

## “The Three Literacy Gaps and Title III of NCLB”

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### Abstract

*No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) attempts to ensure educational equity for all K-12 students. However, for the conceptual goals of NCLB to become reality, pre-service teacher training models must be modified to include a deeper understanding of individual differences and how these play out in classroom dynamics. The “Three Literacy Gaps” that hinder student learning must be understood by novice teachers: (1) the gap between the student and the text, including readability issues, background knowledge, experience, interest, motivation, language transfer, and tolerance for challenge; (2) the gap between the teacher and the student, including cultural and socioeconomic differences, language variables, perceptions, and expectations; and (3) the gap between the student and his peers, including cultural dynamics, family background, expectations, language, book access, learning rates, and literacy levels.

In particular, Title III of NCLB provides accountability for the progress of English Language Learners. However, without a deep understanding of the “Three Literacy Gaps” and appropriate bridgebuilding strategies that help—rather than hinder—learning, novice teachers and seasoned alike, will continue to orchestrate classroom environments that widen, rather than close achievement gaps on high-stakes assessments. The “Three Literacy Gaps” model infuses literature from reading, second language acquisition, learning theory, and multicultural dynamics.

### Introduction

Nearly one out of three students in the United States will not graduate from high school. Students from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) quartile are more than six times as likely to drop out than the highest SES quartile (Thornburgh, 2006). Most of California’s newest immigrants and English Language Learners (ELLs) are in the lowest quartile. This article will focus on the specialized needs of ELLs in the context of literacy and *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), bringing a multicultural perspective from having spent the majority of our careers focused on California’s diverse needs where half of the K-12 population have a first language other than English.

The *No Child Left Behind* Act (2001) mandates educational equity for all K-12 students, including English Language Learners (ELLs) as described in Title III. In the United States we have over five million English Learners and 1.6 millions ELLs are in California (Aguila, 2006). In California, the Dean of San Diego State University described it this way, “We have an undeclared state of emergency . . . almost one out of two African-American and Hispanic students drop out . . . we [California] may be the fifth economy in the world, but our schools are failing” (Meno, 2006). For the conceptual goals of *NCLB*

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to become reality, educators must examine every possible venue for increased quality of learning in the United States' school system by increasing quality of teacher training, student services, and measuring learning outcomes. This article focuses on the needs of ELLs, presenting a theoretical teacher training model, "The Three Literacy Gaps," which illustrates the complex barriers that inhibit student learning in the classroom and bridge building strategies that promote literacy.

To help the goals of *NCLB* become reality for all students, pre-service teacher training models must be modified to include a deeper understanding of individual differences and how these play out in classroom dynamics, particularly in the area of reading comprehension and literacy in general (Infante, 1996; Petersen, 1996; Turbill, 1996). The "Three Literacy Gaps" that hinder student learning must be understood by novice teachers: (1) the gap between the student and the text, including readability issues, background knowledge, experience, interest, motivation, language transfer, and tolerance for challenge; (2) the gap between the teacher and the student, including perceptions and expectations, cultural and socioeconomic status, and language variables; and (3) the gap between the student and his peers, including cultural dynamics, family background, expectations, language, book access, learning rates, and literacy levels. The teacher orchestrates a dynamic literacy environment and can build bridges to overcome these learning barriers, or literacy gaps, particularly for ELLs, thus providing an open pathway for lifelong learning.

In particular, Title III of *NCLB* provides accountability for the progress of English Language Learners (California Department of Education Language Policy and Leadership Office, 2005). Specifically, annual measurable achievement objective 1 (AMAO) calculates the percentage of ELLs making annual progress on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). The CELDT is the California state assessment which monitors ELL growth from year to year. The results of the CELDT places ELLs in one of five proficiency levels—Beginning, Early Intermediate, Intermediate, Early Advanced, and Advanced. For AMAO 1, ELLs at the Beginning, Early Intermediate, and Intermediate levels are expected to gain one proficiency level. Those at the Early Advanced or Advanced level who are not yet English proficient

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are expected to achieve the English proficient level on CELDT. Those at the English proficient level are expected to maintain that level.

Similarly, AMAO 2 calculates the percentage of ELLs attaining English proficiency on the CELDT. In order to meet AMAO 2, 30.7 percent or more of the ELLs in the cohort must attain the English proficient level.

Finally, AMAO 3 holds the Title III local educational agencies (LEAs) accountable for meeting targets for the ELL subgroup that are required of all schools and LEAs, which can be a district or county office of education, under NCLB. The academic achievement targets specify the percent of ELLs that must be proficient or above in English-language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Title III accountability is at the LEA level only (California Department of Education Language Policy and Leadership Office, 2005).

However, even though ELLs are passing the CELDT, 40% of ELLs are still failing the English-language arts on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) (Gándara, 2006). Without a deep understanding of “The Three Literacy Gaps” and appropriate bridge building strategies that help—rather than hinder— learning, novice teachers and seasoned alike, will continue to orchestrate classroom environments that widen, rather than close achievement gaps on high-stakes assessments for English Learners. The “Three Literacy Gaps” model infuses literature from reading, second language acquisition, learning theory, and multicultural dynamics.

### **Literacy Gap #1: The Gap between the Student and the Text**

For some students, learning comes easy. However, for the immigrant child, the English Language Learner (ELL), and/or the child who speaks non-standard English, learning can be difficult. These ELLs have specialized literacy gaps that emerge from the incongruity between their home and school worlds. The first gap that emerges is between the student and the text itself. This literacy gap encompasses the many issues that create barriers between the child and the comprehension of the text, including readability issues, background knowledge and experience, interest, motivation, language transfer, and tolerance for challenge.

