Don't Level the Playing Field

Tip It Toward the Underdogs

Our research describes how the contrasting ecologies of affluence and poverty contribute to disparities in the development of information capital. To reverse the growing polarization between the so-called haves and have-nots, here are six policy recommendations, recognizing that they represent only a beginning to a much-needed process of serious thought, reflection, debate, and action.

1. Unlevel the Playing Field: Too many government programs, like Title I, as well as foundation efforts are aimed at "leveling the playing field," giving high-poverty students a leg up by equalizing educational resources with more affluent communities. Today, the "comparability" provisions in federal and state funding programs, for example, are still the tools that officials use to ensure equal educational opportunity among lower- and higher-income students. But as we have seen, equal community-based resources do not create equal opportunity. We need to provide more resources and additional supports to students in poor neighborhoods. As a policy strategy, "resources" are most frequently defined as extra funding. Surely, additional funds targeted to more computer and Internet resources in the Badlands would help make up for the fact that most of the neighborhood students do not have high-speed Internet access at home. However, additional targeted human resources are needed as well. Placing more adult mentors in the preschool area in libraries is just one type of additional support that could have enormous implications in the amount, type, and quality of early shared reading. Using technology specialists to create and guide children through knowledge-centered Internet environments is another type of additional support. Training assistants to craft opportunities for more intensive engagements with resources (no more random flipping and clicking) is crucial for these children's further learning. Whether through mentoring, additional adult involvement, more challenging and culturally relevant learning opportunities, or higher-quality parent-child interactions, the goal should be to compress more experiences and practice into the time available.

2. Parent Involvement Training: Nearly ubiquitous, the story hour in libraries has introduced millions of youngsters to the joys of reading and listening to stories. But the story hour could do more: there is an important role for librarians and teachers to play in training parents in the skills associated with successful reading. In our experience, parents in the Badlands wanted to provide children with a good start; however, they often didn't know what they could do to help.

Helping parents understand which skills and capacities children will need to become successful readers builds social capital. Such knowledge helps parents make judgments about what kinds of language and literacy experiences to look for in preschool and child-care settings, what to look for in initial reading instruction in kindergarten and the early grades, what to ask principals and others who make decisions regarding reading instruction, and whether their child is making adequate progress in reading or needs additional instruction. In short, parent training ought to unlock the mystery of what it takes to ensure children's success in school.

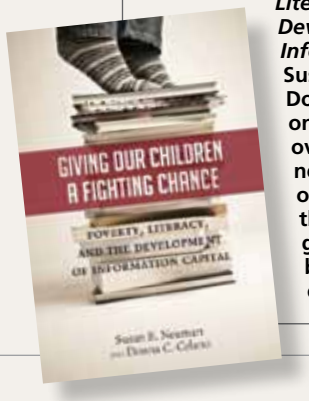
Literacy begins in infancy, with a child's first exposure to language, and then progresses in rather predictable ways through language learning, vocabulary and knowledge accumulation, early exposure to books and to the sounds and symbols of language, experimental play with reading, accurate decoding, and fluent reading, all the way to the most advanced forms of reading to learn and constructing meaning from multiple texts. We need to help parents understand the crucial role they play in children's early lives. Parents are not just disciplinarians, backup teachers, or homework completers; when they have the necessary knowledge and skills, they are supportive coaches and guides as their children learn to read. The informal, everyday literacy lessons they provide for young children—by reading to them, telling them stories, and cheering on their efforts to learn—shape what children know and how they come to see the place of literacy in their own lives. It is imperative that we engage all parents in these endeavors.

3. Computer Training and Assistance: "Googling" has become common parlance to many people. It is not familiar to all, however, particularly those in low-income communities. The digital divide is still an unfortunate byproduct of living in poor areas where Internet access is often limited or unreliable.

If libraries are to provide equal access to resources for all our citizens, we must consider interventions and trainings that strategically provide information navigation skills to adults and their young children to promote more educational uses of the library resources. Recent advances in technology offer extraordinary support for reading development and information gathering. However, as we saw throughout our observations, these resources will not be used to full advantage without training and support. These new technology tools are not self-teaching; pre-readers and beginning readers need the careful scaffolding of an adult who may use the clever animations and multimedia characteristics in ways that turn the work of reading into play. Even the most comprehensive software cannot substitute for the power of adult guidance and support for enhancing student learning.

Equal community-based resources do not create equal opportunity. We need to provide more resources to students in poor neighborhoods.

