ACCESS TO BOOKS

"We believe that literacy—the ability to read, write, and understand—is the birthright of every child in the world as well as the pathway to succeed in school and to realize a complete life."

—Richard Robinson, Scholastic chairman, president, and CEO

KEY FINDINGS

➤ Placing books in the hands of children fundamentally influences their chances for both personal and academic success (Constantino, 2014; Neuman and Celano, 2012; McGill-Franzen, 2016; Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2013; Kim, 2009).

➤ The most successful way to improve the reading achievement of low-income children is to increase their access to print (Neuman and Celano, 2012).

➤ Although low-income children have, on average, four children's books in their homes, a team of researchers concluded that nearly two-thirds—or 61 percent of the low-income families they studied—owned no books for their children (US Department of Education, 1996).

➤ Unfortunately, little has changed. These contrasting ecologies of affluence and poverty have become the source of increasing racial prejudice, growing class stratification, and widely different opportunities to become well educated.

➤ Access to books is fundamental to a hopeful, productive life: being read to, reading for yourself, and discussing what you've read creates an upward, positive spiral that leads to more reading and greater academic achievement and personal fulfillment years down the line (Cunningham and Zilbulsky, 2014; Jacobs, 2014; Neuman and Celano, 2012).

➤ Books in the home are a "marker" for a "scholarly culture" that reflects a penchant for reading and learning (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, and Treiman, 2010).

More to Know: "The More the More, the Less the Less"

Susan Neuman and Donna Celano's (2001) seminal study of four Philadelphia neighborhoods—two middle-class and two low-income—reveals the stark reality of lack of access of books for children in low-income homes and communities. The ratio of books to children in middle-income neighborhoods was 13 books to one child, while in low-income neighborhoods the ratio was one book to 300 children (2001, 2006). Alarmingly, more than a decade later, little has changed; indeed, technology—once hoped to bridge the gap—has made the disparity even worse (Neuman and Celano, 2012).

Middle-class parents typically have access to computers in their homes and can navigate technology in ways that benefit their children's developing literacy; on the other hand, poor families without access to computers in the home are less likely to know how to use the technology available in public libraries to help their children access print and learn to read. This becomes yet another way in which children with less continue in a downward literacy spiral, while the children with the benefits of a higher income spiral up.

In their 10 year study of access to books, Neuman and Celeno (2012) saw a pattern they called "the more the more, the less the less." In other words, students who had abundant access to books and "were able to read fluently, reading more and acquiring more information," while students without easy access to books "seemed to develop avoidance strategies, merely tolerating reading without the cognitive involvement associated with reading for comprehension." Given the learning power of reading—what it does to develop the mind—this has devastating consequences:

> *Reading has cognitive consequences that extend beyond the immediate task of understanding particular texts. Studies have shown that avid readers—regardless of general ability—tend to know more than those who read little. Further, those who know more are likely to learn more, and to do so faster; in other words, knowledge begets more knowledge.*
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> *This is a stunning finding because it means that children who get off to a fast start in reading are more likely to read more over the years—and this very act of reading develops vocabulary, general knowledge, and information capital. Consequently, children's earliest experiences with print will establish a trajectory of learning that is reciprocal and exponential in nature—spiraling either upward or downward, carrying profound implications for the development of information capital.*

Jonathan Kozol (2005) has called the educational divide between those who have and those who don't "the shame of the nation." Although solving the complex barriers of poverty is largely beyond our means as educators and parents, we can do much to solve the book gap—and therefore, the achievement gap—by making sure that all children have access to books.

In 2010, Reading Is Fundamental (RIF), the largest children's literacy nonprofit in the United States, commissioned a research survey—Children's Access to Print Materials and Education-Related Outcomes—an unprecedented search uncovering 11,000 reports and analyzing 108 of the most relevant studies. The finding were indisputable: children's book distribution and ownership programs have positive behavioral, educational, and psychological outcomes. Providing children access to print accomplishes the following:

- **Improves reading performance.** Among the studies reviewed, kindergarten students showed the biggest increase.

- **Helps children learn foundational reading skills** such as letter and word identification, phonemic awareness, and completion of sentences.

- **Prompts children to build reading stamina,** to read more frequently and for greater amounts of time.

- **Improves children's attitudes toward reading and learning** in general (Lindsay, 2010).

The researchers also suggest that a reciprocal relationship may exist between access and outcomes. In other words, providing interesting written materials to children increases their reading behavior and achievement, which in turn further increases their desire to read and acquire more books.

What About E-Books?

The fourth edition of the *Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report* was released in January 2013 and reflects the growing popularity of e-books. The highlights include:

- The percentage of children who have read an e-book has almost doubled since 2010 (25% vs. 46%).

- Among children who have read an e-book, one in five says he or she is reading more books for fun; boys are more likely to agree than girls (26% vs. 16%).

- Half of children aged 9 to 17 say they would read more books for fun if they had greater access to e-books—a 50% increase since 2010.

- 75% of kids who have read an e-book are reading e-books at home, with about one in four reading them at school.

- 72% of parents are interested in having their child read e-books.

- 80% of kids who read e-books still read books for fun primarily in print.

- Kids say that e-books are better than print books when they do not want their friends to know what they are reading, and when they are out and about/traveling; print is better for sharing with friends and reading at bedtime.

- 58% of kids aged nine to 17 say they will always want to read books printed on paper.

Closing Thoughts

One of the surest ways to break down the barriers between the rich and poor is to provide all children with access to books. Much of the information our children will need to succeed in our complex world isn't available through conversations and firsthand experience—it's available only through print. Neuman and Celano (2012) state firmly: Leveling the playing field isn't enough. We need to "tip it toward" those most in need.

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