**Figure 1. The Gap between the Student and the Text**

<b>STUDENT</b>	<b>GAP</b> <b>readability issues</b> <b>interest</b> <b>motivation</b> <b>language transfer</b> <b>tolerance for challenge</b>	<b>TEXT</b>
<b>background knowledge and experience</b>		

*Readability*

Multiple factors affect readability of text. Readability in the strictest sense, is a formula for calculating a grade level equivalent for a particular passage, usually involving sentence length and numbers of words or syllables. As a result, the teacher can identify that a particular book is written at the fourth grade readability level (4.0) or is at the middle fifth grade readability level (5.5). He would then match a fourth grade reader (4.0) with a fourth grade book (4.0) or a middle fifth grade reader (5.5) with a middle fifth grade book (5.5). This pairing between the text’s readability level and the child’s reading level would be considered an appropriate match. The assumption would be that the text would be at the student’s “instructional” level, because there was a readability match. The assumption is also that appropriate instructional progress can be made when a teacher matches the student’s reading level to the text’s readability level. Even though vocabulary and sentence length formulas can indicate readability levels, the astute classroom practitioner must also understand the three cueing systems that contribute to understanding text—*grapho-phonics*, *semantics*, and *syntax*—and how these relate the English learner.

Grapho-phonics refers to the relationship between graphemes and phonemes (phonics) and the student’s ability to lift print off the page. Graphemes or letters (e.g., ch, th, ck, ea) are the written representations of phonemes or sounds (e.g., /ch/, /th/, /k/, /e/). Most children readily acquire phonics skills as they study the relationship between the spoken word and the written representation. However,

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some students who are native English-speakers can struggle with phonics. For example, an African American child who speaks non-standard English may say, “I *asked* my mother for a drink” but it would sound like, “I *axed* my mother for a drink.” When coming to the study of phonics, these non-Standard English pronunciations provide challenge during the early days of making one-to-one correspondences between spoken and written words. It is critical that the instructor explicitly point out these differences so the students can systematically see the differences. Additionally, a student who is a native Spanish speaker is accustomed to a completely phonetic linguistic system; whereas, English is phonetically inconsistent, borrowing from many other languages. Bridge building strategies for non-English speakers include pointing out cognates, grammar similarities, and grammar differences.

Contrastive analysis, a method by which linguistic differences can be highlighted between two target languages, is one way in which phonetic differences can be explicitly taught. For example, Spanish-speaking ELLs often invert the phoneme /b/ for /v/ as in the words *berry* and *very*. When such inversions are made, students can be asked to repeat the phonemes /b/ and /v/ and asked to analyze where in the mouth the words are formed. It can then be explained that the phoneme /b/ is a bilabial sound, which is formed when the front of one’s lips touch. In contrast, the phoneme /v/ is a labial-dental sound, which is formed with one’s two front teeth touch the front of the bottom lip. Teachers may choose to do this kind of work in front of a mirror so that students can view the formation of such sounds if they cannot feel them. In addition, this kind of work should be done sensitively and works best either one-on-one or in small groups. Unnatural attention should not be given to students who struggle with sound formation.

In California, student language backgrounds include Mandarin and Cantonese which are not phonetic, but involve characters; whereas, Arabic and Spanish speakers are accustomed to their languages represented phonetically. Bridge building strategies for these non-native English speakers involve explicitly pointing out these differences and providing tutorials and extra scaffolding strategies to help fill in the gaps. Utilizing teaching assistants and parent volunteers who are fluent in the students’ native language(s) is particularly effective.

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A powerful bridge building strategy for all learners is to utilize books on tape and printed bilingual books that show both languages. Additionally, with writing, a powerful bridge building strategy is to have the students write the piece in their native language first and then translate into English. The authors found this strategy particularly helpful with their Portuguese-speaking and Laotian students. Peer assistance for their Spanish-speaking and Arabic-speaking students were also powerful bridge building strategies.

Semantics refers to meaning. Semantics involves the understanding of parts of words (morphemes), individual words, phrases, sentences, and passages. Semantics also involves the literal understanding of the passage (reading on the lines), as well as reading “between the lines” (understanding the subtleties of the passage), and “reading beyond the lines” (applying the text). Teachers need to consistently assess student understanding in all three areas as they measure comprehension. Oftentimes, non-English speakers (as well as native English speakers) can parrot back basic answers to literal comprehension questions (e.g., What is the main character’s name? The main character’s name is Dona . . .) which misleads the novice teacher into thinking that the student understands the passage. However, the more fully trained teacher will realize that true comprehension also involves a deep understanding of the subtleties of the text as well as the ability to manipulate and apply the text to other situations, including text-to-text connections (e.g., similar themes exist in C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* as in Tolkien’s trilogy) and text-to-life connections (e.g., the student compares the character’s experience with his own).

The importance of building schema for technical vocabulary in the comprehension of text cannot be overemphasized. For example, if an ELL is going to read a science chapter about the California Gray Whale, it will be essential that she understand technical terms, such as *mammal*, *baleen*, *calf*, *spouting*, *spyhopping*, *migration*, *flukes*, *filter feeder*, and so forth. Without understanding these technical terms, it will be difficult to comprehend a California Gray Whale text. The astute instructor sees the potential literacy gaps between student and text and introduces the vocabulary prior to reading the passage, providing literacy bridge building strategies, such as video clips and illustrations, thereby helping the

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student decipher the meanings of the technical vocabulary in context after adequate schema building has taken place.

Syntax refers to word order which relates to grammar. Native and non-native English speakers easily transfer aspects of syntax which are similar. However, differences in syntax between the child's oral language and the student's textbook will create a gap or challenge. For example, a child who grows up speaking non-standard English will have some trouble comprehending a typical reading text. In America, many African American children who grow up speaking non-standard English are quickly challenged by the mismatch between their home language and the academic language of their textbooks when they enter school. For example, typical English syntax might be, "Henry doesn't care,"; whereas, in Black English, a child might say, "Henry, he don't care." A bridge building strategy to assist is acknowledging and discussing the differences so that the student processes the differences in the context of support for both home and school languages.

Additionally, non-native English speakers are often challenged by grammar differences as well. In English, we would say *the blue house*; whereas, in Spanish we would say *la casa azul* (the house blue). Naturally then, the native German speaker would easily translate *das blau Häus* to *the blue house*, but the native French or Spanish speaker would need to make a syntactical adjustment. The knowledgeable instructor sees the "gap" and supports the student in leaping over the chasm.