The main article and this sidebar are excerpted from *Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance: Poverty, Literacy, and the Development of Information Capital* by Susan B. Neuman and Donna C. Celano. Based on 21 studies conducted over 10 years in two neighborhoods, it offers a new lens on the achievement gap—and the need for both school and community solutions.



4. Access to Information: It seemed like a yearly ritual: throughout our 10 years of studies, city budget allocations for libraries would be on the cutting block. Particularly in the poorest neighborhoods, budgets would be slashed, and libraries even threatened with closure. Supposedly saving precious taxpayer dollars, hours of operation would be curtailed, weekends limited, and librarians inevitably asked to do more with less. In essence, access to information for poor families and their children was seen as expendable.

It seems as if we have forgotten how valuable libraries are to our society. We expect much of them—from helping us perform our civic duties to understanding our fundamental rights in a democracy—but often we give little in return in terms of public support. Nevertheless, the library as an institution has continued to serve its mission: to support the virtues of information and reading, to offer people opportunities to read what they choose rather than what is chosen for them. Unlike school, the public library has no predetermined curriculum or pedagogical emphasis; rather, it is designed as neutral space available to all. Historically, this institution has helped to reduce inequity by making information readily accessible to the community at large. Today, it is serving this role as nearly the sole safety net for those who lack access to print and other technologies.

Library closures, limited hours, and diminished services do great harm to all citizens, but especially those in poor neighborhoods. Instead of closing them down, we need to recognize their central role in revitalizing communities and support them with greater funding. Libraries in our neediest communities should be open longer, with a greater number of resources and services. They serve as a lifeline of information to their local citizens.

5. Engage Students' Minds: Far too often, people underestimate the capabilities of students who live in poor neighborhoods, equating poverty with low ability. In reality, these students are eager to learn and develop greater expertise if given opportunities to do so. It is so rare, unfortunately, that such opportunities are offered to them.

In the Badlands, there are few preschool options; the Head Start and Even Start federal programs offer high quality but limited hours of care. More than likely, a child here will go to a local church-based program or be raised by a relative, such as a grandmother. The unsettling work patterns and varying shift schedules makes stability in child care nearly impossible. One or two decrepit playgrounds offer children a place to play. A few community organizations proudly exist, but their focus is on keeping the impinging ills that accompany poverty—joblessness, drug use, teen pregnancy—in check, rather than providing an enriching environment for children. Observing summer programs, we saw students treated to a pabulum of mind-numbing activities that merely filled up the hours until the summer was over.

Students come to expect less and give less in return. They perceive themselves as poor learners and seek avoidance strategies, including dropping out mentally or physically from school. These students need adults who believe in their abilities and trust that they are capable learners. They need programs that help to develop their expertise in domains of interest and offer immersion in communities of practice, recognizing that enculturation lies at the heart of learning. When we give students opportunities to become involved in cognitively stimulating topics that spark their interests and imaginations, we begin to tap their extraordinary potential.

6. Economic Integration: Schools today reflect their neighborhoods. In geographically concentrated neighborhoods of poverty, children will attend schools in which over 90 percent of the students are poor. Similarly, in geographically concentrated neighborhoods of affluence, children will attend schools in which over 90 percent of students are affluent. Throughout our country this pattern persists: schools are economically segregated, further exacerbating the problems of inequality.

If we are truly committed to improving the education of poor children, we will have to get them away from learning environments smothered in poverty. Schools in poor areas typically struggle for many reasons, but among the most prominent are their rotating faculty of inexperienced teachers, low-level curricula, and ineffectual administrators. In contrast, schools in affluent areas, on average, are more stable, with more highly trained teachers, more rigorous curricula, fewer discipline problems, and more support from volunteers.

Studies have shown that economically integrating schools can be a feasible strategy for changing this scenario.[1] This is being done in some places with impressive results. An important study conducted in Montgomery County, Maryland, showed that low-income students who were enrolled in affluent elementary schools performed far better than similarly low-income students in higher-poverty schools in the county—even when the higher-poverty schools were given extra resources.[2] After seven years, low-income students in affluent neighborhood schools cut the large initial gap with middle-class students by half in math and by one-third in reading. Students performed at almost half a standard deviation better than comparable low-income students in higher-poverty schools. Further, achievement scores for the middle-class students did not decline or show evidence of any negative effects.

–S.B.N. and D.C.C.

Endnotes

1. Richard D. Kahlenberg, *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001).

2. Richard D. Kahlenberg, ed., *The Future of School Integration: Socioeconomic Diversity as an Education Reform Strategy* (New York: Century Foundation, 2012).