

**HOW SCHOOLS CAN HELP “UNDERSERVED” STUDENTS
SUCCEED**

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When I selected Patricia M. Cunningham as the theorist about whom I would research, I had no knowledge about her concepts or achievements. As a result of my research, I have come to respect her theory that all children can learn to read and write. I was a child who was raised in the inner-city and could have easily been written off as one who would be “at-risk” of failure. Due to my mother’s intuition, nurturing and high regard for education, I was motivated to be a good student and to strive to succeed. As a result, I do not embrace the term “at-risk” to describe students who have been “underserved” by the educational system.

Being raised in the inner-city and considered impoverished are factors that have led many to believe that these students are at risk for reading difficulties. With childhood poverty on the rise, we can project that more of the children who arrive in our classrooms will be at risk for academic failure.¹ I, like Pat Cunningham, understand that all students, despite their race, culture, or socioeconomic status can read, can write, can succeed, can perform and can learn. The test will be to see how well our schools prepare these students for the challenges that lie ahead of them.

Patricia Cunningham is a professor of education at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Pat began teaching in the 1960s and has taught first and fourth grades and remedial reading. She has over 30 years of teaching experience and is currently engaged in Four-Blocks® staff development across the United States.² The Four Blocks® Literacy Model was developed in 1989-90 by Pat Cunningham and Dottie Hall as a framework to teach all children to learn to read and write by using Guided Reading, Self-Selected Instruction, Writing and Working with Words as the four different approaches or “blocks” that when used daily, provide numerous and various opportunities for children to become proficient in their literacy development. This model is particularly useful for struggling readers because it acknowledges that children do not all learn in the same way and provides substantial instruction to support whatever learning personality a child comes with.³ Pat is an accomplished author, recognized for her research on contemporary phonics instruction, who has written more than 25 books, articles and publications.

¹ Cunningham, P. M. & Allington, R. L. (1999). *Classrooms that work: They can **all** read and write* (2nd edition). (p. 1). United States: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc.

² The Four Blocks Literacy Model. Retrieved March 6, 2006 from <http://www.four-blocks.com/about.htm>

³ The Four Blocks Literacy Model. Retrieved March 11, 2006 from <http://www.wfu.edu/academics/fourblocks/>

Contemporary approaches to phonics instruction are rooted in constructivist principals of learning (focused on the individual needs of the child) and the fact that children can learn phonics through meaningful engagement with reading real texts.⁴ Approaches for teaching phonics using a contemporary approach should include multiple strategies that provide opportunities for students to focus on reading stories, poems and plays; writing; and working with onsets and rimes. Pat Cunningham published *Phonics They Use* in 1991, which relies heavily upon students remembering rimes and substituting onsets to learn new words. (More information about Patricia M. Cunningham’s work in the classroom will be discussed in my partner’s paper. We decided to divide our discussion topics into “Classrooms that Work” and “Schools that Work” to incorporate the titles of two books co-authored by Ms. Cunningham.)

A comprehensive approach to literacy instruction is needed because children bring different learning styles and experiences into our schools. Take for example a child who has not had many opportunities at home to read, limited writing experiences or no practice with our alphabetic language. These students will start school at a disadvantage merely because they haven’t had the necessary home instruction, not because they are from the inner-city. As educators, we do these children a disservice if we do not take the steps to teach them how our alphabetic language works and thus, help speed up their ability to read and write. Teachers’ instructional practices and decisions (planning, interactions, and assessments) directly influence all students’ literate activities and attitudes toward reading and writing⁵; and ultimately learning. Phonics instruction is an important aspect of the teacher’s skill to engage underserved students in literary activities. Adams (1990) concluded that children –especially at-risk children –need a rich variety of reading and writing experiences as well as direct instruction in letter-sound patterns.⁶

Teachers and schools must be mindful that there are different levels of parental involvement and sometimes, just getting the child fed, bathed, clothed and off to school is all of the parental involvement that some parents can offer. All parents are not capable of helping with homework,

⁴ Vacca, J. A. L., Vacca, R. T. , Gove, M. K., Burkey, L. C., Lenhart, L. A. & McKeon, C. A. (2006). *Reading and learning to read* (6th edition). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc. (p. 184).

⁵ Ibid. (p. 28).