Though this discussion of readability of text is by no mean comprehensive, common variables of readability that create gaps between student and learner have been discussed. However, the most critical potential gap between student and the text is the gap between his background knowledge and experience as it relates to the text. Background knowledge and experience is foundational to all three literacy gaps.

### *Background Knowledge and Experience*

Background knowledge and experience hugely influences a child's ability to comprehend text. When administering an informal reading inventory to a fifth grader, a young man read the third grade passage and received a 98% score on word accuracy but a 20% score on comprehension. Intuitively, the instructor sensed that the student simply did not have the background experience necessary to comprehend the

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passage. She chose to give him the fourth grade passage even though this went against the directions of the reading inventory. The student scored 95% accuracy on word recognition and 75% on comprehension. It made no sense that the child would have 20% reading comprehension on the third grade passage but 75% comprehension on the fourth grade passage. However, the third grade passage was about a rodeo and the fourth grade passage was on a familiar topic for the child. After the informal assessment was administered, the instructor asked the child, "Have you ever been to a rodeo?" the child responded, "No."

The instructor had grown up going to rodeos every summer of her life in California. Corrals, cowboys, lassos, bulldogging, saddles, Brahma bulls were common vocabulary and common sights in her childhood. When the instructor read the rodeo passage, images of childhood swept across her mental screen, replaying scenes as if she were the central character. Unfortunately, however, for the student without this background experience, there was no text-to-life connection. Hence, even when a teacher has made the text to student match (4.0 to 4.0), there can still be a major disconnect or gap in understanding. The astute instructor recognizes the critical importance of schema building prior to approaching the text. Bridge building strategies that build background knowledge include picture walks, text overviews, video clips, and hands-on experiences.

### *Interest*

Children have varied interests in reading. For example, children in the primary grades tend to have a huge curiosity about animals. When examining the gap between the student and the text, an instructor can capitalize on interest which contributes to intrinsic motivation by administering reading interest inventories to her students. Then, based upon the children's interest, the instructor can provide a bounty of books available at the students' readability levels on these topics.

Insightful, energetic teachers may create elaborate activities to pique the interest of students and to build background knowledge and experience prior to reading content area textbooks. For example, prior to reading a social studies textbook chapter about the Gold Rush of the 1840s in California, a teacher purchased 400 butterscotch candies. During recess break, she hid these candies all over the classroom. Some candies were hid alone, while other candies were hidden as a group of two, three, or even ten.

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Before inviting her children back into the room after recess, she showed the children one butterscotch candy. She told her students that each butterscotch candy represented “gold” and that hundreds were hidden in the classroom. Excitement mounted. Then, she gave the children a few guidelines for safe searching and the children feverishly hunted for the candy. Excitement and laughter filled the air as children hurried to locate hundreds of butterscotch candies in about three minutes. Some children had a huge pile of candy on their desks, while others only had a few pieces. This instructor then began to ask the children how they felt when they were hunting for the candy. “I was so-o-o excited—especially when I found a whole bunch of pieces. My heart beat fast. I wanted to find more!” The instructor then went on to explain, “This is how the early pioneers felt during the Gold Rush when they had ‘gold fever.’ They would find a vein of gold, or hear about a vein of gold, and feverishly rush to dig for more gold.”

The instructor, the primary author, then introduced key terms: *pioneer*, *Gold Rush*, *gold fever*, *gold*, *cradle*, *pick*, *axe*, and so forth. She would then show a short video clip on the Gold Rush or have pioneer guests dressed in costume, carrying Gold Rush gear, arrive to tell their story. By the time the children came to the text, they were hungry readers struggling through dense text to find meaning. This instructor had filled in the “gap,” the missing background knowledge and experience, by providing hands-on experience, video clips, and guests in costume. The students now had background and keen interest and could bring meaning to the text.

### *Motivation*

Motivation is also critical. A recent study by Wang and Guthrie (2004) examined the effects of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, amount of reading, and past reading achievement on text comprehension between U.S. and Chinese students. The variables that represented intrinsic motivation were curiosity, involvement, and challenge. The variables represented extrinsic motivation were recognition, grades, social, competition, and compliance. Results indicate that “intrinsic motivation was positively related to text comprehension in both U.S. and Chinese children when the variables of past reading achievement, extrinsic motivation, amount of reading for school, and amount of reading for

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enjoyment were controlled for. In contrast, extrinsic motivation was negatively associated with text comprehension among these children after controlling for other variables” (p. 178).

Psychological literature tells us that “40-50% of performance is mediated by motivation” (Rueda, 2006). “People in any culture must first feel safe before any meaningful human and intellectual interaction can take place. When fear becomes a predominant emotion—as it does for many students learning English—the entire enterprise of learning comes to a screeching halt” (Reeves, 2005, p. 74). Hence, the classroom practitioner must create a safe environment in which English Language Learners can take risks and enjoy reading for pleasure without continual fear regarding assessment. There must be an emphasis on enjoyment of reading for meaning (internal motivation) and not an overemphasis on the assessments (external motivation).

Relationships are the central hub of learning. Teacher/student relationships can contribute to flow in learning or completely deflate student motivation. Fear or threat closes down students’ emotions, inviting chemical brain reactions that release chemicals that shut down learning (Caulfield, Kidd, and Kochner, 2000; Goleman, 1994; Jensen, 2000). Conversely, a comfortable, loving environment where students feel safe to ask questions, get help, and express their needs, invites a nurturing atmosphere conducive to learning (Caulfield, Kidd, and Kochner, 2000; Fowler and D’Arcangelo, 1999).

