

Differences in Print Environment

for Children in Beverly Hills, Compton and Watts

Courtney Smith, Rebecca Constantino and Stephen Krashen

Lack of access to books is rarely mentioned as a cause of low literacy, yet research confirms that it is an extremely important factor. More access to books is associated with more free voluntary reading (Houle and Montmarquette, 1984; Morrow, 1982) and more free voluntary reading is associated with better literacy development (Krashen, 1993). There is some evidence that poor children have less access to reading material than affluent children. Kozol (1991) reported that a public school in the South Bronx had about 700 books in the school library for a student body of 1,300, while a student in the more affluent North Bronx had 8000 books for 825 students. Constantino (1995) found large discrepancies among three children in different neighborhoods. In this paper, we take a closer look at the differences among children in print environment, examining several possible sources of books.

Procedure

Subjects for the study were 40 public school children ages 8 to 12 from three communities in the Los Angeles area: Beverly Hills, an extremely affluent community; Compton, considered working class; and Watts, considered working and underclass. Table 1 presents median income in these three communities (data from 1994 U.S. Census).

Table 1.
Median income in three communities

Community	Median Income
Beverly Hills	83,000
Compton	20,000
Watts	15,000

The sample was a sample of convenience. Beverly Hills children were located through mutual acquaintances. Compton children were contacted through a teacher in the Compton school district who was able to obtain permission from parents of children in three different classrooms. Children in Watts lived in families participating in Habitat for

necessary. Nevertheless, we applied several tests to the data. The Beverly Hills children had significantly more books at home than the Watts children ($t = 6.82, df = 14, p = .000$) and had more books than the Compton children ($t = 6.45, df = 14, p = .000$). The Beverly Hills children had significantly more books available in their classroom libraries than the

Table 2:
Print Environment in Three Communities

	Books in Home		Classroom		Libraries:		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	School Total	Public Total	Bookstores Total
Beverly Hills	199.2	118.0	392.4	91.2	60,000	200,595	5
Watts	0.4	.74	53.8	30.9	23,000	110,000	0
Compton	2.67	3.37	47.3	20.4	16,000	90,000	1

Books in home: age appropriate, not total books
Bookstores: within walking distance of children

Humanity. There was no reason, however, to suspect that significant differences existed between these children and other children in their communities.

One of us, (R.C.) personally visited the homes of every subject and counted the number of books in the home. R.C. also visited the classrooms of every student and counted the number of books in classroom libraries. Data on school libraries and public libraries was obtained by telephone and data on bookstores was obtained from the Yellow Pages.

Results

Table 2 presents our findings on the print environment of the three communities and table 3 shows how Watts and Compton compare to Beverly Hills.

These differences are so obvious that inferential statistics are hardly

Watts children ($t = 13.62, df = 17, p = .000$) as well as the Compton children ($t = 14.30, df = 15, p = .000$). MANOVA analysis produced similar results.

Discussion

The differences in access to books among these communities is astounding. We expected to find that children in more affluent communities have more books in the home, but the degree of the difference was far beyond our expectations. Unfortunately, school does not help level the playing field. In fact, school makes things even more unequal; less affluent children have fewer books in their classroom libraries and school libraries. The community also fails these children: less affluent children have access to fewer books in their public libraries. Thus, those who have more access to books from one

source appear to have more access from all sources.

We suspect that our data understates the problem. LeMoine, O'Brien, Brandlin and McQuillan (forthcoming) reported that school libraries in schools in less economically advantaged areas tended to provide fewer services: children were allowed less access to them and they had more restrictive checkout policies.

It is no wonder that lower SES children do so poorly on measures of literacy development. They have been denied the most important ingredient for literacy development: reading material.

A weakness of our study is that the children we studied were not randomly sampled. As noted earlier, they were a sample of convenience. If some bias is present, if our results were not typical of children in these communities, the situation would still be unacceptable: the fact remains that significant numbers of children are without print resources at home, and have very little outside of home.

The cure, in our view, is simple: better classroom libraries, better school libraries and better public libraries. There is plenty of empirical evidence in support of this option: better school libraries are associated with better reading achievement at the state level (Lance, Welborn and Hamilton-Pennell, 1993), the national level (Krashen, 1995; McQuillan, 1996) and the international level (Elley, 1992). The cure must come from school: school should not simply be a place where we reward affluent children and penalize the less affluent.

Courtney Smith is a graduate student in Education at the University of Southern California.

Rebecca Constantino received her Ph.D. in Education from the University of Southern California and is currently a U.S. Congressional Fellow.

Stephen Krashen is a professor of Education at the University of Southern California.

Table 3:
Comparison of Beverly Hills
with Watts and Compton

Ratios	Books in Home	Classroom	School	Public
Watts	498 to 1	7.3 to 1	2.6 to 1	2.4 to 1
Compton	75 to 1	8.3 to 1	3.75 to 1	2.1 to 1

When it does this, it is simply "a hospital that tends to the healthy and rejects the sick" (Schoolboys of Barbiana, 1970, p.13).

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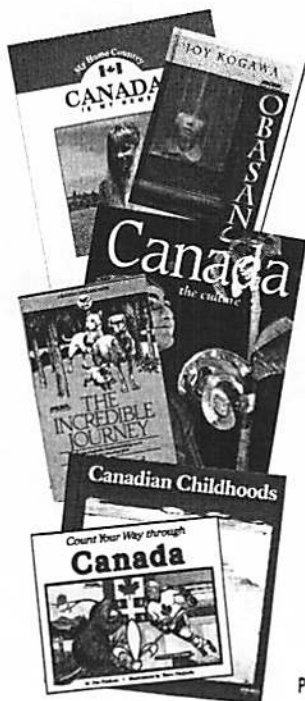
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