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***Bridging the Literacy Achievement Gap Grades 4-12***

**Edited by Dorothy S. Strickland and Donna E. Alvermann (2004)**

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**Bridging the  
Literacy  
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Grades 4-12**

**Dorothy S. Strickland and  
Donna E. Alvermann Editors**  
FOREWORD BY RONALD F. FERGUSON

English Language Learners constitute the fastest growing segment of the school-age population, 9.3% of the total school enrollment (NCBE, 2002). It is predicted that in the year 2025, 1 in 4 students will come from a home where a language other than English is spoken (Spellings, 2005). It is a common phenomenon that there is a drop in scores for all students when moving from learning to read to reading to learn in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, but it is even more pronounced for English Language Learners. They do well in K-3 where the focus is on word skills versus text skills, but from 4<sup>th</sup> through middle school and high school when academic demands of the curriculum become more rigorous, the performance of these students falls dramatically.

Because English Language Learners being schooled all in English initially make dramatic gains in the early grades, whatever the type of program students receive (ESL, English Immersion, Sheltered, etc.) this misleads teachers and administrators into assuming that the students are going to continue to do extremely well in later years. It is not understood that there is much more involved in learning a language than just being able to use conversational English and being able to decode words.

Yet, all is not bleak. Dr. Stephen Krashen who has done extensive research on this subject feels that there is hope for older students to catch up with the right interventions. Therefore, a book like *Bridging the Literacy Achievement Gap Grades 4-12* is a valuable resource for those interested in closing the achievement gap (s) at that level. Dorothy S. Strickland and Donna E. Alvermann, the editors, have done an outstanding job of presenting an understanding of the achievement gap as well as provide examples of effective, practical applications that can be replicated.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I is comprised of six chapters each addressing an aspect of understanding the achievement gap. Each topic covered—socioeconomic status, home

background, linguistic background, quality of instruction—is examined to show its particular affect on the achievement gap.

The first chapter by Robert T. Jiménez discusses the literacy learning of Latino students and the specific challenges they face as well as ways to address those challenges including the recognition that good assessment is the key. The second chapter by Deborah Hicks presents the effect of poverty on student's writing. The third chapter by Timothy Shanahan names the seven key variables for reading achievement for secondary students: leadership, amount of instruction, framework and curriculum, professional development, special learners, instructional materials, and parent involvement.

The fourth chapter by Amy Wigfield is focused on the fact that motivation is crucial to reading engagement and that an individual's motivation is determined by his or her beliefs, values, and goals associated with reading. Self comparisons and grouping practices can negatively affect an adolescent's motivation to read. Secondary school teaching practices can also contribute to this motivation decline especially for minority students who may see little relevance to their culture. The author gives recommendations on how to address these issues such as putting an emphasis on growth rather than comparisons, going beyond the textbook, and giving students choices.

Chapter Five by Carol D. Lee focuses on African American students and literacy. Race, language, and class have restricted opportunities for African Americans. Even when African Americans attend integrated schools, they tend to score lower than white and Asian peers. Ebonics has been attributed for being a factor as well as the poverty situation of many Blacks. These contribute to the lack of background knowledge, a necessary ingredient for reading comprehension. The author takes issue with some assumptions about literacy and how beneficial they are for African Americans such as generically good instruction, effective instruction for the low-income, and Culture Responsive Teaching.

Chapter Six by Donald D. Deshler, Jean B. Schumaker, and Susan K. Woodruff address how to improve the literacy skills of at-risk adolescents. The first is responsive teaching, including continuous assessment, instructional accommodations, and elaborated feedback. The second is systematic instruction, which includes structured instruction, connected instruction, scaffold instruction, and informative instruction. The third is intensive instruction, which includes sufficient time and high engagement.

Part II of the book is comprised of nine chapters, each about a promising practice that has been implemented and has proven to be effective in addressing the literacy achievement gap for older students. At the beginning of each chapter three main points of the chapter are listed followed by a detailed description of the program. Some chapters include a conclusion and/or note some lingering issue or next steps which need to be taken.

Because of the valuable background information provided and the samples of easy to replicate programs, I highly recommend this book for educators and policy makers who are committed to addressing literacy issues, especially for older at-risk students, in order to help close the achievement gap. Educators at the secondary, including mainstream teachers, ESL Coordinators, Special Education teachers, and principals will especially find this resource to be helpful as they

search for strategies, programs, and methods that have proven to be effective in helping to close the achievement gap.

University professors preparing teachers to work with English Language Learners in secondary schools will also be able to glean ideas from this book that would be beneficial to their students. Not only educators, but policy makers who make decisions about programs that should be funded could benefit from having the information in this book. Educational and community organizations that want to influence policy makers with recommendations about programs that have proven to be effective would want this information as well.

### **Works Cited**

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