### *Language Transfer*

Students’ home language(s) are their greatest linguistic resources. One way to transfer language from the mother tongue to the second language is via the use of cognates, a powerful bridge building strategy. Cognates are words that sound the same and have similar meanings in two languages. For example, *democracy* and *democracia* are cognates in English and Spanish. These two words sound the same and have similar meanings. Teachers of second language learners can keep a cognate word wall in their classrooms where they can track words with such similarities. This word wall can be kept both as a bulletin board display in the classroom, as well as an individual word wall list kept in a student folder or portfolio. Word walls follow the spiral theory of mastery whereby repetition reinforces previously learned principles (Allen, 1999). Word walls allow students to be exposed to new words multiple times,

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and as such, internalize new words as they are recycled throughout the school year. Drawing attention to similarities between words in two languages is also one of the most resourceful and efficient ways to teach vocabulary to ELLs. It is an efficient approach to vocabulary development for ELLs in that target words are connected to words already part of the student's language repertoire. This, then, also becomes an asset model in that there is a focus on what the ELL already brings to the educational experience in terms of language, instead of an overemphasis on what the student does not already bring with him.

Unfamiliar idioms create a huge gap between the learner and the text. Select ELL-friendly texts that use a minimum of idioms. Also, create "Idiom Dictionaries," an effective bridge building strategy, that explain unfamiliar expressions that cannot be explained by the literal interpretation of conjoined phrases. For example, when students hear the idiom, "I was on the fence about the decision," they may work through an exercise whereby they analyze both the literal and figurative meaning of the expression. Students can draw both the literal and figurative meanings on a sheet of paper, along with sentences that display their understanding of both the literal and figurative meaning so that the expression does not become a hindrance for them in the future. ELLs can then keep idiom logs where they list idioms as they arise in texts or in oral language in classroom.

### *Tolerance for Challenge*

Each student has an individual tolerance for challenge. The insightful instructor recognizes how much she can push each student and when to back off so as to keep her students progressing at an appropriate level and pace. A colleague, who was an immigrant from Mexico, spoke no English when she came as a 16-year-old to California. She was placed in a newcomers' class where the curriculum was extremely simple. She asked the teacher to go into a more difficult class. Her teacher said, "No." She asked the Vice Principal if she could go into a more difficult class. The Vice Principal said, "No." Finally, she asked the Principal who told her "Yes, but prepare to fail. It will be too difficult." This determined 16-year-old worked long hours and lived with her Spanish/English dictionary. After two years, she graduated from high school at the top of her class. Granted, this was an exceptional young lady, but the point is this—if work is too easy, it results in disengagement. If work is too difficult, it can also result in disengagement.

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Educators need to facilitate students working in flow. Csikszentmihalyi describes flow theory in his seminal work *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990). In this book, he describes flow as the optimal conditions in which an individual can perform at his or her best. These conditions include the ability to concentrate on the task and immediate feedback to measure success. When an individual is in flow there will be a “deep and seemingly effortless involvement in the task” which means the task is at the appropriate level of challenge. Csikszentmihalyi also describes that concern for self disappears as the individual is lost in the task—the affective filter is low, the student feels safe, non-threatened, and can focus on the task at hand.

Robert Rueda, Professor and Literacy Specialist in the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, described an English Language Learner he observed in a local high school. Rueda (2006) described a student who on one day wrote only a few sentences during an entire language arts period as he responded to his teacher’s writing prompt. The teacher then assumed that the student simply had poor English and poor writing skills. However, the following day the student came in and said his cousin had been shot. The teacher asked him to write about this experience. For the next few hours the student deeply absorbed himself in the task and presented to his teacher five pages of handwritten narrative on this traumatic experience. The teacher learned from this experience that it is easy to make wrong assumptions about the challenge levels needed by ELLs. With this particular student, she had made an incorrect judgment regarding his ability level. When the student had a topic of interest to him, he demonstrated that he was able to take on, not only the level of challenge of the previous day’s assignment, but could easily exceed the level of challenge as he had a meaningful topic about which to write.

Drop out statistics demonstrate that both gifted and low ability students drop out from high school (Thornburgh, 1996). The key is engaging the students at the appropriate level of challenge in work that is of interest to them with a mentor who is able to assist them in them at their appropriate level of growth.

### *Summary*

Literacy gap #1, the gap between the student and the text, requires not only that the teacher be able to match texts with the student’s readability level, but also requires that the teacher is keenly aware of the

child’s interests, motivation, background and experience, language transfer, and tolerance for challenge. The instructor must build bridges between the student and the text when gaps are present.

**Literacy Gap #2: The Gap between the Student and the Teacher**

Gap #2, the gap between the teacher and student, widens when educators are not sensitive to their own perceptions and expectations of student performance, differences in cultural and socioeconomic status between student and teacher, and language variables between student and teacher.

**Figure 2. Gap between the Student and the Teacher**

<b>STUDENT</b>	<b>GAP</b> <b>perceptions</b> <b>expectations</b> <b>culture</b> <b>socioeconomic status</b> <b>language variables</b>	<b>TEACHER</b>
<b>background knowledge and experience</b>		

*Perceptions and Expectations*

Establishing and holding high expectations for all students is an essential component to successfully meeting individual needs and is also a guiding principle of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (August & Hakuta, 1997; August & Pease-Alvarez, 1996; Brisk, 1998; Education Trust, 2003). Moreover, teachers’ expectations of students are inextricably linked to their perceptions about students’ abilities, their own pedagogical skills and their content knowledge (Howard, 1995; Ferguson, 1998; Wenglinsky, 2001). When educators are not well-informed regarding the population and needs of the students they instruct, they unknowingly hinder, instead of further educational progress.

Research reported by Dusek and Joseph (1986) suggests that teachers of African American and Mexican American students were not expected to perform as well as White students. In this manner, low

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expectations are communicated to students by teachers in either covert or overt ways. According to Brophy (1983), students of teachers with low expectations demonstrated their low expectations in the following ways:

- a) Were called on less frequently—these students were often overlooked or were the recipients of inequitable treatment when called upon;
- b) When called on, provided less time to respond—on average, such students were given one to two seconds of wait time versus the five to seven seconds needed to create a well-formulated response;
- c) Were given the answer rather than helped to solve the problem themselves—students were asked lower level questions, and were given the answer, instead of time to formulate a response of their own;
- d) Were criticized more often, and praised less—students were not given positive feedback for their responses; and
- e) Were paid less positive attention, but disciplined more strictly—students were not given equitable treatment either for their positive or negative behavior.

