important in the beginning stages of learning to read.

Adopt a Do-Whatever-It-Takes Attitude

This means trying alternative techniques, providing extra sessions, working on motivation, using technology, and providing more practice or whatever else might be required to move students forward.

Strengthen the Core Program

Accelerating progress should start with taking a close look at the core program and seeing how it might do a better job of accelerating progress. Because the gap has widened and there may be a significant number of students who are behind because they missed instruction, more time and resources will most likely need to be added to the core program. In a recent study, Chu, Clay, and McCarty (2021) of the Center for Public Research and Leadership found that the need to bolster core programs is especially prevalent in schools serving students with the greatest academic needs:

> In sites that serve large populations of low-income, Black, Latinx, and multilingual learners, concerns about the materials' capacities to meet students' needs were more common than in sites serving majority white or middle-class students. For instance, in Hartford, where a large proportion of students are multilingual, teachers and leaders reported that some curriculum resources were insufficiently tailored to the needs of their students, particularly because they included vocabulary that was inaccessible for students who were learning English. (p. 22)

MEETING THE NEEDS OF ENGLISH LEARNERS

Many digital programs are available in Spanish and other languages as well as English. Students may not realize that they can choose to have the program presented in a language other than English. Many programs also have a translation feature so that students can have unfamiliar words or whole texts translated into their home language.

Find Out Where Students Are

All students should be screened, generally at the beginning of the year or when they transfer into the school. With the literacy gap now wider than ever, it is all the more important to find out where students are in their literacy development and take it from there. There is a temptation to begin at the beginning and reteach skills. However, this wastes valuable time and will bore students who have mastered the skills. As Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2021) recommend in *Distance Learning Playbook*, use "methods for discovering what students already know in order to minimize wasted instructional time such that we can focus on needed learning experiences" (p. 3). To paraphrase a popular TV ad, "Only teach them what they need." This is especially true of the foundational skills of phonics and syllabic analysis. TNTP (2020) recommends identifying the content knowledge and skills that students might struggle with and addressing those that are most critical.

Monitor Progress

All students' progress should be monitored three times a year to make sure that the program is working and that students are making adequate progress. Struggling students should be monitored monthly, biweekly, or weekly. Progress should also be monitored informally on an ongoing basis. Instructional adjustments should be made as needed.

Make Sure That Students Have the Resources They Need

If distance learning is involved, whether for classes or home assignments, find out whether students have the devices they need and can use them effectively, have broadband Internet access or hotspots, and the technical support they need. Also work with the home so that students have the support they need to complete assignments. Most important of all, make sure that students know how to use the required technology.

Read and Write in All Subject Areas

In an attempt to boost reading scores, some elementary schools limited instructional time in social studies and science or eliminated these subjects and used the time to teach reading skills. This is a misguided practice and may even have lowered scores. Social studies and science build vocabulary and background knowledge in a way that language arts classes can't. In some studies, background knowledge has been shown to make a greater impact on comprehension than does the use of comprehension strategies (Samuelstuen & Bråten, 2005). As Neuman, Kaefer, and Pinkham (2014) note, "The more you know about a topic, the easier it is to read a text, understand it, and retain the information" (p. 145).

Content areas also offer challenging reading materials and writing activities in which students use the concepts and language of the subject matter they are studying. If properly taught, strong social studies and science programs should boost skills. The best results are obtained when teachers develop the skills needed to comprehend science and social studies texts with an emphasis on teaching text structure and vocabulary that is an integral part of the subjects being taught, and also the research and writing skills needed to explore and report on what they have learned.

This is not to say that content-area teachers should become reading and writing teachers, but rather that they should develop the strategies that are necessary to read and write about their subject matter. Additionally, it is important that all subject matter teachers use teaching aids and instructional supports that will help below-level readers better understand, remember, and write about the content being presented.

Partner with the Home

Caregivers provide their children with encouragement and support. They are better able to perform their role if they feel valued and are informed about the school's program, their child's progress, and ways in which they can support their child and the school. If parents and other caregivers know what students are studying in school, they can complement the school's efforts. "With deepened knowledge of their students' academic materials, families can supplement students' crucial content knowledge through conversation, reading, and shared academic activities" (Chu et al., 2021, p. 24).

