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# Understanding the Fourth-Grade Slump: Our Point of View

*by Joseph Sanacore and Anthony Palumbo*

## **Abstract**

*Educators know that an achievement gap exists between students of low-income and middle-income families, a gap that is especially evident in fourth grade and beyond. This essay explores issues related to this gap, including primary-level children being immersed in narrative text and, therefore, unprepared for the challenges of informational text and content-specific vocabulary; lack of available material children are interested in reading; and limited reading opportunities created by a focus on high-stakes, test-preparation regimens.*

For more than a half-century, school administrators and teachers have been aware of the significant achievement gap between students of low-income and middle-income families. Whether using results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, local standardized testing, or informal classroom assessment, this achievement gap becomes more evident by fourth grade and increases as children get older. For many of these students, a critical transition occurs when they enter fourth grade. At that point, they make a shift from Stage 2 to Stage 3 of Chall's (1996) Stages of Reading Development—or roughly from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Though some children transition smoothly to fourth grade, other students struggle with content area material. It is interesting to note that Chall and Jacobs (2003) and Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990) found that the reading achievement of second- and third-grade low-income children was comparable to the achievement of the normative population on all subtests of the Diagnostic Assessments of Reading (Roswell and Chall 1992). By fourth grade, however, some children's scores began to decline, starting in the area of vocabulary.

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Throughout the United States, this “fourth-grade slump” is a major problem and requires a thoughtful response from educators; otherwise, it can negatively impact students’ learning as they progress through the grades.

### *What Causes the Slump?*

Although theories abound concerning the probable causes of the fourth-grade slump, we focus here on several causes that we believe are especially important. Our reflections are evidence based, considering not only research findings but also our more than 30 years of practical experience as classroom teachers, school administrators, and consultants to school systems nationwide.

For example, as children enter the upper elementary school grades, they are expected to comprehend large amounts of expository (or informational) text and related vocabulary across the curriculum. Regrettably, in the primary grades, these children were immersed mostly in narrative (or storybook) text, which is substantially different from the structure and content of informational text often found in textbooks. Usually, textbook chapters begin with an introduction; continue with subheadings and relevant text information as well as document-based information including graphs, charts, tables, maps, cartoons, caricatures, and captions; and end with a summary or conclusion and discussion questions (Sanacore 2006a). To further challenge children’s efforts to understand such chapters, the discourse might be presented in a macrostructure (or overall text) format, but it can be embedded with such microstructures as sequence, description, comparison–contrast, problem–solution, and cause–effect (Meyer and Freedle 1984; Meyer 1985; Tompkins 1994; Sanacore 2002b; Moss 2004).

Textbook chapters also are packed with content-specific vocabulary and concepts that often are different from low-income students’ personal language and awareness of the world (Chall et al. 1990; Chall and Jacobs 2003). Because word knowledge is highly correlated with reading comprehension (Anderson and Freebody 1981), children who lack vocabulary knowledge will probably have difficulty comprehending content area resources. Not surprisingly, these students are expected to read and comprehend increasing amounts of expository discourse in upper elementary and secondary schools, but because they do not have substantial experience with informational resources and related vocabulary, they are less likely to have acquired the necessary skills needed for understanding expository text (Gregg and Sekeres 2006).

We believe another potential cause of the fourth-grade slump is the difficulty children encounter when they attempt to select reading materials that interest them. An important part of becoming an effective reader is to have easy access to a wide variety of narrative and informational resources written at different reading and interest levels and to engage daily in actual in-school reading for 90 minutes (Allington 2006). Research and practical experience have taught us that when children read materials that interest them, they are more apt to read often; to increase their awareness of content-specific concepts, text structure, and general world knowledge; to improve their fluency, meaning-making, vocabulary, phonics, writing, grammar, and spelling skills and strategies; to become competent and confident in reading more challenging materials; and to continue reading as a lifetime activity (Carlsen and Sherrill

1988; Nagy 1988; Krashen 1993; Sanacore 1994, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Dahl et al. 1999; Worthy, Moorman, and Turner 1999; Dahl and Scharer 2000). Children in primary school need opportunities to select and read different types of texts including poetic, descriptive, narrative, and expository. Classroom libraries, therefore, need to be packed with diverse resources; and Moss, Leone, and Dipillo (1997) recommended that updated informational trade books should make up about one-fourth to one-half of the resources in classroom libraries.

Regrettably, what students are interested in reading is often unavailable in classroom and school library collections (Worthy et al. 1999; Sanacore 2006b), and some students seem to be more negatively affected—especially boys, students with negative attitudes toward reading, and students with low achievement in reading. In the Worthy et al. study, poor children were less likely to buy books; thus, they were more inclined to borrow them from school libraries. These types

of problems in low-income communities are compounded by funding inadequacies, which can influence such factors as the purchase of school library resources. The urban schools that Lazar (2004) visited had inadequate school libraries, which limited students' access to reading materials and to teacher-librarians who are vitally important resources for motivating students to read.