In order to close this gap, educators must begin to examine and unveil their belief systems about the students that they teach. As teachers begin this examination, they must also be open to on-going reflective examination, clarifying their own belief systems. Oftentimes, bridge building strategies require teachers stepping into the lives of their students by surveying students about their backgrounds and interests; making home visits to bridge communication between school and home; and conducting community mapping projects to understand more about the assets surrounding the community in which their students live.

By surveying student interests, educators can collect important background information, such as students' favorite authors or hobby interests. Interests and hobbies can then influence text selections, instructional techniques, and development of learning exercises. Additionally, utilization of personal interests promotes motivation. For example, if a teacher determines that a struggling reader in her

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classroom enjoys car magazines, he/she can encourage the student to select a book about cars for silent sustained reading time.

Home visits can allow educators to view their students in a more positive light, as well as build rapport and support between the home and school. Dr. Doretha O'Quinn of Biola University takes educators on "urban plunges" where they go into the inner city of Los Angeles, visit neighborhoods, libraries, museums, and eat in the restaurants, completely absorbing themselves in the community culture and language of their students.

Finally, community mapping projects allow educators to explore assets and resources surrounding the school. For example, when exploring the community, a teacher may find that a local church has after-school tutoring. The teacher may advise his/her parents and students about this and work with the church to specify student needs. In this way, community resources can be utilized as funds of knowledge, supporting classroom learning, and building bridges between the teacher and the students.

*Cultural and Socioeconomic Differences:* Cultural and socioeconomic differences between the teacher and the student can create gaps of misunderstanding. Caring teachers must know their students and build bridges into the students' home culture. Valdés (1996) reminds us that assistance to Mexican-origin families must be based on "an understanding and an appreciation and respect for the internal dynamics of these families" (p. 203). Educators must begin to explore cultural and socioeconomic differences as assets to school life and the classroom. Exploration of cultural and socioeconomic differences can inform educators in how to do their work better, instead of deterring educational progress. Similarly, educators must challenge the notion that parents who rear their children in ways that do not fit traditional American expectations do not parent well. Instead, as Valdés (1996) suggests, "In this age, when there is talk about the value of diversity, both practitioners and policymakers must be willing to accept the fact that new immigrants bring with them models of living life successfully that can not only enrich our society but also provide for these new Americans in what is now a very dangerous new world" (p. 203).

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As Trumbull and colleagues (2001) note, communication among educators and culturally diverse families often entails assumptions based on cultural values about child-rearing and schooling, and these must be understood and bridged if true partnerships are to be forged. By embracing a holistic approach that involves “the whole child, the whole curriculum, and the whole community” (Genesee, 1994, p. 15) all students can be better supported for academic success (Genesee, 1994). This holistic approach includes exploring the assets that families already bring to the educational system. That is, before the system decides that there is a deficit within the community or family, assets must be explored and defined. There must be a concerted effort to find assets within the community and to reconsider what such assets might look like. This process, then, embraces the viewpoint of wholeness where the entire child, and his/her needs, is considered.

*Language Variables:* Valdés (1998) and Callahan (2005) warn about the harmfully low expectations implicit in “watering down” academic content for ELLs, and tracking them into strands of coursework that are below grade level standards. Interconnected with the critical component of holding and realizing high expectations for ELLs is their being taught grade level content at the same time as they acquire academic English skills. Traditionally, ELLs have been instructed using methods that developed English skills first, before they were allowed to access more cognitively demanding core academic content. This practice has led to high numbers of ELLs attaining basic English fluency but not academic English skills or grade-level academic proficiency in a timely manner (Valdes, 2001; Scarcella, 2003). Gibbons (2002) argues strongly that academic content must not wait until language is acquired. Instead, teachers can successfully teach language *through* content.

Delpit (1988), when writing in the context of African American students in the United States argues that if one is already not a part of the dominant culture, being told the explicit rules of that culture makes acquiring a new culture easier. That is, those implicit codes that have been engrained to members of the culture must be made explicit to those outside of the culture. Delpit writes, “But parents who don’t function within that culture often want something else . . . they want to ensure that the school provides

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their children with discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken to written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society” (p. 20).

Lower socioeconomic parents, like the parents of middle and upper-class children, want their children equipped with academic skills for college and beyond. And, since children from impoverished homes may not already be equipped with implicit academic codes, it is the responsibility of teachers to make those codes explicit for all children. Explicit means directly taught and clearly defined without assumptions of prior knowledge. Explicit literacy instruction means the utilization of authentic language and purposes. Explicit literacy instruction does not mean mindless grammar drills taught out of context of student writing or authentic literature. Instead, the conventions of reading and writing must be taught in a reflective manner, with real-life examples, so that students are able to use language for a range of purposes. Therefore, teachers explicitly build bridges to fill in gaps between students’ home languages and the language of the dominant culture.

Examples of explicit bridge building literacy instruction would also include addressing idioms and figurative language. Idiomatic language is something that ELLs often struggle with because it is usually culturally bound. Teachers commonly use idioms and figurative language in their daily teaching. Teaching students to compare figurative and literal language is a helpful resource in assisting students to unpack the meaning behind idioms. This language comparative method also gives ELLs a structure or toolkit by which to unveil meaning behind future unknown words, expressions, or phrases. Such giftings of bridge building strategies to reach across the gap between the students’ home language and the daily language of their teachers, motivates and prepares all students for the futures they deserve.

### *Summary*

The teacher then, not the student, is responsible for bridging the gap between herself and her students as it relates to perceptions and expectations of student performance, differences in cultural and socioeconomic status, and language variables between teacher and student. The caring, perceptive teacher acknowledges these differences or “gaps” between her own background and her students’ background,

and reaches out to the student to bridge the divide, supporting the English Language Learner in his learning endeavors.

