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Falling Through the Cracks

Of all the things that children have to learn when they get to school, reading and writing are the most basic, the most central and the most essential. Practically everything else that they do there will be permeated by these two skills. Hardly a lesson can be understood, hardly a project finished unless the children can read the books in front of them and write about what they have done. They must read and write or their time at school will be largely wasted.

—Bryant and Bradley (1985, p. 1)

No one wants to fail. Failure has the power to paralyze with fear, enrage with frustration, and demoralize with despair. We have all experienced failure—as learners ourselves (e.g., unlocking the mysteries of computers or mastering the intricacies of golf), as teachers working with students for whom we had no instructional answers, and sometimes even as parents and grandparents, watching our children or grandchildren struggle with learning to read. Failure is particularly traumatic for children and adolescents because they have so few emotional, psychological, and intellectual resources on which to draw. Failure on the part of our students is the beginning of a downward spiral—falling through the cracks.

“Falling through the cracks” is by no means a scientific description. You won’t find it in reading textbooks along with terms such as dyslexia, reading disability, learning disability, unexpected underachiever, slow learner, or backward reader. “Falling through the cracks” is not an officially sanctioned label requiring a lengthy “wait and see” period to determine if a child will outgrow the
problem or develop the skills that are lacking. To qualify for falling through the cracks, a student does not have to go through a prereferral process, interminable testing, and then display a 25-point discrepancy between his or her nonverbal IQ and achievement. A good teacher knows almost immediately when a student is falling through the cracks. It only takes a few days—or at the most, a couple of weeks—to figure it out.

**FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS: THE DEFINITION**

Falling through the cracks simply means falling behind when everyone else is moving forward. Stanovich (1986) captured the essence of this educational free fall when he applied the term, “Matthew effect,” to the field of reading. The term was first coined by sociologist Robert Merton (1968) and later picked up by Walberg and Tsai (1983) to describe an educational phenomenon. The term has its origins in the New Testament parable of the talents in Matthew 25:29 in which, according to Merton’s (1968) initial interpretation, the “rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” As used by Stanovich (1986), the term describes the effect of reading deficits from which poor readers almost never recover—despite our most valiant efforts to remediate, accommodate, and compensate.

Stanovich (1986) eloquently describes what happens to children when they fall through the cracks in terms of learning to read.

> Slow reading acquisition has cognitive, behavioral, and motivational consequences that slow the development of other cognitive skills and inhibit performance on many academic tasks. In short, as reading develops, other cognitive processes linked to it track the level of reading skill. Knowledge bases that are in reciprocal relationships with reading are also inhibited further development. The longer this developmental sequence is allowed to continue, the more generalized the deficits will become, seeping into more and more areas of cognition and behavior. Or to put it more simply and sadly—in the words of a tearful 9-year-old, already falling frustratingly behind his peers in reading progress, “Reading affects everything you do.” (p. 390)

I frequently appear on radio call-in shows devoted to educational topics. A program devoted to reading problems is always a favorite of producers because the phone lines light up almost immediately and stay lit throughout the hour. On one occasion, I offered my e-mail address to the listening audience if they had questions that weren’t answered during the show. By the time I returned home a few days later, I had received over 70 e-mails from parents whose children were experiencing reading difficulties and from adults whose lives had been adversely affected by their inability to read well. Their poignant cries for help define falling through the cracks in ways that research and statistics can never do. You will have an opportunity to read some of their notes to me in the sidebars.
Individuals who fall through the cracks usually spend their school careers in remedial reading, special education, alternative education, or compensatory education and often drop out or graduate from high school still unable to “understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual” (Elley, 1992, p. 3). When children arrive in kindergarten, we are powerless to change the variables that have already affected their chances for reading success. We cannot raise their IQs, enhance their early childhood literacy experiences, increase their socioeconomic levels, or improve the educational attainment of their mothers. We can, however, teach them to read.

HOW MANY STUDENTS ARE FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS?