Teach for Equity

"Equity means giving individuals what they need to succeed and giving more to those who need it. Equity includes the belief that all students can achieve at high levels, offers high-quality opportunities, and provides the necessary preparation for success. . . . It is personalized to each and every student" (Conner, 2021). Because of poverty, racism, lack of opportunity, learning difficulties, or other obstacles, some students need more. Equity is not the same as equality. Equality means that everyone is provided the same opportunities and resources. Equity means that students are provided whatever they need. In this text, equity is viewed through the lens of reading performance. Regardless of ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, students reading below grade level need more opportunities and resources so that they can be brought up to grade level or as close to it as possible. Although they strike English learners, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students in greater proportions, reading difficulties are a widespread factor in every segment of the student population. For instance, Decoding Dyslexia is a parent-led grassroots

movement whose purpose is to obtain equitable effective instruction for students who experience difficulty learning to read.

The single most powerful step that you can take to achieve equity for below-level readers is to boost their reading progress so that they will be reading on or close to grade level and thus will then be able to read grade-level content-area texts. This will build their background knowledge, vocabulary, and cognitive skills and give them the tools they need to succeed academically. Being able to read on or close to grade level puts students on the track to academic success.

Respond to Students' Cultures

We all belong to a culture, with no culture being better than another. Responding to students' cultures is a key ingredient in literacy acceleration. As Howard (2021) makes clear, students become more engaged when they feel included and valued; when they see themselves in the texts that they read, the posters on the wall, the use of cultural artifacts in the classroom, the reference to customs and events from their culture; and perhaps most important of all, when teachers build on what students bring to the classroom. As Howard explains, "Every student that walks into our classroom has a rich array of knowledge and background. Make use of that cultural knowledge. Students should see themselves reflected in what they learn and how they learn it."

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant instruction begins with academic success. As she explains, "Thus, culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers attend to students' academic needs, not merely make them 'feel good.' The trick of culturally relevant teaching is to get students to 'choose' academic excellence" (p. 160).

MEETING THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS

Professor Ladson-Billings, a pioneer in promoting the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy, was inspired by her fifth-grade teacher who introduced her segregated class to accounts of influential Black Americans. At that time, Black Americans were not included in the textbook that the class used. In addition to using materials and approaches that are responsive to students' cultures, she emphasizes the need to develop students' academic success, which in this text means having virtually all students reading on or close to grade level.

As Ladson-Billings explains, culturally responsive instruction uses culture as a "vehicle for learning" (p. 161). As an example, Ladson-Billings describes the teacher who invited parents into her classroom to share their skills. One parent taught a fifth-grade class how to make sweet potato pies. The students wrote reports about George Washington Carver and his sweet potato research, conducted taste tests, created a plan for selling pies, and conducted research to find out how a person might become a cook or chef. They also wrote thank-you notes to the classroom guests.

> In her study of eight teachers who were especially effective with Black students, Ladson-Billings found that the teachers varied in their approaches, but all had a deep commitment to fostering the development of every one of their students.
>
> > Fundamental to their beliefs about teaching was that all of the students could and must succeed. Consequently, they saw their responsibility as working to guarantee the success of each student. The students who seemed furthest behind received plenty of individual attention and encouragement. (p. 163)

Applying the Chapter's Recommendations and Resources

This chapter has discussed a number of principles for closing the gap. Where do you stand in terms of implementing those principles? Use the chart in Form 1.1 to estimate where you are right now and what steps you might take to get where you want to be.

FORM 1.1

Closing the Literacy Gap Chart

Principles for closing the gap	Where I am now	Where I want to be	Action steps for getting there
Having expectations that gaps can be closed			
Providing additional time and using it effectively			
Providing effective practice			
Providing materials on the appropriate level			
Fostering student self-teaching			
Adopting a do-whatever-it-takes attitude			
Strengthening the core program			
Finding out where students are			
Monitoring students' progress			
Making sure students have the resources they need			
Fostering reading and writing in the subjects I teach			
Partnering with the home			
Teaching for equity			
Responding to students' cultures			

Guilford Publications
370 Seventh Avenue
New York, NY 10001
212-431-9800
800-365-7006
www.guilford.com