**Literacy Gap #3: The Gap Between the Student and His Peers**

Gap #3 is the gap between the student and his peers. The gap includes cultural dynamics, family expectations, language, book access, learning rates, and literacy levels. The insightful practitioner must work to differentiate his teaching so as to build bridges between students in the learning classroom, rather than allow differences to widen gaps between students, hence alienating ELLs from their peers.

**Figure 3. The Gap between the Student and his Peers**

<b>STUDENT</b>	<b>GAP</b>  <b>cultural dynamics</b>  <b>family background &amp; expectations</b>  <b>language</b>  <b>book access</b>  <b>learning rates</b>  <b>literacy levels</b>	<b>PEERS</b>
<b>background knowledge and experience</b>		

*Cultural Dynamics*

Cultural dynamics influence acquisition of reading skills throughout a child’s academic career, particularly in learning styles and social interaction variables in the context of the classroom environment.

Students tend to enjoy learning alone or learning in a group. For example, when a student is from a culture that is group-oriented, she will tend to discuss learning with her peers and enjoy cooperative group activities. Learning from a peer and making a mistake in front of a peer is acceptable. Therefore, the

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student from the group- oriented culture will tend to respond positively to bridge building strategies such as cooperative groups, pair/shares, think tanks, and group presentations in the context of literacy lessons. Sharing information in the learning context of a cooperative, rather than competitive cultural dynamic, matches the student's learning preferences.

However, a student from a culture that is more oriented towards working or learning alone may feel shame when making a mistake in front of her peers. This tendency to feel shame may affect her interaction in a cooperative group. A bridge building strategy that is helpful in this case is to allow students multiple options of accomplishing a task. For example, "You may work alone or with a partner to read through the three poems and write a comparative essay." This provides the student who prefers to work alone an option to do so; whereas, the student who is more of a social learner can rely on her peers.

Two cautions are in order related to cultural dynamics and learning styles. First, teachers must avoid overgeneralizing cultural tendencies to every student from a specific culture. So, for example, because sibling caretaking is common among Hawaiians, it does not mean that every Hawaiian child will be group oriented. And, because Latino cultures also tend to be group oriented does not mean that every Latino student will prefer to work in a group.

Secondly, when the instructor understands the cultural dynamics of his classroom and the subsets of learning styles within those cultures, he can more readily adjust his instruction to allow for both individual and group activities. The student working within a context that is a fit for her learning style and cultural preferences, lowers the affective filter, inviting learning in a comfortable atmosphere, rather than distressing the student due to the sociocultural context. Eventually, every student must develop proficiency working alone, as well as in a group, in order to develop the requisite skills for career success. However, the insightful instructor is aware of these dynamics and gently introduces students to new venues for learning.

The instructor must also understand the social interactions of each cultural subgroup represented in his classroom and the potential misunderstandings or gaps that can emerge between the groups. For example, female Islamic students may tend to defer to males in a mixed gender group due to sociocultural roles.

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Likewise, females of Asian cultures may also tend to defer to others within classroom dialogue. In the Thai culture, it is even considered disrespectful to ask questions of the instructor. These examples of deference would be demonstrating respect for teacher and peers, and not lack of understanding. Instructors must find ways to maximize all students' participation in the learning process through bridge building strategies that promote literacy. For example, the instructor may want to provide opportunities for gender specific reading groups, opportunities to read aloud with a friend and small group prior to the entire class, or individual listening stations for hearing books read aloud. If the instructor finds a student feels intimidated by public engagement in literacy learning, he may want to provide a parent volunteer, peer tutor, or self-paced learning materials.

### *Family Background and Expectations*

The extent to which children experience respect for family background modeled in the classroom will oftentimes impact students' abilities to respect each other. This means that teachers must be cognizant of what they do implicitly and explicitly to celebrate their students' family backgrounds. If respect and celebration for one's family background is not modeled, the children of newly arrived Americans, many of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, may come to believe as Saragoza (1983) suggests that material worth is equivalent to self worth. As Valdes (1998) suggests, "At that time, they may look at their parents—who are poor and have not managed to acquire materials symbols of success—with embarrassment. They may view them from the perspective of the majority society, and consider them failures" (p. 204).

In order to counter the phenomenon of valuing one's mainstream culture over home culture, there are a variety of bridge building strategies that can be utilized in the classroom setting. In particular, reading literature from a variety of perspectives, cultures and home lives can create the openness and dialogue needed for mutual appreciation of family background. Students may also participate in collecting, presenting and writing about artifacts from their culture or home that are special to them. Teachers may

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want to compare and contrast such artifacts in order to help students understand the uniqueness and commonalities between cultures. In this manner, it is directly what teachers do and the exercises that they select, which will impact children's ability to build bridges between each other.

Additionally, family background expectations will vary from family to family and student to student. With some families, little to no schooling has been enjoyed for generations. These families may value work more highly than the educational endeavor. Additionally, parents or grandparents may not only *not* speak English, but they may also not be able to read in their native tongue. These variations create critical dynamics between students. Whereas, one high school student may have the luxury of studying four hours each night and his parents may expect him to do so, the peer seated next to him may be working 30-40 hours per week to help support his family. A teacher must be sensitive to these differences in families' needs and expectations as they relate to literacy and classroom performance between peers.

### *Language*

Historically, American schools have valued English and monolingualism to the exclusion of other languages. Unless parents select bilingual programs for their students, students will oftentimes lose their native tongue or get the implicit message that their home language is not valued as much as English. The lack of value for the home language was reinforced with Proposition 227 in California when Bilingual Education was outlawed and parents needed to actually obtain a waiver to have their students in bilingual programs.

In order to create an atmosphere where bilingualism is valued between students, there are intentional strategies that teachers must employ. One bridge building method is creating an atmosphere of safety regarding use of the native tongue in the classroom. This means that even in mainstream English-speaking classrooms, teachers will both use the native tongue and allow students to use their native language. The teacher may opt to make connections between the native language and English as in the use of cognates. For example, *democracy* in English and *democracia* in Spanish sound the same and have the same meaning. Teachers may choose to keep cognate walls as a vocabulary tool in the classroom. Keeping such a resource in the classroom sends a message to students that their home language is both

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valued and a resource to new learning. It also allows students to know that they can use the native tongue to make meaning in the classroom.