One of the most heartbreaking sights in American schools today is that of children—once so eager to read—discovering that they are not learning how. There comes over those sparkling eyes a glaze of listless despair. We are not talking about a few children and scattered schools. We are talking about millions of children and every school in the nation. And the toll in young spirits is the least of it. The toll in the learning and thinking potential of our citizenry is beyond measure. (Sylvia Farnham-Diggory, as quoted in Spalding & Spalding, 1990, p. 10)

There is general agreement among most researchers in the field of reading and learning disabilities that only about 5% of the children currently enrolled in school have genuine learning disabilities sufficiently severe to require placements in special education. These disabilities are pervasive and extraordinarily difficult to remediate without intensive and specialized training (Lyon, Fletcher, et al., 2000, p. 262). However, the total percentage of students in the United States (Grades K-12) who are currently enrolled in special education, remedial reading, or compensatory and alternative education programs for older students far exceeds this 5% figure.

Remedial reading and special education could easily be called growth industries in the United States. We are experiencing record Title I expenditures, burgeoning Reading Recovery programs, statewide initiatives to improve reading achievement (Manzo, 1998), widespread accountability testing to raise reading achievement (Editorial Projects in Education, 2000, pp. 72–73), and mushrooming special education programs (Finn, Rotherham, & Hokanson, 2001). The educational toll of picking up the pieces after kids have fallen through the cracks represents only a fraction of the total costs of reading.

MY HEART IS BREAKING

M[y daughter] cannot decode more than a few of the words in her second-grade reader. Her teacher put her in a reading program three times a week for half an hour sessions. However, he called me yesterday and recommended that she be tested for learning disabilities with their team of experts. Her comprehension is good and so is her vocabulary, but she can’t blend three sounds together to make a word. She loves being read to, and I’ve been reading to her each night since she was a baby. She can tell you all about the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder, facts about whales, and things from all the books we have enjoyed together over the years. I know she wants to read but is finding the whole process so very difficult. She cried when I told her she was going to go through more testing. She just wants to fit in and be like everyone else, and my heart is breaking.
failure. There are also the social costs of funding juvenile homes (Allen-Hagen, 1991), prisons, adult education programs, and remedial college programs (Sandal, 2001), as well as the millions in lost earnings that adults who cannot read incur.

In his 1985 book, *Illiterate America*, Jonathan Kozol painted a bleak picture of literacy levels in the United States:

Fifteen percent of recent graduates of urban high schools read at less than sixth grade level. One million teenage children between twelve and seventeen cannot read above the third grade level. Eighty-five percent of juveniles who come before the courts are functionally illiterate. Half the heads of households classified below the poverty line by federal standards cannot read an eighth grade book. Over one third of mothers who receive support from welfare are functionally illiterate. Of 8 million unemployed adults, 4 to 6 million lack the skills to be retrained for hi-tech jobs. The United States ranks forty-ninth among 158 member nations of the United Nations in its literacy levels. (pp. 4–5)

A 1987 report titled *The Subtle Danger: Reflections on the Literacy Abilities of America’s Young Adults* (Venezky, Kaestle, & Sum) offered this caution:

We will not collapse tomorrow from a lack of adequate literacy skills, but we may find that year by year, we continue to fall behind in international competitiveness, and that society becomes more divided between those who are skilled and those who are not. (p. 53)

Literacy levels have scarcely improved since these dire warnings and predictions of the mid-80s. Consider the following grim statistics:

The National Institute for Literacy reports that although very few adults in the United States are truly illiterate, between 21% and 23% of the adult population, or approximately 44 million people, can read only a little—not well enough to fill out an application, read a food label, or read a simple story to a child. Another 45 to 50 million people (25% to 28% of the adult population) can perform more complex literacy tasks, such as comparing, contrasting, or integrating pieces of information, but cannot engage in higher-level reading and problem solving such as would be needed to attend a community college or hold a highly skilled job (Reder, 2001).
The International Adult Literacy Survey, which compared the literacy skills of adults in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States (National Literacy Secretariat of Canada, 1997), found that the United States has more adults in the bottom two levels of literacy (i.e., they lack a sufficient foundation of basic skills to function successfully in our society) than any of the other countries except Poland.

