Introduction

In some respects, the conditions of poverty and near-poverty are worse than the statistics would indicate. The reason for this is that several key social and public goods have become increasingly inaccessible for a number of American households. In particular, a quality education, health care, affordable housing, and child care either are out of reach or are obtained only at the cost of considerable economic expenditure and hardship. Yet these social goods are vital in building and maintaining healthy and productive citizens and families.

—Mark R. Rank, *One Nation, Underprivileged*

According to researchers such as Rank (2005), we have lived under the deficit model for viewing poverty for some time. The assumption has often been that since the economic system generates prosperity for anyone willing to work hard, if you are poor it must mean that you are a personal failure. After all, this is the land of opportunity. Living in poverty means that you failed to work hard or that you have a lack of intelligence or some other character flaw. Rank points to the research of Gilder (1981), Hernstein and Murray (1994), and Schwartz (2000) who list the common assumptions about why people are poor:

1. Absence of strong morals

2. Failure to exert responsibility

3. Laziness

4. An inability to save for the future

5. Lack of intelligence

6. Addictions to alcohol or drugs

In other words, we often view poverty through the lens of inadequacy, and indeed many of our "solutions" for closing achievement gaps in school hover around a plan to "fix" poor kids. Many of these plans have involved special pull-out programs, retention, and a temptation to make sweeping assumptions

about children from poverty that would have us assume that all children from poverty are alike. After years and hundreds of millions of dollars spent on programs to close the gap, we now know that there is something at work here besides just poverty. We also know that all children from poverty are not alike.

In this book we examine the effects of poverty on children, but we will not make the assumption that all poverty is alike. Indeed, there is a vast difference between the effects of poverty on children living in a volatile inner-city neighborhood riddled with daily violence and a child living in poverty in rural America. These are cultural differences, and they do not stop with this example; culture is the lens through which we view the world, and it affects how we approach education. Culture is created by heritage and by environment, by the approach to learning and by how it is valued. Culture includes the expectations, traditions, values, roles, and modes of learning that may go back thousands of years. Culture is reinforced daily in the home and in the neighborhood, and the culture of the home is sometimes in direct contradiction to the culture of the classroom, and vice versa.

The culture of a Native American child living on a reservation is different from that of a Mexican American child living in South Texas with parents who are migrant workers. They both live in poverty, but their approach to education, the way in which they view authority, and how they view school may be very different because of their culture.

Culture has such a strong influence on children and how they learn that we recommend teachers look at culture first and then poverty as they modify best practices to meet these needs. We also recommend that educators view culture from the standpoint that these children may have had different experiences than their middle-class counterparts and that we need to build on and expand the positive experiences rather than trying to change them.

For more than two decades, education has struggled with how to make education equitable to a population that has changed dramatically in that time. In the last century, education seemed to get it right for those children who were middle or upper class and who came from an Anglo-Saxon culture. Test scores and other data bear this out. However, educators and the system of education in general are in turmoil over how to teach to cultures that do not fit the middle-class, Anglo-Saxon background. Teachers are leaving the field in droves, not because they do not know their subject matter but because they do not know how to teach their students effectively. For many teachers, self-efficacy has eluded them, and coming to school each day to face failure is not appealing. When offered more money to teach in high-poverty areas, many teachers opt out because it is often frustrating and time consuming trying to reach a population that is not responding positively. Principals and other instructional leaders are often overwhelmed by the issues facing them and feel powerless to help teachers to be successful.

It is not that principals, teachers, and other members of the education system do not care or are not aware—nothing could be further from the truth. We often say that if someone told us that students would be more successful if we learned to stand on our heads, we would give it a try. Teachers and administrators are passionate about wanting students to be successful. They are growing

weary of being told they need to get test scores up, dropout rates down, and graduation rates up; educators are ready for someone to tell them how and to have the research to back it up.

