Bridging Inequity with BOOKS
To develop literacy, students need access to many interesting reading materials. Investing in our libraries is critical to equitable achievement in reading.

Stephen Krashen

Too many of our students, particularly those in high-poverty schools, struggle to become fluent readers. Yet a simple solution to this serious issue could be just a shelf away. "The provision of a rich supply of high-interest story books," Mangubhai and Elley (1982) urge us, "is a much more feasible policy for improving English learning than any pious pronouncements about the urgent need to raise teacher quality." Unfortunately, schools often neglect this obvious option.

Choosing Books, Choosing Literacy

Books are necessary for the free voluntary reading through which we develop much of our literacy. Free reading profoundly improves our reading and writing ability, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. Students who say they read more typically have superior literacy development. And school programs in which children select their own reading material for at least a year—and are not tested on what they have read—have been shown to be consistently superior to skill-oriented programs in literacy development.

Students who participate in sustained silent reading, one form of free reading, show more interest in reading later. In one spectacular study, 6th grade boys who participated in an in-school free reading program for eight and one-half months not only did more leisure reading while they were in the program, but they also were still reading more than comparison students six years later (Greaney and Clarke 1973).

The Power of Print

Perhaps the best known in-school free reading program is the Hooked on Books study conducted with boys in reform school (McNeil, in Fader 1976). Researchers gave each participant a paperback book, which they could exchange for another paperback anytime. The students were encouraged to read whatever they wanted, without accountability. After two years, the boys improved in reading comprehension, writing fluency, writing complexity, self-esteem, and attitude toward school. Students who were not in the program stayed the same or worsened on these measures.

Free reading appears to work for everyone. We now have evidence that free reading programs in school are effective worldwide for students of all ages, for both first and second language development (Elley 1991, Krashen 1993). While there is considerable evidence that language acquisition takes place when we understand what we hear and read (Goodman 1982, Smith 1994), even those firmly committed to a skills approach for beginning reading support free reading for solidifying skills and building vocabulary.

Encouraging Free Reading

If free reading is valuable, how do we promote it? Here again, research is consistent. Children read more when they have access to interesting reading material. When researchers gave junior high school students two magazine subscriptions related to their interests, student scores on the California Test of Basic Skills in Reading increased by one-half year over comparison groups during a two-year period (Rucker 1982).

A reasonable interpretation of these results is that the magazines not only served as a source of comprehensible text but also stimulated more reading. As Rucker (1982) points out, magazines are probably the "reader interest specific" of all mass media, and "may consequently be the most valuable as stimuli to reading" (p. 33).

Light reading serves as a conduit to heavier reading. A colleague and I (Ujiie and Krashen 1996) studied comic book reading among middle school boys. We found that boys who described themselves as heavy comic book readers said they like to read more than lighter comic book readers, and they read more for pleasure. And boys who did not read comic books read fewer books in general. Although reading magazines and comic books is certainly not sufficient to develop higher levels of literacy, light reading is a missing link in the lives of many students.

Quality Libraries Inspire Reading

Simply providing access is the first and most important step in encouraging literacy development. Studies also show that children read more when they have a quiet, comfortable place to read. Two kinds of evidence support the importance of school libraries, which can meet these conditions.

First, children get a substantial percentage of their reading material from libraries. When asked where they get their books to read, 30 to 97 percent of children mention some kind of library (Krashen 1993).

Second, a series of recent studies shows that better libraries are related to better reading, as measured by standardized tests. Lance (1994), for example, found that investments in school libraries resulted in better library collections, which in turn resulted in superior reading achievement scores among elementary schools in Colorado.

Test scores also support the need for high-quality libraries. In an analysis of score predictors for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 4th grade reading test for 41 states (Krashen 1995), among the best predictors was the number of books per student in the school library. These results should be of great interest to Californians. California’s low performance on the NAEP as compared to other states’ inspired the formation of a reading task force—and the perception that something was very wrong with how reading was being taught in the state.

Recent research also demonstrates a clear negative relationship between
poverty and the amount of print at home, and a positive relationship between the amount of print at home and the amount of reading children do (McQuillan 1996). McQuillan analyzed a variety of factors related to NAEP 4th grade reading scores in 41 states plus the District of Columbia. He also found that better school and public libraries were related to greater library use, which in turn was related to more free reading. And more free reading was related to better scores on the NAEP.

The need for print-rich environments spans nations and languages. The quality of a country’s school libraries is a significant predictor of its rank in reading (Elley 1992). Not surprisingly, children in more economically developed countries read much better than those in less economically developed countries. This is, most likely, because children in wealthier countries have more access to print. Interestingly, children in the less wealthy countries with the best school libraries made up a large percentage of the gap. The school library can make a profound difference.

**The Case of California**

The poor performance of California’s 4th graders on the NAEP reading test has generated much publicity. California is far behind the U.S. average in number of books per student in school libraries, a result that is not surprising given the strong correlation between books per student in libraries and scores on tests of reading achievement and California’s poor performance on the NAEP.

California spends much less than other states on school libraries and has far fewer librarians per pupil. California, in fact, ranks last in the United States in school librarians per pupil. California has one school librarian for every 6,179 students. The national average is one school librarian for every 882 students (U.S. Department of Education 1997). Inmates at the Preston, Calif. Penal Institution, which has one librarian for 815 inmates, have better access to books than California’s high school students (Moore 1995).