During the past 10 years, the number of students ages 6 through 21 identified as learning disabled has increased 38% with the largest increase (44%) among students between the ages of 12 and 17 (Lyon, Fletcher, et al., 2001, p. 262).

Reading achievement overall has failed to improve during the past 10 years as reported by the most recent report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). In the year 2000, the national administration of the reading test showed that 37% of fourth grade children demonstrated reading abilities below the basic level. This means that these children did not have sufficient reading skills to satisfactorily complete grade level assignments involving reading. One alarming aspect of the report is that, although overall reading levels did not change significantly from prior years, the gap between good and poor readers grew larger. Children classified as good readers actually performed better than they did in the previous assessment, but children classified as poor readers performed worse than they did previously. How many kids are falling through the cracks annually? Too many. Who these students are and why their numbers are growing will be explored just ahead.

WHO ARE THE STUDENTS WHO ARE FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS?

About 5% or even less of the total number of students nationwide who enroll in kindergarten each fall learn to read as if by magic. They arrive at school already reading fluently. They may announce one day that they have learned to read, or their teachers may discover them reading a faculty bulletin or newspaper during playtime. They weren’t “taught” to read in the conventional sense of the word, but were able, by virtue of the ways in which nature and nurture blessed them, to figure out on their own how the English language works. These students are not distributed evenly among all of the kindergarten classes across the country. Many classes have none, whereas some may have as many as five or six fluent readers.

Another 20% to 30% of students overall learn to read with ease when exposed to any kind of formal instruction. These children seem almost teacher or curriculum proof. Again, there is no guarantee regarding how many of these
students will show up in each classroom. Some classrooms may contain a majority of students who learn to read with ease; others may have as few as 5%, or even none.

For about 60% of students overall, learning to read will be hard work. Success will depend largely on the effectiveness of instruction, the continuity and articulation of the curriculum, and the stability of the child’s family and school environments. Some of the students in this cohort will fall through the cracks; others will sail through school. If one or more of the following traumas occurs, any one of the children has the unfortunate potential to fall through the cracks: (a) ineffective instruction or curriculum, (b) a poorly managed or disorganized classroom, (c) an unstable classroom (i.e., multiple teachers coming and going because of illnesses or maternity leaves), (d) an unsafe or poorly run school, or (e) family stress and difficulties (e.g., divorce, job loss, or serious illness).

About 15% to 25% of students will find reading to be one of the most difficult tasks they have ever undertaken. Even with the presence of specialized, intensive, and one-to-one instruction that begins as early in their school careers as possible, their progress will be slow and their need for practice and overlearning crucial. Last, about 5% of the total number of students overall will have a serious and pervasive reading disability and will likely be placed in special education. That is not to say that these two bottom cohorts of students cannot learn to read or will not learn to read eventually. To survive academically, however, they will require the very best in systematic and direct reading instruction from highly skilled and supportive teachers.

Although the goal of leaving no child behind is an admirable one, the expectation that every child will be on grade level by third or fourth grade seems a highly unrealistic one, even to those who specialize in early intervention programs for the prevention of reading difficulties. Torgesen (2000) explains:

[If we were to set an absolute grade level reading comprehension standard for every child.] this would mean that we would be expecting all children to have at least average verbal ability. Since decades of cognitive research suggests that it is unrealistic to expect all children to attain verbal intelligence estimates within average range as a result of special instruction (Lee, Brooks-Gunn, Schnur, & Liaw, 1990), it also seems unrealistic to expect reading teachers to accomplish this goal starting as late as kindergarten or first grade. (pp. 55–56)