In the last century, education experimented with many new ideas in working with all children. From differentiation to models on poverty, we tried many new ideas, and though we made some progress, gaps remained. We now know from the research on past experiences that there is not a "one size fits all" approach to working with children from poverty. We know that, while poverty makes a marked difference in achievement without appropriate intervention, just differentiating for poverty alone is not enough. If we are to provide instructional practices that make a difference in student learning, we must address culture first, poverty second.

It is our purpose in this book to provide a framework for teaching that includes the instructional practices that make the most difference in student learning modified for culture *and* poverty, not just for poverty. We have based this book not on observations, but on research about what makes the most difference in learning, research on the brain and learning, and research on how various cultures approach learning.

In Chapter 1 we examine some of the more common models for dealing with gaps in learning in schools today. Next, we introduce the reader to the reasons why culture matters so much and why recognizing this is essential to any model if we are truly going to make a difference in closing the gaps. The reader is introduced to a six-part framework that is the underpinning of this book. This framework addresses key structures that must be in place to effectively work with culture and poverty.

In Chapter 2 we discuss motivation and why many cultures in our schools are "turned off" by our typical approach. We examine brain research on how motivation is turned on in the brain and ways that we can modify our approaches in the classroom to tap into how the students in our classrooms are motivated to learn from within. Only *you* can motivate you—and the same is true of your students: all motivation comes from within. That is the bad news; the good news is that we can lead our students to the natural motivation with which they are born by addressing some of the issues that affect the brain's desire to learn; for example, making the classroom instruction culturally relevant helps to tap into the motivation of the diverse classroom.

Chapter 3 is a discussion of how we build resilience in our students by using research-based and culturally appropriate practices in the classroom. Resiliency—the ability to survive and thrive in the face of difficult circumstances—is the characteristic that will lift our students out of poverty, and it is resiliency that will keep them in school even when circumstances are difficult. The ultimate goal of everything that we discuss in this book is to build this resiliency. Turnaround teachers are educators that have the ability to build resiliency in their students.

Chapter 4 introduces the cognitive system and discusses how best to provide instruction to students. In this chapter we discuss declarative learning, which makes up most of the learning in the classroom. Declarative information requires the appropriate storage in the brain so that it can be retrieved on those

days it is needed. Unfortunately, most declarative learning is taught through lecture and is stored in the semantic pathway, which is the least reliable for retrieval. Add to that the fact that this pathway requires the learner to have the vocabulary skills for appropriate retrieval. Students from poverty often start school with as little as half the vocabulary of their middle-class counterparts, and students from other cultures may have even less exposure to the vocabulary of the classroom. It is no wonder that these students struggle in the typical classroom that relies so heavily on verbal skills.

Chapter 5 explores the second area of the cognitive system—procedural learning. This is the most difficult part of learning because it requires the students to do something with the declarative information. Students must have an understanding of the factual information (declarative) in order to demonstrate that they can use it in some way (procedural knowledge). They must demonstrate not only that they can use the declarative information but also that they can use it appropriately. For example, students learning about estimation must be able to use that information in a real-world context, not just in that of the classroom. Indeed, many of the states' standards and benchmarks specifically declare that students must be able to demonstrate understanding in a real-world setting.

Chapter 6 is a discussion of the task of the instructional leader in the school as he or she gathers the resources needed to address all of the needs of children from poverty. It is a call to all educators to join hands with the social, emotional, spiritual, physical, and educational resources of communities so that we can lift students from poverty. Poverty is not just a problem for the police force or for the housing authority; it is a problem for all of us because it is robbing us of resources in terms of productive citizens and tax dollars.

In Chapter 7 we merge all of the information from the chapters to examine this new framework and create strategies to use it in your school.

A decade ago, Dr. Belinda Williams edited a book called *Closing the Achievement Gap.* Very few of the ideas and suggestions of that book have been brought to fruition today—and yet the problems of a decade ago remain. The time has come to demand the resources, the research, and the training to lead students of poverty to daily success. It is time as well to provide teachers with instructional practices that really do make a difference in acknowledging culture and poverty in education. We must create the middle class of the future by providing the scaffolding that builds resiliency in our students of poverty. We hope the discussions in this book will be a beginning for you and for those you teach.