

The Grade 4 Slump

Low-income kids need coherent instruction in a broad range of knowledge and language.

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

The grade 4 reading gap (which widens in each succeeding grade) represents the single greatest failure in North American public schooling and the most disheartening affront to the ideal of democratic education.

In 1964, Walter Loban published a graph that still defines early reading in the United States. It coordinated achievement along the vertical axis and student age along the horizontal. On this matrix, he plotted two lines showing the performances of low- and high-income students.

The graph looks like a tilted funnel, with the narrow end at the left starting at kindergarten. In kindergarten, the two sides of the tilted funnel are fairly close. They begin to separate sharply around grade 4. After that, the gap keeps the same heartbreaking trajectory. Jeanne Chall called this sharp widening ‘the fourth-grade slump.’

A few schools, even a few districts such as Inglewood, California — which serve many low-income students on free and reduced-price lunch — have made inroads into the test-score gap. And some reading programs like *Open Court*, *Success for All*, and *Direct Instruction* have, when well implemented, raised reading skills (decoding) up to a point. But the early gains from those programs tend to fade by grade 4, and students still suffer the Chall slump.

To understand what needs to be done, it’s necessary first to grasp the cause and character of the current reading gap. And to view the gap accurately, it’s essential to give it a new name.

From age 2 on, there exist large differences in children’s familiarity with unusual words, standard pronunciation, and complex syntax, a fact that was long suspected but not well-documented and quantified until the monumental research of Betty Hart and Todd Risley, as summarized in their book *Meaningful Differences*.

Many a low-income child entering kindergarten has heard only half the words and can understand only half the meanings and language conventions of a high-income child. Our schools, as currently constituted, do not reduce this original knowledge/vocabulary gap.

Low-income children who read with fluency still typically show big deficiencies in vocabulary and comprehension. Hence, instead of the term ‘reading gap,’ clarity would be better served by using a more descriptive term like ‘language gap’ or ‘verbal gap.’

The widening of this verbal gap as students progress through the grades is the archetypal example of the so-called Matthew effect in education: “Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance, but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

Experts in vocabulary estimate that to understand spoken or written speech, a person needs to know about 95% of the words. The other 5% of word meanings can then be inferred from context.

If we assume that an advantaged kindergartner knows 95% of the words in a teacher’s remarks, or in a passage read aloud from a book, the result is that the child is not only gaining new knowledge from the exposition, she is also gaining new word meanings by being able to infer the meaning of the other 5% of the words.

The less-advantaged child, by contrast, suffers a double (or triple) loss. The exposition is puzzling from the start, because the child doesn’t know enough of the words. He therefore fails to gain knowledge from the exposition and also fails to learn new word meanings from the context. And to intensify that double loss, the child loses even that which he hath — his interest, self-confidence, and motivation to learn.

How can the gap be reduced? Some enabling words and concepts will need to be taught directly, and we must do this systematically, as Andrew Biemiller of the University of Toronto has recommended.

Yet we are well aware that most words will continue to be learned indirectly, in context, which is all the more reason to make sure that the context is carefully and cumulatively sequenced so that every child understands it and makes new gains in knowledge and vocabulary.

Children learn and remember what is meaningful to them. History and science become meaningful if they are taught in a sustained and coherent way. All those currently-fragmented hours devoted to ‘language arts’ need to include the worlds of nature and history, literature, art, and music that will build the knowledge and vocabulary of children and enable them to become readers in the true sense.

The main barriers to equal educational opportunity are those that have been erected by unfortunate habits of mind in the schools and by an unfortunate tendency to believe that the job can’t be done. The complacency caused by social determinism and IQ determinism have currency only because we haven’t yet managed to narrow the verbal gap.

Before giving way to determinism, however, we need to transform the hours devoted to the literacy block in preschool and in the early grades by doing what works best, according to the ablest researchers: providing an explicit, coherent, and carefully-cumulative approach to a broad range of knowledge and language.

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