The harsh reality of Torgesen’s (2000) statement often blurs our vision of what can be accomplished in schools, however. To focus on the impossibility of getting every student to grade level is one way to miss the fact that huge numbers of students are currently failing to learn to read at anywhere near their verbal abilities. We must lay aside the somewhat artificial and not altogether
statistically sound concept of “grade level” (Spear-Swerling & Sternberg, 1998, p. 61), if our legislators and state boards of education will let us, while at the same time disabusing ourselves of the notion that raising reading achievement is a somehow suspect and politically motivated goal. We must focus instead on the vast numbers of students whose quality of academic life, to say nothing of their success as adults, would be immeasurably improved if they could read commensurate with their potential—whatever it may be. If we are to reach that goal, we will be busy for some time to come. We can save the grade-level debate for later.

The students who are most likely to fall through the cracks sort themselves into several categories. Many of them fit into multiple categories and present a variety of risk factors—further increasing their odds of reading failure. Students at risk of reading failure include (a) low-IQ, low-achieving students; (b) boys; (c) developmentally delayed students; (d) special education students; (e) low-socioeconomic (SES) students or students of racial and ethnic minorities; (f) non-native-English-speaking students; (g) students with speech and hearing impairments; (h) early intervention and remedial reading students; and (i) teacher- or school-disabled students. All kinds of students fall through the cracks—rich ones, poor ones, children with below-average IQs, and even gifted ones. Children from “good” schools can even fall through the cracks. A student can fall through the cracks anywhere.

Low-IQ, Low-Achieving Students

Low-IQ, low-achieving students who fail to qualify for any kind of help or special services are prime candidates for falling through the cracks. Their IQs are below average but not low enough to qualify as mentally impaired. These students do not meet the criteria for learning disabilities either because the discrepancy between their ability and achievement is too small or even nonexistent. Low-IQ, low-achieving students are often socially promoted despite a lack of literacy skills, and they rarely experience success in school. Sometimes, the rules are bent, and they are identified as learning disabled or EMI so they can receive services of some kind. If they are placed in effective special education programs that focus on student outcomes, they may receive the services they need to learn to read. But the majority, after repeated school failure and several grade retentions, often drop out of school when they can (Tynan & Latsha, 1999).

One very interesting finding from recent research on the prevention of reading disabilities is that, if children are given adequately intensive, explicit, and mastery-oriented instruction in early reading skills, IQ is not strongly related to how well they acquire beginning reading skills (Vellutino, Scanlon, &
Lyon, 2000). Other factors, such as specific language weaknesses, SES, and behavior disturbances are much stronger predictors of early reading failure than is general intelligence level.

**Boys**

Boys seem to fall through the cracks more readily than girls, not because they are overlooked or ignored by their teachers, but rather because of their teachers’ heightened anticipation of problems as well as their increased awareness and attentiveness to boys’ slightest departures from behavioral and academic norms. In a sense, one might say that some boys are “picked on” or “singled out.” Teachers are more prone to identify learning and behavioral problems in boys than girls (Vogel, 1990). One longitudinal study of literacy acquisition among low-income children found that teachers were more likely to contact the parents of boys regarding academic problems than they were to contact girls’ parents, even though there were no overall difference in academic performance between the boys and girls (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991).

McGuinness (1985) points out that, in general, the male-female ratio in special reading classes is, at the most conservative estimate, 3:1; in other words; 75% of the reading-disabled group are males. The sex ratios for those students with identified reading disabilities, once hypothesized to be biologically based, with boys more likely to have disabilities than girls, have more recently been found to be nearly equal, so any actual imbalance between the sex ratios is less a function of actual differences in the distribution of reading disabilities in boys and girls and more a function of a referral bias on the part of teachers (Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Fletcher, & Escobar, 1990). Teachers, irrespective of their own gender, appear to respond differently to boys than they do to girls (Sadker, Sadker, & Klein, 1991).

