Although economically disadvantaged and minority students made some gains in their academic performance between 1970 and 1988, the education reforms of the last decades still have failed to close the academic achievement gap.

With the exception of some progress in reading for 9-year-olds, the gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students, whites and blacks, and whites and Hispanics in reading and math, as measured by scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) remained essentially unchanged between 1990 and 2004 (Haycock, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2004; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2004).

Economic conditions, funding, family involvement, cultural differences, expectations, grouping arrangements, and English language acquisition are among the complex factors influencing the achievement gaps among groups. Emerging evidence and a growing number of researchers, however, have underscored the power of schools to overcome the disadvantages of families and communities (Education Trust, 1999; Johnson & Asera, 1999; Sherman, 2002).

Central to what Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, and Fernandez (1993) describe as the transformative role of education is educators’ faith in the potential success of every student. Researchers (Cawelti, 2003; Waxman & Tellez, 2002) concur. Gordon

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Cawelti (2003) says, “Teachers and principals tend to have difficulty working hard on a goal such as eliminating the achievement gap if they don’t really believe it can be accomplished. Therein lies the real challenge for school district leaders … helping others come to hold this same view” (p. 2).

A fundamental shift in teachers’ knowledge, skills, and assumptions about children in high-poverty schools and students who are culturally and socioeconomically diverse is needed for the achievement gap to narrow. Teacher professional development must introduce the study of the role of culture and daily experiences in human development and learning. Federal, state, and district policies must define goals and objectives to move beyond improving achievement to closing the gaps. What is needed is a comprehensive knowledge base to inform systems change, certification, instruction/assessment, professional development, policies, leadership, and parental/community involvement (Williams, 2003).

**A TRADITION OF MONOCULTURALISM**

Traditionally, educators in the United States have expected children to leave their cultures at the schoolhouse door. Education’s goal has been to even out differences and create a one-culture society that reflects the majority culture. As a result, many educators have ignored or devalued the cultural assets of children who are not part of the majority culture. Many educators expect children to function as empty vessels into which school knowledge is poured. This unexamined expectation does not acknowledge that culture exerts a powerful influence over what knowledge is valued and how it is learned. It has been assumed that educational differences will be eliminated by providing minorities and the disadvantaged with the experiences of middle-class whites (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Crochunis, Erdey, & Swedlow, 2002; Trumbull, Greenfield, & Raeff, 2003).

When viewed through the lens of the majority culture that prevails in schools, the abilities and potential of children who are racial or language minorities, or lower socioeconomic status, are often overlooked. The knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values — the strengths these children bring to the classroom — are often in conflict with those school values. In other words, what these children know, what they can do, their world view, and what is important to them do not always match what the school wants them to do, how it wants them to view the world, and what it considers important. The school and teachers often label this mismatch as low ability or lack of intelligence.

When these children do not demonstrate the knowledge and skills defined as normal or grade level on assessment instruments, they end up being sorted into categories, such as needing remediation, special education, or alternative education, that cause them to be labeled and treated as though they have little or no
potential to develop standard abilities. As a result, children who are very capable in other settings are often rendered ineffective in school.

Current school policies do not distinguish between emerging ability development — measured by current systems of assessment — and potential for learning (Sternberg, 1998). Decisions about students are based on the assumption that assessment data represent and define the child’s potential to learn, not what students have learned so far.

A culturally pluralistic society allows for diverse perspectives about which knowledge is important, and for different ways of knowing. For example, one culture might value abstract, theoretical knowledge, learning best in an analytical manner focused on isolated parts, while another culture might value experiential knowledge or learn in a relational manner focused on how parts relate to each other and to the whole. Understanding varied cultural values and perspectives has implications for how teachers are able to help all children achieve at higher levels (Trumbull, Greenfield, & Raeff, 2003).

**ROOTING OUT THE CAUSE**

David Cohen and Deborah Loewenberg Ball (2001) conclude that the most important factor that accounts for differences in achievement is instruction. Similarly, although the focus of their research was English language learners, Hersh Waxman and Kip Tellez (2002) suggest their findings have implications for all students: “Once teachers begin to examine their existing teaching practices critically, they may acknowledge the value of more student-centered practices” (p. 31).

Reform that addresses closing the achievement gap may need to focus on helping educators understand more about the dynamics of normal human development in varied cultural contexts. Growing evidence suggests that the role of culture and daily experiences in human development is an important dynamic to be understood, and the cumulative evidence supports the need to introduce the study of the role of culture in learning into professional development programs.

Educators currently perceive and incorporate culture as a celebration of heroes, heroines, holidays, and food. However, celebrating Black History Month and scheduling an ethnic foods night is only one way of valuing and incorporating varied cultural experiences. Valuing cultural diversity implies understanding the role of culture in the learning process and using culturally relevant teaching to draw on the cultural strengths of learners — their knowledge, experiences, interests, and skills (Crochunis, Erdey, & Swedlow, 2002; Trumbull, Greenfield, & Raeff, 2003).

