



The Trillium

Fall 2006

Ontario Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

The Achievement Gap

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What is the 'Achievement Gap'?

By Dr. Peter Orange

The expression 'Achievement Gap' implies that some students are not reaching a predetermined, standardized measurement of acquiring and using knowledge and/or practically realizing their recognized potential. It implies that there may be 'gaps' in the context of their learning. There may well be 'gaps' in the community's academic expectations. Schools alone cannot redress the achievement gap.

Schools must actively and willingly invite new partners into the process of education. School policies must address the needs of the whole child in areas that extend far beyond those measured by a multiple-choice test. The most obvious solution for schools is prevention programming, delivering a high quality comprehensive curriculum and developing and maintaining a mindset school culture that promotes students' engagement.

The ASCD position (adopted in March 2004, and supported and promoted by Ontario ASCD) states that: For all students to excel academically and thrive as individuals we must raise the bar and close the achievement gap. Educators, policymakers and the public must understand the grave consequences of persistent gaps in student achievement and demand that addressing these gaps becomes a policy and funding priority. ASCD believes that all underserved populations – high-poverty students, students with special learning needs, students of different cultural backgrounds, and urban and rural students – must have access to:

- innovative, engaging and challenging coursework (with academic support) that builds on the strengths of each learner and enables students to develop to their full potential;
- high-quality teachers supported by ongoing professional learning; and
- additional resources for strengthening schools, families, and communities.

Further reading:

ASCD publication - InfoBrief (on the Ontario ASCD website) Jan. 2006 (Number 44); April 2006 (Number 45); Summer 2006 (Number 46)

Educational Leadership - ASCD publication – November 2004 vol. 62 Number 3

Ontario ASCD, a diverse learning community that promotes excellence in education, is dedicated to supporting the growth and success of each learner.

ASCD in Action

ASCD Networks

ANNOUNCING TWO NEW NETWORKS

NETWORK FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION NETWORK FOR PRIVATE SCHOOLS

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- one focusing on the special needs of Special Education;
- and the other focusing on the unique challenges of Private Schools.

We all have experiences and 'wisdoms' to share and online forums have proven successful for many professional educators. If you are interested in joining one or both of these network forums, or in creating one of your own, please contact:

Dave Bird, OASCD Treasurer
Dave.Bird@ascd.ca

We'd love to hear from you.

To Learn More About ASCD's Other Networks, Visit:
<http://www.ascd.org/aboutascd/cr/networks/network.html>

Book Review*:

Fullan, M., Hill, P., Cr vola, C., (2006) *Breakthrough*. Thousand Oaks, California, USA : Corwin Press
by Dr. Peter Orange

Breakthrough is a response to the 'Achievement Gap' issue. It is highly attractive to those who value moral purpose as the *sine qua non* of driving forces in educational reform. *Breakthrough* speaks simply and clearly to teachers, administrators, parents and governing bodies. The message is that we already have the vast majority of answers to create a meaningful and timely educational pathway to learning. The authors take the separate ingredients, name and define them, give them contextual perspective and then interrelate and position them into an exciting, viable and optimistic imperative. They emphasize that the 'arrangement' can only work as a whole.

Breakthrough is a highly practicable text. There are four powerful precepts in the *Breakthrough* model. What makes *Breakthrough* engaging is its circumspect view of who educators are, what they need and what learners of the present and future need.

(*The complete review can be read in the upcoming Ontario ASCD Journal – 'Changing Perspectives')

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The Achievement Gap – Boys' Literacy

When I was approached to write an article on achievement gaps for *The Trillium*, I was honoured but also perplexed. I didn't have an extensive knowledge of the research on this topic, but I did have the perspective of a classroom teacher, English department head and teacher librarian. After some thought, I realized that as a busy educator I might not be able to quote statistical reports or empirical evidence, but like my colleagues, I had an “in-the trenches” recognition of various achievement gaps.

I was aware that some students in my classes, department and school were not achieving the same level of success as other students due to special learning needs, socio-economic conditions, differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and gender.

The gap that stood out in my experience was the gender gap in literacy. When I taught Kindergarten, boys chose play tools over books. When I taught Grade 3, boys treasured their hockey cards. In Grades 6, 7, and 8 boys preferred real life adventures, comics and sports magazines to novels. When I taught English in Grades 9 through 12, swearing in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* got the boys' attentions but many of the classics left them cold.