We can only speculate at this point regarding the emotional and psychological repercussions, to say nothing of the academic fallout, for boys who are labeled as disabled, slow learners, and hyperactive, irrespective of their actual status. Their teachers are more likely to (a) have lowered academic expectations for them, (b) be hyperattentive to their perceived or actual departure from strict behavioral norms, and (c) experience a general lack of efficacy with regard to meeting their academic needs. If any of these factors are also combined with other risk factors (e.g., poverty or developmental delays), the odds of boys falling through the cracks increase exponentially.

**Developmentally Delayed Students**

Students who are physically, emotionally, or cognitively immature when they arrive in kindergarten are often thought to be “late bloomers.” Their teachers
may mistakenly believe that time and maturation will solve all problems—that these students like desert plants, after a “rare sudden shower of rain . . . [will] spontaneously burst into bloom” (Ansara, 1969, p. 51). Unfortunately, this expected blooming seldom occurs, and the student becomes just another educational fatality. Juel (1994) warns educators of the dangers of this “wait and see” attitude:

There is an unbounded optimism among teachers that children who are late in starting will indeed catch up. Given time, something will happen! In particular, there is a belief that the intelligent child who fails to learn to read well will catch up to his classmates once he has made a start. Do we have any evidence of accelerated progress in late starters? There may be isolated examples which support this hope, but correlations from a follow-up study of 100 children two to three years after school entry lead me to state rather dogmatically that where a child stood in relation to his age-mates at the end of his first year at school was roughly where one could expect to find him at age 7 or 8. (p. 120)

Special Education Students

Laurence Lieberman (2001) writes in an Education Week commentary that special education is neither alive nor special anymore. Lieberman has been a special education teacher, the learning disabilities coordinator in the former U.S. Office of Education, and the chairman of the special education doctoral program at Boston University. He speaks from experience. His reasons for making this shocking pronouncement are some of the same ones that I believe lead to so many learning disabled special education students falling through the cracks.

Many LD students disappear academically because the focus of special education is no longer on preparing students to return to regular education when they are able to read and write but, rather, to be included in the regular classroom while accommodations and modifications are made to their program. For students with physical or profound mental disabilities, inclusion has much to commend it. For the child with learning disabilities, inclusion often means giving up on learning to read and write.

In some classrooms, education for students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities, resembles the way business is conducted with low-achieving students in urban schools—I pretend I’m really teaching you what you need to know to be successful in the real world, and you pretend that you’re really learning it (Meichenbaum & Biemiller, 1998). In fact, recent analyses of the achievement of reading-disabled children within inclusion settings shows that most of them make very little progress in their reading ability from year to year. One study showed that 80% of the poorest readers made no measurable gain over the school year (Klinger, Vaughn, Hughes, Schumm, & Elbaum, 1998), and another (Zigmond & Baker, 1996) showed that LD students, as a whole, made no progress toward closing the gap in reading achievement that got them identified as learning disabled in the first place!
**Low-SES Students and Racial- and Ethnic-Minority Students**

The lower overall reading achievement of low-SES students and ethnic-minority students as compared to their higher-SES counterparts, has been documented, discussed, and dissected for over 30 years. Coleman (1966) and his colleagues were among the first to report the academic deficits of students from low-income families. More recently, the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress have shown the same disappointing achievement gap (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). The reading achievement of affluent suburban students is significantly and consistently higher than that of students in urban schools in high-poverty areas (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Whether children from low-SES or ethnic-minority families fall through the cracks often has more to do with where and with whom they go to school than the fact that they are poor or from a racial or ethnic minority. There is a greater chance of low-SES or minority students achieving academic success if they attend a school in which the population contains a mix of moderate-SES and higher-SES students. High concentrations of low-SES students or ethnic minority students can create difficult and discouraging challenges for many educators.