Is culturally relevant teaching different from good teaching in general? Good teaching includes such factors as providing a caring environment, having content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, and practicing skillful classroom management. However, all of these factors may coexist with the implicit goal of promoting the majority culture. For many children who are not part of the majority culture, this approach can create dissonance, which may inhibit their ability to benefit fully from otherwise good teaching and further exacerbate existing gaps in learning curriculum content.

Culturally relevant teaching, on the other hand, includes all that is considered good teaching but also takes the learner’s cultural background into consideration, building on the student’s experiences and affirming his or her cultural identity (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Williams & Woods, 1997; Zeichner, 2003). In addition, when teachers pay deliberate attention to making instruction relevant to students’ experiences, they contribute both to improving achievement and to closing the academic gap that may exist between culturally, linguistically, and/or socioeconomically diverse students and mainstream students (Johnson & Asera, 1999; Knapp, Shields, & Turnbull, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IMPLICATIONS**

Good professional development designed to close achievement gaps will require ongoing discovery and discussion and should encompass expectations educators hold for students, child development theory, curriculum content and design, instructional and assessment strategies for instilling higher-order competencies, school culture and practices, and shared decision making (Corcoran, 1995, pp. 2-3). Luis C. Moll, associate professor at the University of Arizona, requires students in his teacher preparation course to visit students’ homes to identify “funds of knowledge” to use to make instructional connections. A middle school principal in St. Paul uses a professional development day to assign his teachers to tour students’ neighborhoods to gain useful information about history, architecture, art,
resources, occupations, and health issues that they can integrate or introduce with new lessons.

According to Moll (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994), “One advantage to studying human beings dynamically, within their social circumstances, in their full complexity, is that one can gain a much more complete, and, we believe, a much more valid understanding of them” (p. 19).

Educating culturally diverse groups of students requires that educators know and value students’ past, present, and future cultural experiences as a central component in the formal teaching and learning equation. Through professional development, teachers must study the role of culture in learning, and understand and recognize a framework of normal human development.

Specifically, the learning must embed four components. Teachers must:

1. Understand the most current research on brain development and functioning and the implications of that research for the way we teach (biology);
2. Acknowledge the role cultural experiences play in developing abilities and motivation (psychology and sociology);
3. Provide the necessary supports to enhance children’s resilience in school environments and interpersonal relationships; and
4. Incorporate available knowledge of how people learn and the evidence of what is required for whole-school change and reform (leadership, policies, and practices).

Professional development that maximizes and strengthens opportunities for connections and learning in school includes developing teachers’ abilities to implement new strategies and conditions (Caine & Caine, 1991):

- Thematic teaching that includes material relevant to students’ lives;
- Cooperative learning that involves communication, collaboration, and interpersonal relationships;
- Using motivation and challenges that compel students’ interests and intrinsic enthusiasm;
- An understanding of and value for learners’ experiences, and ability to help students connect new and existing knowledge;
- Reflection and developing a personal awareness of deep meaning; and
- Metacognition, or thinking about the way that we think, feel, and act.

**Leadership and management close the gap**

A review of 30 years of research and the case studies of 18 schools reveal elements that characterize adult, student, and adult-student relationships in schools that have effective programs or periods of effectiveness (Rossi & Stringfield, 1995). More recently, Johnson and Asera (1999) and Waxman and Tellez (2002) identified similar characteristics in schools that were successfully closing the achievement gap. These schools:

- Incorporated diversity;
- Built on students’ prior knowledge;
- Demonstrated culturally responsive instruction;
- Exhibited caring and trust;
- Demonstrated leadership and a focus on service to students;
- Had instruction aligned to standards;
- Provided ongoing professional development;
- Offered additional time for instruction; and
- Had meaningful community and parent involvement.

In addition, schools succeeding with culturally diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged students have staff with a powerful belief system that rejects as excuses for failure children’s cultures, abilities, and life circumstances. Teacher beliefs are key. When teachers shift from a deficit perspective to a vision of strengths and possibilities with a no-excuses responsibility for student learning, the gap can close (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002).
and serving students differently than when management is directed by central office staff. Simply introducing standards and accountability assumes that all educators in districts and schools have the will to focus their energy on ensuring that all students will learn them. The potential power of each of these strategies implemented singularly, without the necessary focus on teaching and learning, leaves to chance the certainty that they will make a difference in academic outcomes for those groups of children the current system of education continues to fail.

Closing the achievement gaps requires the education community to rethink assumptions, beliefs, values, policies, and traditional practices to create opportunities to educate all children.

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