

A Clear Vision for Closing the Achievement Gap

Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices. Belinda Williams, ed. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. 1996, Alexandria, Virginia.

Cities are in trouble. The movement of people, jobs, and businesses away from once vibrant, bustling places has resulted in crime-ridden, economically depressed cities that struggle to keep their inhabitants fed, employed, and educated. Those living in the city are mostly poor minorities who have no choice but to live in what economists call “no zones” – places where there is no formal economy (Noguera 17). These conditions surround many urban public schools. Daily, urban public schools receive an overwhelming amount of students whose parents are either unemployed, in jail, or on drugs. Test scores show that these urban students, the majority of whom are poor minorities, academically perform well below students who are white and from the suburbs.

What can be done to reduce this dramatic gap between urban students and other “normal” students? In *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices*, Belinda Williams organizes a forceful collection of essays that both analyze the factors that contribute to the achievement gap and present concrete solutions for the narrowing of this gap. Addressing what United States Secretary of Education Rod Paige calls “an education emergency,” *Closing the Achievement Gap* is an essential piece of scholarship that identifies explicit steps to take for the reduction of the achievement gap (Education Department).

All of the authors, many of whom are experienced in psychology, urban education, or sociology, lend their expertise to this compelling book. For example, Floraline Ingram Stevens, who has worked as a Program Director at the National Science Foundation in the Division of Research, contributes her knowledge of assessment strategies to suggest new, accurate, and valid ways of testing urban students. Kenneth M. Zeichner, a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, focuses on pedagogy as a solution for the narrowing of the achievement gap. This wide range of experts specializing in the different aspects of education allows for a comprehensive assessment of the achievement gap.

The organization of *Closing the Achievement Gap* is very logical, clarifying the arguments and thus creating an influential piece of scholarship. Belinda Williams uses the first chapter as an introduction, explaining the differences in achievement and outlining the following chapters. She directly states the purpose of the book – to identify the factors contributing to the achievement gap and to influence urban school reform strategies – letting the reader know what will be covered in the following chapters. The subsequent chapters then individually focus on different factors and solutions associated with the achievement gap. The final chapter is used to synthesize the arguments presented in the preceding chapters and to establish the criteria needed to be met for the success of urban students.

Chapter 2, written by Margaret C. Wang and John A. Kavach, focuses on educational segregation, the concept of resilience, and resilience-building strategies. The authors identify decentralization as the main culprit leading to the continuation of educational segregation, connecting the results of decentralization, in this case poverty, to low achievement. Citing evidence proving that programs such as special education

actually cause children's learning problems to increase, the authors claim that this and other methods, tracking for instance, create an educational divide in schools. Instead, schools should focus on aspects, such as "powerful instruction," (16) that do not underestimate children's learning abilities. A great portion of this chapter is also spent on the concept of resilience, the identification "and understanding [of] individual and institutional resources that can be cultivated and mobilized to moderate the effects of individual vulnerability or environmental hazards" (17). The authors identify and cite results of two ways to promote this concept: school connections with other resources and the reduction of educational segregation.

The use of examples and the direct form of writing in the chapter solidified Wang and Kavach's arguments. The examples gave Wang and Kavach's claims life, showing how their concepts could be implemented in school curriculum and philosophy. The effects of geographic decentralization, a known problem for cities in general, are sufficiently dissected in the educational realm. This chapter effectively shines light on the drastic situation urban public schools are in due to decentralization.

Chapter 3, written by Patricia Marks Greenfield, Catherine Raeff, and Blanca Quiroz, deals with culture and its effect on the achievement gap. The authors attribute the difference between the home culture and school culture as a reason for the achievement gap. Individualism, the value stressed in the United States, dominates classrooms and is present in curriculum. However many minority students have grown up under a collectivist culture. The authors also identify two groups of minorities: voluntary and involuntary. While the voluntary minorities (immigrated voluntarily) are secure with their cultural identities and willing to embrace the US culture, involuntary minorities (those forced into US culture by colonization or slavery) do not trust institutions that are related

to the oppressing culture. In order to reduce the achievement gap, schools must be aware of these types of cultural differences and consider them when educating their students.

The background information and arguments in this chapter are well laid out. The authors effectively describe, give examples, and explain problems and conflicts. However, more development of solutions for resolving the involuntary minority situation in education would strengthen this already very thorough chapter.

Chapter 4, written by Kenneth M. Zeichner, concentrates on pedagogy. Zeichner stresses four key elements that can narrow the achievement gap: high expectations of students, cultural congruence in instruction, teacher knowledge, and teacher strategies. Teacher education, specifically in multiculturalism, is emphasized in this chapter.