Exacerbating the problem of having poor access to books is the issue of having less school time for actual reading. From our experience as consultants to schools throughout the United States, we have observed a negative trend in which reading for pleasure is being viewed as a frill, or necessary evil, because so much instructional time is allotted for high-stakes, test-preparation regimens. We strongly believe that children who do not have daily opportunities to read a variety of texts in school are losing the benefit of applying important skills and strategies to interesting and meaningful resources. This lack of accumulated application over time, accompanied by inadequate access to books, could explain part of the puzzle of the fourth-grade slump.

Furthermore, many upper elementary and secondary school teachers still consider the teaching of reading to be the responsibility of primary school teachers, and this limited perception could be contributing to the fourth-grade slump and even the "eighth-grade cliff." According to Michael Kamil (cited in Grasso de León 2002, 2), the perception that teaching reading is the responsibility of primary school teachers is more prevalent at higher grade levels, and "many of the teachers responsible for 'content areas' do not have substantial knowledge of how to teach reading." Complicating these issues are the assumptions that content area teachers bring to their classroom practice. In general, these teachers believe that their role is to cover content, that textbooks are necessary to accomplish this task, and that middle school and high school students are strategic readers and learners (Alvermann and Moore 1991; Wade and Moje 2002; Alvermann and Nealy 2004; Alvermann, Phelps, and Ridgeway 2007).

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Although these assumptions are not new, they continue to underpin the belief systems and classroom practices of content area teachers. Textbooks, in particular, are still used as dominant instructional resources despite other worthwhile options, including fiction and nonfiction trade books and electronic media (Alvermann et al. 2007). These and other options carry more benefits than textbooks because they are interesting, meaningful, and relevant to students' lives. They also are easily connected to thematic units, provide a useful context for teaching and learning skills and strategies, and represent excellent formats for engaged reading and personal responses. Furthermore, they present information at different levels of readability and understanding as compared to textbooks, which are usually written above their designated grade levels and, therefore, can cause learning difficulty and frustration for many students (Chall and Conard 1991; Budiansky 2001; Allington 2002). Finally, trade books and electronic media foster independent learning and simultaneously plant seeds for lifetime learning. From this big-picture perspective, we are not attempting to negate content area teachers' love of subject matter. As former elementary and secondary school teachers, we continue to appreciate and embrace many worthwhile ideas generated by content area resources. We have found, however, that when students have alternatives (other than textbooks) for blending both content and process, they are better equipped to handle assignments and to be successful in school.

### ***Toward a Better Understanding of the Slump***

These and other potential causes of the fourth-grade slump do not represent a one-size-fits-all position, as children's learning needs come in varied sizes and shapes. We believe teachers and administrators need to develop a more elaborate understanding of the slump before they incorporate teaching practices aimed at reducing the achievement gap between advantaged and less-advantaged students. Though the following issues are not comprehensive, they support an increasing awareness of some of the important concerns that affect children's literacy learning.

#### **Issue 1: Primary-Level Children Need More Exposure to Expository Discourse**

Informational text is substantially different from storybook text (or story grammar), which dominates primary school settings. In classroom libraries, in read-alouds, and in shared reading, storybook materials have power over informational resources. Usually, a story consists of characters, a place where the story happens, and a time when the story occurs. Typically, the main character has a problem and attempts to solve it by setting goals, getting involved in related events, and dealing with obstacles. The story leads to resolutions or outcomes, and the total narrative experience helps children to infer the story's theme or moral. This relatively smooth narrative flow is significantly different from informational textbooks, which are the dominant instructional resources in the content areas.

With informational discourse, students are expected to deal effectively with a quantity of information from textbooks, trade books, Internet Web sites, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and other sources. Even the vast majority of norm-referenced test content in reading is expository (Daniels 2002). Although young children's experience with expository text is limited at the primary level, they are capable of processing informational discourse effectively (Duke 2000; 2003). In fact, the issue of narrative versus expository text has less to do with which discourse is more difficult to understand and more to do with which discourse is lacking in

children's reading experiences (Sanacore 1991; Moss 2004). For example, in Pappas's (1991) study, kindergarten children gave comparable retellings of both narrative and informational text. Yet, children's experience with expository text is either minimal or non-existent (Fisher and Hiebert 1990a, 1990b; Hiebert and Fisher 1990; Trabasso 1994; Venezky 2000). We believe that students in all grade levels, including literacy learners who struggle with reading (Dreher 2003), will benefit from instruction that helps them use informational text effectively.