California’s public libraries are not a big help. I found that they now rank in the bottom seven of the country (Krashen 1996). Public library budgets have been cut 25 percent since 1989, and public library hours have been cut 35 percent since 1987. Children’s collections have been hit the hardest (McQuillan 1996). Clearly, children in California live in a state of extreme print deprivation (pun intended).

**How the Print-Rich Get Richer**

California children experience amazing disparities in their print environments. The average child in Beverly Hills has more age-appropriate books at home than the average child in Watts and Compton has in his or her classroom library (Smith et al. 1997). Privileged children also have far better school libraries, better public libraries, and greater access to bookstores.

The gap extends to library services. Students in high-achieving schools in affluent areas are able to visit the school library more frequently, both independently and as a class, and are more likely to be allowed to take books home (LeMoine et al. 1997). School is clearly not closing the chasm. It is making things worse.

This situation is reflected elsewhere, including New York State. Of the 12 New York school libraries in one study, the six that served few poor children had more books than the six that served many poor children (Allington et al. 1995). What is especially noteworthy about this research is that the number of books per child in the schools serving poor children was 15.4, well above the average for the state of California. What is unacceptable elsewhere is above average in California.

Beyond the quality of library collections themselves, additional barriers deprive children of the rich reading they need to develop literacy. While students in low-poverty schools usually have relatively open access to school libraries, children in high-poverty schools often face severely restricted access to the few services their school libraries do offer. Some schools even bar children from taking library books out of the building, despite the print-poor environment many of these children also face at home. Affluent schools place no such restrictions on their students.

**Libraries and Second-Language Acquisition**

The library situation is even worse for those acquiring English as a second language. Developing literacy in the primary language is an extremely efficient means of developing literacy in

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**Average Number of Books in Three California Communities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beverly Hills</th>
<th>Watts</th>
<th>Compton</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books in home</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books in classroom libraries</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books in school libraries</td>
<td>60,000</td>
<td>23,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books in public libraries</td>
<td>200,600</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookstores</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
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*from: Smith, Constantino, and Krashen (1996)*
the second language (Cummins 1981). To become good readers in the primary language, however, children need to read in the primary language.

In the United States, the average Spanish-speaking family with a limited-English-proficient student has only 22 books in its home. This figure refers to total books, not age-appropriate books for children (Ramirez et al. 1991). Once again, school does not solve the problem. In the bilingual schools studied by Pucci (1994), school libraries had approximately one book per child in Spanish. ESL students often do not know what the school library can offer, and their families, too, are almost completely unaware of what is in libraries and how they operate (Constantino 1995).

**Dollars and Sense**

Many teachers buy most of the books their students read. Indeed, Allington and his colleagues report that “classrooms with the largest collections of trade books were those where teachers reported they purchased most of the books” (pp. 23–24). Educators who do this are in an impossible position. If they do not buy books, students have nothing to read. If they do, and students progress in literacy, the basal series and unused software gets the credit. The one solution to this intolerable situation is a much greater school investment in books.

The money is there. A fraction of the investment we are willing to make for technology will provide access to good reading material for all children. Weighing the animal more precisely and more frequently will not help it grow faster—it needs to be fed.

My dream is of a one-time investment, with the interest going to school and classroom libraries. The governor of California, at the time of this writing, is willing to invest a billion dollars for technology and training. At 5 percent interest, one billion dollars would generate $10 per school child in California. Committing this money to school libraries would increase California’s investment from $8.50 per child, the current level, to $18.50 per child, just above the national average. And the money would be there forever.

**Does Access to Books Lead to Reading?**

If books are available, will children read them? Two recent studies and several older studies strongly suggest that they will. A colleague and I recently observed 11 middle school classes in the middle of the school year during

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sustained silent reading time. Overall, 90 percent of the children were reading (Von Spreckens and Krashen, in press).

In one school with an inadequate library serving children from print-poor environments, 2nd and 3rd graders went to the public library monthly. By visiting the public library during school time, but before it was open to the public, the children could explore the library, share books, and not be constrained by the need to remain quiet. Each child was allowed to take out 10 books, which suddenly produced a substantial classroom library for use during sustained silent reading time and for reading at home. Three weeks after the first trip, children and parents were surveyed. The children enjoyed their visit, and most reported reading more—and more easily. They wanted to return to the library. Parents’ responses tended to show even more enthusiasm (Ramos and Krashen, in press).

Of course, the implication of this study is not simply to use the public library. The solution must come from school. The school involved in this study was lucky to have a cooperative, well-supplied public library close to the school. Others are not so lucky.

**Books—An Essential Element**

Simply providing interesting books for children is the most powerful incentive for reading. This conclusion is consistent with research showing that extrinsic incentives for reading have not been effective (McQuillan 1997). Improving access to books and giving children a quiet, comfortable place to read does successfully encourage reading. We must build critically needed reading environments for all our learners—book by book.

**References**


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**True or False?**

**EXAM FOR EDUCATORS AND ADMINISTRATORS**

Please answer the following with a "T" for true or "F" for false.

1. I want a masters program that offers me more than a diploma.
2. I want to make changes in my classroom and in my school.
3. I would like a program that requires me to be on-campus only ten weeks out of the whole year (a beautiful mountaintop campus would be fine).
4. I want to know how my Christian faith is important in my work as an educator.

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