In a homogeneous class of low-achieving students, for example, such as one might typically find in urban schools or suburban and rural schools with urban demographics, teachers can fall into an insidious low-expectations trap. Students who are skill deficient, have unproductive school behaviors, lack organization, and have low motivation need more than just fancy slogans or good intentions to engage them in learning. Over the years, lowered expectations for many low-income and minority students has resulted in a sense of educational powerlessness and debilitating meaninglessness (Fine, 1991). The greater the number of low performers in a classroom, the less certain teachers feel about their abilities to influence learning and achievement (Smylie, 1989), thus creating a vicious cycle of lowered expectations and concomitant achievement.

Low-SES and ethnic-minority students fall through the cracks in huge numbers not only because of educational variables—for instance, lowered classroom expectations (Ennis, 1998) and poorly staffed and administered schools (Edmonds, 1981)—but also because of environmental variables, such as fewer and often very different opportunities in the home for informal literacy learning (Baker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, 1995; Goldenberg, Reese, & Gallimore, 1992). We know that students from low-SES backgrounds come to school less prepared to learn to read than their more affluent counterparts in two broad areas. First, they have had less exposure to print and so their knowledge of letters and how print can be used to convey meaning is less well developed than it is in their middle-class counterparts (Adams, 1990). They have also not had as many opportunities to play certain types of language games with their parents (i.e., learning nursery rhymes), so they are less sensitive to the sounds in language (Hecht, Burgess, Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 2000). Lack of experience and knowledge in these areas make it difficult for children from low-SES backgrounds to acquire the early word-reading skills that are the foundation of later fluent reading and comprehension. The other broad area in
which children from low-SES environments have fewer opportunities to learn is in general verbal knowledge, particularly vocabulary, which is so important for good reading comprehension once children begin reading more difficult texts in third grade and up.

Non-Native-English-Speaking Students

One of the largest groups of students at risk of reading failure in the United States currently is non-native-English-speaking students, and when these students are also poor, their odds of limited literacy attainment are very high. The United States is not the only country that experiences this problem; African (Postlewaite & Ross, 1992) and European (Tosi, 1979) countries experience early school dropout and high failure rates where immigrant children are immersed in second-language instruction. Canada offers the most successful model of dual-language literacy, but the cultural, economic, academic, and familial resources that are available to support students there are vastly different from those that face the majority of immigrants to the United States.

The debate of how and when to teach English reading to non-English-speaking or limited-English-proficient students is a rancorous one at times. Unfortunately, there are no easy or sufficiently research-based answers available. The joint report from the National Research Council, the Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, and the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) summarizes the current state of affairs as follows:

The accumulated wisdom of research in the field of bilinguals and literacy tends to converge on the conclusion that initial literacy instruction in a second language can be successful, that it carries with it a higher risk of reading problems and of lower ultimate literacy attainment than initial literacy instruction in a first language, and that this risk may compound the risks associated with poverty, low levels of parental education, poor schooling, and other such factors. (p. 234)

Students With Speech and Hearing Impairments

Students with speech and hearing impairments are at a very high risk for reading failure. Their inability to hear and manipulate the sounds of the English language inhibits phonological skill development—a critical prerequisite to learning to read (Torgesen & Mathes, 2000). Between 40% and 75% of preschoolers with early speech difficulties develop reading problems later on (Aram & Hall, 1989; Bashir & Scavuzzo, 1992). Even when students’ speech difficulties are mild to moderate and are easily remediated by speech therapy, they remain at greater risk for reading problems than other students (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1990).

Hearing impairment and deafness are also highly associated with reading difficulty (Conrad, 1979; Karchmer, 1978; Waters & Doehring, 1990). Even when students have no documented hearing impairments, a history of chronic
ear infections leading to intermittent hearing loss during preschool years can be associated with reading difficulties (Wallace & Hooper, 1997).

**Early Intervention and Remedial Reading Students**

Students with reading difficulties are like the hot potato in that game teachers sometimes play with students when it is too cold or rainy to go out for recess. A readily available object, such as an eraser, becomes the “hot potato,” and students pass it quickly around the classroom or circle hoping they won’t get caught with the potato when the signal is given and thus be forced out of the game.