English language learners will often clarify concepts or directions for each other in the native tongue. Many new, and sometimes seasoned, teachers feel uncomfortable with this notion. This is not to say that English is not taught or that English is not the target language in the classroom. Certainly, for students in mainstream and Structured English Immersion (SEI) programs, English is the goal. SEI (also referred to as Sheltered English Immersion) refers to classes where ELL students who have not yet met local district criteria for having achieved a "good working knowledge" (also defined as "reasonable fluency") of English are enrolled in an English language acquisition process for young children in which nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with a curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language. Although English is the goal in an SEI program, students must be allowed to clarify and expand upon concepts in students' home languages must become a part of the classroom culture of safety that is established by the teacher to promote practical connections between languages. Students can also be taught to contrast the linguistic features between the home language and English. They can explore both the value and commonalities both phonetically and morphologically.

### *Book Access*

Just as an individual who plays tennis gets better when he has access to a court, racket, and tennis balls, so does a reader get better when he has access to books at home and school that are at his ability level, on a topic of interest, and readily available for him to read. Jeff McQuillan (1998) describes access to print materials as the "critical variable affecting reading acquisition." McQuillan states that 61% of low income families have no books for children in their homes and the average of the rest of the lower SES families was zero to two books. Middle-income communities have an average of 54 books in their homes. High SES families have an average of 199 age-appropriate books. Communities ranking highest in reading assessments had a plethora of books in their public libraries, ease of access to books in the community, and many texts per student (McQuillan, 1998). Krashen underscored this need for book access and libraries in his seminal work, *Every Person a Reader* (1996) as he challenged the California

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Department of Education regarding their literacy approaches that lacked emphasis on the home, school, and community libraries.

Additionally, a tennis player improves when he has a coach who will provide feedback and exposure to better ways of playing. So also, the child entering school who has been read to has a larger vocabulary. Hart & Risley (1995) tell us that low-income children come into school in kindergarten with 3,000 words in their listening vocabulary, as opposed to a listening word bank of 20,000 for the middle-income child. Book access is key and can help the child overcome the limitations of poverty. Dickenson's study (1991) indicated that the home environment, specifically the reading material in the home environment, is a *stronger* predictor of later academic achievement than income. The library is the great equalizer in the United States as this blessed system provides free access to literature for every family, regardless of income.

The more a child reads, the better reader he becomes. Success breeds success and time on task, or practice, counts, just as it does in the game of tennis. The greatest bridge building strategy, then, to fill the gap that exists between student and peers is to ensure that every child, regardless of ability level, has books at his or her reading level and interest accessible to him at home and school on a regular basis so he can practice literacy through independent reading.

### *Learning Rates*

Students all learn at different rates and it is essential for the classroom instructor to make the learning environment a comfortable place for all learners. Because students vary in the amount of literacy support needed for learning phonics skills, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing skills, the astute classroom practitioner recognizes this learning gap. In response to student needs, she designs a learning environment that provides natural bridge building strategies that provide additional reinforcement of concepts as needed. These bridge building strategies generally fall into two broad categories: support within the classroom and support outside the classroom.

Support inside the classroom means accommodations for both faster and slower students. Faster students can "peel off" from the larger group and work independently when they find that have a mastery

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of the material being taught. Gifted and high achieving students are invited to experience more challenging materials. And, students can fluidly move up from one group to another as they advance rapidly. Advanced literature and challenging writing assignments are readily available as students demonstrate mastery.

Bridge building strategies for slower students means that students have opportunity for additional reinforcement of material studied until they have mastery. This includes a peer conversational tutor, a cross-age conversational tutor, games and fun that reinforce vocabulary, cooperative group activities, multiple readings of the same passage, instructional aides that have fluency in the students' home language, listening labs with books on tape, and books of interest that students can take home and read until they have mastered vocabulary.

Support outside the classroom for fast learners means plenty of library books on a variety of topics at a variety of levels that are accessible to ELLs who are rapid learners. Students can read voraciously, moving through material as rapidly as they are able. Many will enjoy library hours that extend before school, after school, and on week-ends. Reading clubs are fun and attractive to advanced ELLs who move quickly through the language arts program and need extra challenge.

Support outside the classroom for slow learners means providing before or after school tutoring, extra story times during lunch recess, self-paced materials for additional reinforcement, and technology support materials, such as computer programs. All children will enjoy opportunity for additional reinforcement and the pleasure of increased library access.

Critically important to bridging the gap of differing needs between students and peers when it comes to learning rates, is that the instructor must orchestrate a non-threatening learning environment where students feel safe. Students must feel free to ask questions as much as they need to, practice their learning as much as they need to, and fail again and again until they succeed—all without fear of ridicule.

### *Literacy Levels*

In most United States' classrooms, a fourth grade assignment does not mean that the teacher will be teaching 30 students who read at the fourth grade level. Instead, it generally means that the teacher will

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work with students who are at the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grade reading levels. This presents a huge challenge for the classroom teacher in elementary school and is only compounded as the grade level increases. Additionally, the challenge increases exponentially when the regular classroom teacher has a student who is in fourth grade, but reads at a third grade level in Spanish and a second grade level in English. And then the child sitting next to him reads at a sixth grade level in Portuguese but a third grade level in English. And then the child sitting next to the Portuguese-speaking student can read at the fourth grade level in Korean but only at the first grade level in English. And then the next child who has just immigrated has never attended school in his home country and has limited English speaking skills and no home language reading skills. And so it goes in a typical California classroom as literacy gaps rage between each student and his peers.