### **Issue 2: Children Need Opportunities to Engage in Actual Reading of Informational Materials**

Children are more likely to read for pleasure when they listen to books read aloud and when they have access to books. Effective read-alouds provide demonstrations of fluent and meaningful reading and also serve as a foundation for motivating children to read, especially when the books that are read aloud are available in classroom libraries (Martinez et al. 1997). Children who have exposure to classroom libraries read 50 percent more books than children who do not have exposure to these libraries (Morrow 2003; Vardell, Hadaway, and Young 2006). Most classroom libraries, however, have a minimal number of books (Fractor et al. 1993), and those materials are typically narrative (Dreher and Dromsky 2000; Dreher 2003). All literacy learners deserve opportunities in the classroom to select and read books in which they are interested, and a steady part of their literacy diet should include informational materials. This daily experience with independent reading provides a multitude of benefits ranging from gaining experience in applying important skills and strategies to developing the awareness that reading can be both enjoyable and informational. Using school time for independent reading is especially important in today's hectic world in which children are expected to cope with such out-of-school stresses as divorce in the family, single-parent households, blended families, and working parents. Children also encounter in-school pressures concerning high-stakes, test-preparation regimens (Sanacore 2007). With less-consistent structure evident in many homes and with the test-prep frenzy in schools nationwide, children are less likely to spend time reading. This scenario, of course, impacts low-income children more negatively. We believe teachers and administrators must, therefore, work diligently and deliberately to secure time each day for independent reading. Children look forward to and benefit from this daily literacy event, which can support their success across the curriculum and through the grades.

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### **Issue 3: Children Need More Experience Building, Activating, and Applying Their Vocabulary**

Although reading immersion provides an excellent context for learning the meanings of words, some students need more focused instruction in vocabulary development. For decades, researchers have known that children's reading and vocabulary development are connected to

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the economic and educational status of their families, and children from low-income homes generally do less well than children from middle-income families (Chall 2000). Hart and Risley (1995) found that, before they begin school, children from low-income homes are exposed to half as many words as children from more affluent homes. According to Smith (1941), this difference grows fourfold by grade 12 (cited in Hirsch 2003). These vocabulary differences often go unnoticed because they do not hinder early literacy learning. At the primary level, low-income children acquire basic literacy skills comparable to other students, but their word knowledge might be insufficient for the content demands of informational text, which increases around fourth grade (Chall et al. 1990). Because content-specific vocabulary is embedded in texts across the curriculum and because word knowledge strongly influences and is highly correlated with reading comprehension (Anderson and Freebody 1981; Nagy and Scott 2000), students with less awareness of content-area vocabulary in the primary grades usually struggle with comprehension throughout the grades. Children at the primary level and beyond profit from opportunities to build their repertoire of word meanings and then apply this knowledge to a variety of reading and writing activities.

### **Issue 4: Children Need to be Engaged During Teaching and Learning**

Whether children are engaged in vocabulary activities or immersed in other literacy-learning events, they benefit immensely from increased participation and interaction in the classroom. This instructional direction reduces passivity and improves academic engagement during reading and writing.

Within this teaching–learning environment, educators need to believe that all students can successfully learn challenging subject matter; and all students, in turn, need to believe that their accomplishments are the result of their knowledge and effort rather than luck (Goslin 2003; Sanacore 2005). From years of experience working with teachers and their students, we have found that students tend to work harder and do their best when their emotions are connected to their learning. When teachers consider children as whole people, instead of empty receptacles to be filled with academic knowledge, the children are more apt to positively respond to curricular expectations. This underpinning is vitally important for literacy success, as teachers direct their thoughtful plans and focused energy toward increasing students' emotional and academic engagement across the curriculum.

### ***Being Proactive***

The fourth-grade slump can be prevented or alleviated by educators who are genuinely caring, highly competent, and deeply responsive to children's learning strengths and needs. Although no guarantee or "silver bullet" exists, looking closely at the issues presented in this article provides insight into the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. We believe teachers and administrators need to be proactive about the gap and incorporate teaching practices aimed at reducing it. Otherwise, the achievement gap will continue to widen, impacting negatively on families and society.

Within the space limitations of this article, other important issues were not addressed. These include "summer learning loss," which each year can cause up to a three-month gap in reading achievement between students from middle-income and low-income families. The summer learning loss also can result in an accumulated deficit in reading achievement,

as much as several years, by the time disadvantaged children reach middle school (Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson 1997; McGill-Franzen and Allington 2001). Of equal importance is the effective use of instructional time that engages students in productive academic work (Allington 2005). Regrettably, substantial time is wasted each day on nonacademic activities (Cameron, McDonald-Connor, and Morrison 2005).

Educators also need to organize classes for smaller student–teacher ratios, support national public preschools, embrace parents as serious partners in their children’s education, and carry out extensive professional development sessions that not only support the application of best practices but also focus on the nourishment of teachers’ inner life (Intrator and Kunzman 2006). Only when these and other worthwhile ideas work in concert will the achievement gap substantially narrow.

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