So it is with students who are failing to learn to read. Teachers pass these students from an after-school program to Reading Recovery to special education, hoping against hope that someone else will have an answer—any answer—as to why this child is failing. There is frequently no rationale to the methods that are chosen. Each teacher does his or her “own thing,” whether it be guided reading in predictable books, a structured phonics program, comprehension strategies—or a little bit of everything all mixed in together. Failing students are the hot potatoes: when they fail in one location, they are dropped into another pair of hands. Meanwhile, their parents naively assume that their child is learning to read.

Many schools have begun to provide something called preventive instruction to children who seem to be falling through the cracks from their first day in kindergarten. However, most current efforts to help students in the early elementary grades lack sufficient intensity and consistency. They are often taught for too little time with too many other children in their instructional groups. Sometimes, they are taught by volunteers who have little training in teaching the specific skills that are so difficult for many children to acquire. Reading instruction for these children is often more fragmented than that of other children who learn to read more easily, and at-risk students sometimes end up actually receiving less instruction than those who are learning normally (Allington & Shade, 1986).

The remedial reading instruction provided to older children who do not qualify for special education but who continue to have reading difficulties suffers from many of the same problems as current preventive approaches. Instruction is often not targeted on the needed skills, children are frequently taught in groups that are much too large, and often, not enough instruction is provided to accelerate reading development to average levels. Problems in providing effective remedial instruction are compounded by the extreme diversity of poor readers in late elementary, middle, and high school. Many students are still struggling to acquire beginning level skills, whereas others need to expand their current reading skills so they can more effectively use reading as a tool for...
learning. If these students are mixed together in large groups, it is unlikely that the needs of individual students will ever be adequately met.

**Teacher-, Curriculum-, or School-Disabled Students**

Most students who fall through the cracks arrive in kindergarten with a built-in set of challenging learning and demographic characteristics. But sometimes, we further diminish their learning opportunities once they are in school. Teachers who are discouraged and demoralized by lack of instructional leadership, peeling paint, tattered textbooks, and few staff development opportunities are less likely to marshal the enormous energy and will that are needed to make a difference in the lives of challenging students. Teachers whose preservice training has been limited to collecting resources for thematic units rather than learning how to teach blending and segmenting don’t know how to teach them all to read (N. Griffin, personal communication, September 23, 2001).

**SUMMARIZING CHAPTER 1**

There are many factors that put students at risk for falling through the cracks in reading—their environmental demographics (e.g., lack of early literacy experiences, poverty, or limited English proficiency), their genetic characteristics (e.g., lack of phonological awareness skills, learning disabilities, or speech and hearing difficulties), or their educational experiences (e.g., ineffective schools, teachers, or methods).

**LOOKING AHEAD**

You are no doubt growing somewhat impatient. You picked up this book to find answers, and thus far, you have only encountered more problems. I can hear you saying to yourself, “I already know all of the reasons kids can’t read. I can’t change any of that. Give me some solutions.”

Help is on the way. In Chapter 2, you will find out what to do first, second, and third: (a) Read to learn as much as you can about reading instruction; (b) focus on the instructional variables that, when altered in your classroom, school, or district, can help you to teach all of your students to read; and (c) reflect on 12 fallacies regarding reading instruction that often fool us and frequently lead to even more students falling through the cracks.

**NOTES**

Recovery in this country was established at Ohio State University in the 1990s. Since then, it has been implemented in 38 states, the District of Columbia, four Canadian provinces, Australia, England, and New Zealand (Ohio State University, 1992–1993).

2. The names of the individuals who sent E-mails to me have been omitted to protect their privacy.

3. The acronym SES stands for the term *socioeconomic status*. Low-SES students are those who are eligible for free and reduced lunch or breakfast (or both) because of their family’s low income. The presence of large numbers of low-SES students makes a school eligible for Title I funding. Schools with large numbers of Title I students are designated as Title I schools.