⁶ Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, MA:

reading a storybook, or writing a book report. Parents who are less educated run the risk of passing on nonchalant views about education that may serve to negatively influence their child's learning experience. On the other hand, the more educated parent shares positive school experiences with their child and encourages the child to do his best to obtain success in school. Schools must be designed so that children who lack parental supports are not placed at risk.⁷ For many children, teachers are the last and best hope for school and life success.⁸

Today, our schools have children from more diverse families, cultures, and experiences than ever before. Inclusion laws have mandated that students with special educational needs be put in the regular classroom and provided with the same access to free public education. In addition, we have children in our schools who as a result of the drug epidemic, are labeled as having learning disabilities, behavioral disorders and/or are emotionally impaired. It is in the best interest of schools to become flexible in meeting the needs of these children and their families.

There are several ways that schools can reach out to the families of underserved children in an effort to show support and encourage academic success. One is to hold cultural diversity days where children and their parents are invited to share some unique aspect of their culture, e.g., food, clothing, religion or tradition. Another option is to ask parents to serve as tutors for English only speakers (parents and students) who are interested in learning a new language. Parents of disabled students may want to "introduce" others to the disability, its causes and affects, or explain the proper etiquette used to interact with or accommodate their child. A "Daddy Saturday" is a great way for schools to acknowledge that many homes are headed by one parent as a result of divorce, separation, incarceration or death.

Most parents, regardless of their background, want the best for their children. Oftentimes, it becomes difficult for low income parents to provide the best for their children. Schools must be

M. I. T. Press.

⁷ Allington, R. L. & Cunningham, P.M. (1996). *Schools that work: Where all children read and write*. (p. 6). United States: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc.

⁸ Cunningham & Allington (1999). *Classrooms that Work* (p. 2).

understanding that the loss of a job, a loved one and/or a home does not mean that a parent is not interested in their child's academic success. What it does mean is that the parent is overwhelmed and may need a little assistance. The parent may need the school to contact the home with some encouraging news about the child's progress, the parent may need the school to offer resources that are available in the community to assist with their situation and the parent may need (and appreciate) a place to sit down, have a cup of coffee and talk it over with other parents.

Parents need to have meaningful and positive relationships with schools in order for productive school, family and community partnerships to develop. Since many teachers and administrators are not taught about the importance of family and community involvement, opportunities for professional development in these areas must be offered. It is important for school staff to model the kind of behavior they want to receive as customers because families and communities are the schools' "customers". If it were not for parents, schools would not have students! Therefore, schools (the administration and its teachers) must be willing to change its mindset and become more customer-friendly. Becoming a school where all children acquire thoughtful literacy will go a long way in meeting the new goals set for schools, but becoming a school where all children read and write thoughtfully will require teachers and administrators to develop new skills and strategies.⁹

Unlike many American businesses, most school districts do not invest the suggested 1 to 1.5 per cent of their operating budget on the professional development of staff. While much has been written about the need to keep workers competitive, school districts rarely allocate this amount of money or the time needed for professional development activities. Now that many school districts and educational advocates are touting school reform, we must be reminded that there will be no school reform unless there is some revolutionary change in the thinking and instructional practices of the schools' administrators and teachers. Several principles for attempting to change the instructional practices in any school include¹⁰:

⁹ Allington & Cunningham (1996). *Schools that work* (p. 152).

¹⁰ Ibid. (pp. 165-170).

- ☺ Involve teachers (and parents) in planning and gathering local data.
- ☺ Decide what you need more or less of.
- ☺ Identify teachers (and administrators) who want to improve.
- ☺ Look long. (There is no quick fix to the problems schools face.)
- ☺ Focus on one classroom at a time. (Good classrooms are the foundations for good schools.)
- ☺ Think commitment, not control. (Involve parents, teachers and staff in the planning, budgeting, curriculum and evaluation procedures to get a diverse view of the problems and solutions available.)

Teachers and administrators should be taught the importance of promoting positive student behaviors, rather than emphasizing the negative ones. Students must be taught that failure is an option that does not have to be chosen. They need to be reminded that just like a test requires a true or false answer, so does life...the options are just different--success or failure. Our schools play a very important role in raising poor students' self-esteem levels and disproving the stereotype that they can not and/or will not be academic achievers. When our schools hire teachers who are willing to raise the level of expectation for all students, develop productive relationships with families and communities and begin to think "outside of the box" for solutions; our students, our families, our schools and our communities will benefit.

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