In 2001, I was appointed the full-time teacher librarian at my high school and I began to have a deeper appreciation for the boys' literacy achievement gap through my teacher librarian AQ course, my local subject council, and initiatives promoted by the Ontario Ministry of Education, the Ontario School Library Association and the Ontario Library Association. I read some informative books, articles and documents like *Even Hockey Players Read: Boys Literacy and Learning* (Booth, 2002), *Teenage Boys and High School English* (Pirie, 2002), *Guys and Reading* (Scieszka in *Teacher Librarian* 30(3)), and *Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boys' Literacy Skills* (Ministry of Education, 2004). I was also able to direct a substantial portion of the library budget and special funds made available through Student Success to purchase boys' literacy resources.

In hindsight, this wasn't rocket science. We selected books that boys would appreciate. We purchased books about sports, cars, war, tattooing, extreme sports, wrestlers, books of lists and statistics. The novels we selected were edgier, with realistic, mainly male protagonists. We included graphic novels, comic books and manga in our orders. Our magazine and periodical selections changed. Sadly, the professional journals sat undisturbed from month to month, so they were replaced by *Hockey News*, *Skateboarder's World*, and *Marvel Comics*. We upped the numbers of newspapers we were receiving.

The first change we noticed was the noise level.

One day, my colleague and I realized that the library at lunch become very noisy. At first we were annoyed, but then we realized that the library was filled almost entirely with boys. Adolescent boys have trouble whispering, and they were kneeling on their chairs, leaning over the tables discussing articles and images with their friends. They were reading and they were talking about it. The next change we noticed was the increased number of boys attending the lunchtime Grade 7 and 8 book club. By last year, more than half of the members were boys. Perhaps our greatest measure of success can be summed up in this anecdote.

One day, I realized that I had seen the same young lady in the library at lunch every day for at least two weeks. Pleased that, as a new grade 9 student, she was obviously taking her studies more seriously, I congratulated her. “Oh no, sir” was her response. “I am not here to study. I am here to meet guys!”

These success stories also point to some other issues. How do we serve boys' unique ways of learning in our classrooms? They are active and they like to talk about what they are learning. Do we promote this in our classrooms? As a teacher librarian, I had to realize that shushing the boys who were excited about what they were reading was counter-productive to developing literacy. What about the material we select for our classrooms? Do we ever use non-fiction in the English classroom? Do we let our students read about or write about issues that interest them? If male students are not excited about *Jane Eyre*, ask yourself why. If they can't connect with Hagar Shipley, consider introducing them to Duddy Kravitz or Dunstan Ramsay.

My first teaching assignment was a two-month stint in a kindergarten classroom. Shortly after I arrived, I was called into a meeting with the principal and the educational assistant. Before my arrival, a concern had been raised about a boy who demonstrated a penchant for dressing up in high heels and a floppy hat. I was asked to monitor the situation and propose a solution. The solution was obvious – put some men's clothes in the dress-up centre. After we introduced a cowboy hat, an engineer's hat and some of my dad's old clothes, our little friend never donned heels again. Clearly we had not been meeting his needs as a male learner.

If we are committed to differentiated learning and success for all students, we must address the specific literacy needs of boys and young men in our classrooms and schools.

By Mark Woermke, Consultant, Secondary Program Department, OCCDSB, mark_woermke@occdb.on.ca

Closing the Achievement Gap in Mathematics A Grade 10 Factoring Lesson Study Project

Factoring! Summative assessment data showed a significant gap in student achievement on this algebraic skill. Paramount to that is the fact that pre-test data at higher grades showed that most student did not retain the skill.

Mother Teresa H.S. was not an exception to these facts. Last September our math department decided to investigate and look for answers to this problem by forming a lesson study group. Our group was made up of the seven teachers of the math department, one itinerant teacher from the OCCDSB (Ottawa Carleton Catholic School Board) Staff Development, Evaluation and Research Department and the OCCDSB math consultant. Our project goals were to narrow the achievement gap on the skills of factoring, both in the academic and applied grade 10 courses and to increase the retention level of those skills over the senior years.

The Lesson Study Project

Lesson study is a professional development process that teachers engage in to systematically examine their practice. The goal of the lesson study is to improve the effectiveness of the experiences that teachers provide to their students. There are four stages to the lesson study: research and preparation; initial implementation; initial reflection and improvement; and second implementation and reflection. The end product, after these four stages were completed, was a factoring unit. This framework provided us with the tools to create effective lessons that would allow most students to learn and retain the factoring skills better.

The Lesson and its implementation

The students were exposed to the same methodology at all times. The unit was structured in a way that included a series of short exercises intended to trigger students' memories of past experiences with the concept of factors and multiplication. By recalling these previously learned structures, it was reasonable to expect that students would make a link to the similarities to the algebraic model of factoring trinomials (e.g. use of the area model in elementary school to introduce multiplication and division with integers should reinforce the use of algebra tiles to learn expanding and factoring of polynomials).