Zeichner's arguments are straight-forward and thorough. His use of a table to list the many requirements needed in pedagogy clearly summarizes his arguments in the text. In the chapter's strong conclusion, Zeichner compellingly challenges society, claiming that "we already know how to teach all children successfully[,] the real issue is whether we as a society are serious about creating schools in which this pedagogical agenda can flourish" (70). Zeichner's call to action exemplifies the type of attitude and approach taken in this book: there is a problem and it can be fixed.

Chapter 5, written by Floraline Ingram Stevens, spotlights assessment and the concept of "Opportunity to Learn" (OTL). Stevens first explains the background of OTL, covering the four variables that make up the original model: content coverage, content exposure, content emphasis, and quality of teaching. From there, Stevens argues for the expansion of OTL under the variables of family support, school environment, and student behavior. Stevens continues, addressing problems in accurate assessment. She suggests solutions for assessment based on the framework of the OTL model and makes logical

arguments for the refocus of student assessment such as the identification of “individual students’ modes for learning” and “focusing on complex real-life problems” (86).

This chapter contained convincing facts and the OTL concept was clearly explained. Stevens portrays OTL as a concept much needed in urban schools today. However, there was room for development. The family support section used persuasive data yet there was no focus on solutions to improve family support networks. The conclusion seemed too abrupt and did not summarize Stevens’ numerous rational points made in the chapter.

Chapter 6, written by Bonnie Benard, expands on resilience, a concept covered in Chapter 2. Benard presents four traits of resiliency: social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future. She then identifies three factors that foster resiliency: caring and support, positive and high expectations, and meaningful participation. Benard stresses the importance of the student-teacher relationship in this chapter, using psychologist Erik Erikson’s stages of development to prove her point that every child needs “a teacher who cares” (102).

The strength of Benard’s arguments provides for a very convincing and inspiring chapter. Benard uses data and specific examples to effectively make her points clear. Her conclusion, a call to action for “educational, social, and economic justice” (113), is an influential finale to a chapter that draws on humanistic approaches to the narrowing of the achievement gap.

Chapter 7, written by Karen Seashore Louis and BetsAnn Smith, focuses on teacher reform. The authors identify a Catch-22 in urban schools where many teachers burn out and become disengaged because they cannot reach their students. The Catch-22 develops because teacher engagement and student engagement depend on each other.

Student underachievement is attributed to teacher burnout, while teacher burnout is caused primarily by student underachievement. To avoid this problem, the authors developed four types of teacher engagement, two focusing on human relationships and two on the teaching process: integration of school and personal life, treatment of students as individuals, involvement in curriculum, and informed knowledge of the subject being taught. The authors continue with examples of three urban schools that address teacher engagement through school culture, school organization, and school leadership.

This chapter is filled with research and examples which cemented Louis and Smith's claims. The depiction of specific urban schools which followed many of the same principles developed in the chapter provided real-life examples of what can happen if reform is instituted. The end of the chapter solidifies the authors' powerful position, summing up each argument and the research results individually.

Chapter 8, written by the editor Belinda Williams, is the concluding chapter summarizing the nature of the urban achievement gap and establishes the changes that need to be made. Williams and the other authors all agree that the urban achievement gap reveals historical, social, and economic events (149). Decentralization, the history of racial segregation, and the new wave of immigration to the United States all impact the urban achievement gap. They agree on four main factors that help create the gap today: poverty, cultural diversity, isolation, and the underestimation of urban students. In review, Williams identifies six specific changes that need to be made for the reduction of the urban achievement gap: the establishment of school-linked services and resources for communities and families; cultural compatibility; teachers who have high expectations, care, and are culturally sensitive; Opportunity to Learn (OTL); school environments that foster resilience; and teacher engagement.

All of these changes are equally important for the closing of the urban achievement gap. However, the authors stress one overriding concept throughout the book: the belief that every child can learn. Nothing can be done to reduce the achievement gap until this philosophy is adopted. Only then can teachers engage their students; schools connect with their communities; and cultures become truly compatible with each other.

The historical, social, and economic considerations and the solid solutions in *Closing the Achievement Gap* provide a sturdy base for understanding and create a path urban schools need to take for narrowing the achievement gap. The chapters contain thorough backgrounds and descriptions, effective research and use of data, sound argumentation, and logical, research-based solutions. Throughout the book, the authors convey a sense of humanism and focus on what the problems are and what needs to be done to fix them. A stellar, analytical, thought-provoking work, *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices* can positively impact and engage any active citizen interested in true educational equality.

Adam Kent

References

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