The way that California has approached handling this multiplicity of language abilities is to have parents fill out Home Surveys when they enroll their child in school. Then, if a second language is spoken in the home, the student will take the CELDT test (California English Language Development Test) to determine proficiency levels—beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced, or advanced. The student will then receive services based upon the results of the CELDT and parent selection of instructional program. Currently, in California, 47% of all ELLs are in Structured English Immersion (SEI) Programs. The goal of an SEI program is the rapid acquisition of English, while engaging with grade-level core content in English. Quality SEI programs offer an immersion setting for beginning and early intermediate ELLs in which most classroom instruction takes place in English, but with curriculum and instruction designed for accessibility, comprehension, and engagement. The primary language (L1) may be used for clarification and support throughout the day, but not for regular instruction in a content area.

The second largest percentage of ELLs, 33%, are in mainstream programs. Students in mainstream programs have met local district criteria for having achieved a “good working knowledge” of English and are provided with additional and appropriate services. Teachers of mainstream students will often utilize Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE), which is an approach used to teach

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academic courses to ELLs in English. Essentially, this approach focuses on increasing the comprehensibility of the academic courses normally provided to Fluent English Proficient (FEP) and English-only students in a district (WestEd, 2005).

Nevertheless, each teacher, seasoned or novice, is still faced with this third gap, the gap between the student and his peers, which challenges the instructor on a daily basis as he seeks to find the best ways to serve his students. Therefore, skillful differentiated teaching for literacy learning must be infused within the context of teacher training models. This third literacy gap, the gap between the student and his peers, helps the teacher recognize the need and match appropriate bridge building strategies. Appropriate bridge building strategies for gap number three include two categories: macro and micro differentiated literacy strategies.

Macro differentiated literacy strategies are those bridge building strategies that must be implemented by the administrator or school faculty, going beyond the walls of one classroom. Macro bridge building literacy strategies might include: grouping students by literacy levels in home rooms, grouping students by literacy levels during a language arts period of one to three hours per day, team teaching, pull out programs, before and after “extra help” group sessions, and utilizing volunteer or paid teaching assistants who can support students during classroom instruction.

Additionally, school and districtwide macro strategies to support second language learners include variations of effective bilingual programs, such as dual immersion (Wu, 2005) or “two-way bilingual immersion” (Lindholm-Leary, 2005) which are particularly helpful when you have two main target languages. Full and partial immersion programs are also implemented; however, the home language is often lost or underdeveloped in academic proficiency (subtractive bilingualism). And, unfortunately, in California, bilingual education dissolved to a public vote in California and Proposition 227, implemented in 1998, ended bilingual programs in California. Nevertheless, “research shows that bilingual education works” (Krashen, 2004/2005, p. 37) and variations of bilingual and trilingual programs are implemented all over the world with great success (Christian, Pufahl, and Rhodes, 2004/ 2005).

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Results of the five-year study monitoring the effects of the implementation of Proposition 227 in California included the following (WestEd & American Institutes for Research, 2006) since the passage of Proposition 227, students across all language classifications in all grades have experienced performance gains on state achievement tests:

- During this time, the performance gap between English learners and native English speakers has remained virtually constant in most subject areas for most grades.
- That these gaps have not widened is noteworthy given the substantial increase in the percentage of English learners participating in statewide tests, as required by federal and state accountability provisions.
- Limitations in state data make it impossible to definitively resolve the long-standing debate underlying Proposition 227 as to whether one instructional model is more effective for California's English learners than another. However, based on the data currently available, there is no evidence to support an argument of the superiority of one English learner instructional approach over another.
- Interviews with representatives of schools and districts among the highest performers in the state with substantial English learner populations further supported the finding that there is no single path to academic excellence among English learners.
- The factors identified as most critical to student success were: staff capacity to address English learners' linguistic and academic needs; schoolwide focus on English language development and standards-based instruction; shared priorities and expectations in educating English learners and systematic, ongoing assessment and careful data use to guide instruction.

Despite all of these findings, WestEd and the American Institute for Research (2006) still found that the likelihood of an English learner meeting the linguistic and academic criteria needed to reclassify them to fluent English proficient status after 10 years in California schools is less than 40 percent. Increasing the quality of teacher training models and outcomes remains essential.

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Micro bridge building literacy strategies are fully under the classroom teacher's control. These strategies are used within the context of the homeroom where students with varying reading levels are present, yet the teacher must make the content accessible to all students in her teaching. "The Three Literacy Gaps" Model can assist in this as the classroom practitioner conceptualizes the many variables that interplay in her dynamic classroom environment, practicing practical, research-based bridge building strategies for her tool kit that include appropriate student-text matches, building background knowledge, teaching technical vocabulary, providing scaffolding, as she continually fills in the "gaps" between her students in their understanding of the text.

### *Summary*

The astute practitioner recognizes the third learning gap, the gap between the student and his peers, and carefully orchestrates classroom strategies to bridge the gaps related to cultural dynamics, family expectations, language, book access, learning rates, and literacy levels. Most importantly, all the learning gaps have as their foundation, the critical role of background knowledge and experience which must be taken into account as the instructor considers comprehensibility of text and lessons and variability of student differences.

### **Article Summary**

For the United States to provide equitable education for all students and to remain globally competitive, it must fulfill the tenets of NCLB as well as Title III. We need to "acknowledge the differences that exist in our classrooms—ethnic, racial, linguistic, gender, and class—and to question why these differences can create conditions of educational, economic, and political inequality" (Whittmore & Crowell, 2005/2006, p. 281). While successfully assisting many ELLs in passage of the CELDT, California educators struggle most to prepare ELLs for passage of the California High School Exit Exam (Gándara, 2006). Hence, ELLs *will* be left behind if classroom instructors are not adequately prepared through deepening their understanding of "The Three Literacy Gaps" that exist in every classroom and acquiring a wide range of bridge building strategies to assist student learning. Teacher training institutions

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and school districts must embrace and teach the conceptual notions behind the “The Three Literacy Gaps” Model—the gap between the student and the text, the student and his teacher, and the student and his peers—and support research-based bridge building strategies to support all learners, including English Language Learners, with access to literacy and an opportunity to reach his or her potential, to truly ensure that “no child is left behind.”

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