

Chapter 9

Literacy Development, Higher Education, and the Achievement Gap

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will explore the challenges of students entering college who have gaps in their literacy development. Historical events within education that have led to some of these skills set gaps will be reviewed. Additionally, causes and current remedies to help students as they try to navigate higher education while needing additional support with their literacy skills will be discussed. Finally, the issue of how colleges are forced to react to students who do not have the skills to compete with the expected academic rigor and steps needed to help both high school educators and professors remedy these instructional challenges will be reviewed.

POVERTY IMPACT ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Based on standardized test scores and research that distinguishes different school opportunities, socio-economic differences appear to have a profound impact on student's literacy acquisition (Diallo, 2020). While there are outliers to this statement, especially when reviewing the 90/90/90 schools that have 90% poverty, 90% minority and perform at 90% on standardized assessments, in general the data indicates literacy differences in line with socio-economic differences (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005; Reeves, 2000). The research surrounding these schools provides a blueprint of how they have turned around these trends in some areas, but this unfortunately is not the norm (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2020; Reeves, 2000). The trend of socio-economic differences impacting literacy is noted at every grade level and continues into secondary and higher education (National As-

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assessment of Adult Literacy, n.d.). Literacy is the key to academic success, regardless of the grade level, and as a result many states have looked at the research and attempted to develop policies that provide K-3rd grade literacy interventions (Dee & Jacob, 2011). The belief is that if earlier support is provided to struggling readers, then the less behind the students will become as they progress through school (Rasinsky & Padak, 2013). Each year that students are not reading at grade level can create greater gaps amongst same age peers, as their same grade level peers are continuing to read at a faster rate making the gap in reading more pronounced (Diallo, 2020). It is a challenge for students below grade level to make up for lost time because in general, kids who like to read and are successful will continue to read; and those who would prefer not to read will fall further behind their reading peers due to the lack of practice.

While students who are reading a year or more behind their grade level peers certainly create concerns, but what does being behind mean? These terms and comments are loosely used and rarely clearly defined. Being able to comprehend and understand what is in print is the primary definition of reading. In order to read proficiently, students need to be able to make meaning from print by putting phonemes together to make words that the student understands (Diallo, 2020). Without this basic skill set, reading for meaning becomes impossible. While schools expect their students to make gains within the general education classroom, nearly every elementary school in the United States has built in reading interventions which have focused on helping students build the necessary skills to comprehend text. When discussing the complex task of reading, there are many different screens and assessments used to determine a student's reading ability. In general, these assessments focus on the following main items: accuracy of reading which is putting phonemes together/testing phonemic awareness to read words, fluency which is the ability to read with appropriate rate/pace and expression, and comprehension. These are three of the main assessments focused on students who are deemed behind or not proficient in their literacy instruction. In addition to identifying words, knowing what the words mean is another challenging task for many students (Rasinsky & Padak, 2013).

The building of vocabulary is of profound importance. In recent years, there has been growing concern about the vocabulary gap widening between children from different socioeconomic groups. By age 3, it is believed that children growing up in poor neighborhoods or from lower-income families may hear up to 30 million fewer words than their more privileged counterparts (Bergland, 2014). A child does not overcome this vocabulary deficit in a year's time or just by attending school. Students from low-income settings do make up ground during the school year but have less opportunities outside of school widening the gap. The total years a child is in school can make up for a lot of loss, but only if they have had quality learning opportunities and experiences (Marzano, 2005).

According to the Rand Corporation's Report (Augustine et al., 2016),

A persistent and substantial student achievement gap based on family income exists in the United States. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 24 percent of fourth-grade students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (an indicator of low family income) scored at or above the proficient level in mathematics, compared with 58 percent of students not eligible for the lunch program. Similar to this mathematics proficiency gap of 34 percentage points, the income achievement gap in reading is 31 percentage points (21 percent versus 52 percent scoring at least proficient). Since NAEP started tracking the income achievement gap in 2003, it has remained statistically unchanged. There are also large achievement gaps between white and black students, white and Hispanic students, and native speakers and English language learners (ELLs), and the gaps in performance persist into later grades (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

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