The strategies and tools included in the feature lesson were the use of manipulatives and technology. Computer Algebra Systems (CAS) was the platform we employed to develop the conceptual understanding of factoring trinomials. CAS is accessible on the TI89 graphing calculators. The use of graphing calculators helped reduce the time spent on routine tasks and

therefore, freed up students to devote more of their efforts to thinking about emerging patterns and developing the concepts of expanding and factoring. The use of manipulatives such as algebra tiles was used for students to explore and represent abstract mathematical ideas in visually rich ways. Such contexts for learning allowed students to see the "big ideas" of mathematics.

Throughout the unit and during the lesson, students had opportunities to learn in a variety of ways, i.e. individually, cooperatively, with teacher direction, and through hands-on experience. Students represented their ideas pictorially, numerically, and algebraically. Using these various forms of representations helped to close the achievement gap even more.

We also considered the visual aids around the classroom as a means of relating past experiences with factoring to the actual lesson. We developed a word wall, posted students' work and provided many technology aids such as posters and instructional cards. Using these visual aids helped student retain the factoring skills being presented even longer.

Assessing our experience

The success of this project was measured by both the students' and the teachers' accomplishments. For the teachers, it was overwhelmingly clear that the team achieved great success. The teachers providing the feature lesson felt more confident and more prepared in their deliveries. The project provided opportunities to think deeply about long-term goals for students, deepened the subject matter and instructional knowledge, and built capacity for collegial learning. Student testimonies were positive and encouraging. From their feedback, we learned that a greater number of students understood the concept of factoring. As post-tests indicated, an increased number of students retained their knowledge. The level of skill retention by students making the transition from grade 10 to grade 11 remains to be seen. Work will be done this year to assess and measure this goal.

What is next?

Mother Teresa is planning to develop more lessons of this nature during this school year. As well, the math department is sharing their experiences with other colleges in the Board and in the province. For example, the team presented the project at the 2006 OAME (Ontario Association for Mathematics Education) Conference this past May.

By *Alex Belloni*, Vice-Principal, St. Paul High School, OCCDSB, alexi_belloni@occdsb.on.ca

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An Evening with Damian Cooper
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Thursday, October 19, 2006

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4:00 p.m. Registration and Publisher's Display

4:30-8:00 p.m. Keynote Speaker and Dinner

\$25 ASCD Members and Students; \$30 Non-ASCD Members

Includes a Chinese Food buffet

Contact Susan Thibault at susan_thibault@occdsb.on.ca for registration information.

President's Message

Much has been written about the achievement gap in our schools. I would like to take this opportunity to give thanks to the educators that are working towards "raising and levelling the bar".

For those who have:

1. Provided food programs in schools: thank you.
2. Worked to reduce the dropout rate: thank you.
3. Engaged in early childhood education: thank you.
4. Applied personal money to aid children: thank you.
5. Focussed on keeping students engaged: thank you.
6. Provide education in non-traditional settings: thank you.
7. Initiated partnerships and involved parents: thank you.

Know that if you are pursuing options that challenge the status quo (we can't close gaps by doing what created them), you should be recognized here. The will to do this comes from being willing to let go of some things that we've always held onto.

This issue of Trillium concludes the ASCD position themes. Welcome to our new Trillium team as they embark on exploring new issues related to Ontario educators this year. And may this school year bring you all constant reminders of why you chose this profession as you see the smiles on students' faces.

The Trillium Working Group

Dr. Peter Orange, editor-in-chief, chair
Deanna Perry, layout editor

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LEAP Institute A Success!

ASCD's 2006 Leadership for Effective Advocacy and Practice Institute in Washington D.C. is designed to bridge the divide between educational policy and practice and is one of many opportunities for ASCD leadership to acquire content knowledge and skills to be effective advocates for sound policies that support best learning and teaching practices.

Ontario ASCD representatives Ivan Saari (President), Roland Kay and Mary Nanavati (Leadership Council) attended the 4 day Institute, engaged in sessions and dialogue with the worldwide educational community and heard from world-renowned authors and educator activists. In particular, common themes in Canadian education were identified as Canadian affiliate leaders spent a day with Annie Kidder, Executive Director for People For Education. Identified issues of poverty, aboriginal gaps, special needs students, the leadership bubble, dropout rates and student engagement, testing implications and ESL programs gave focus to ASCD position alignment and action plans for the coming year. We look forward to bringing you more news of our work on these initiatives in upcoming issues of Trillium!

Web Sites

Ontario ASCD: www.ascd.ca
ASCD Worldwide: www.ascd.org