

Access to Books: Variations in Schools and Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This study found that schools with high numbers of poor children have less access to books and magazines in their classroom libraries than other schools. Furthermore, there were likely to be restrictions on access to library and books in high poverty schools. These discrepancies highlight the critical need for more monies to purchase books for schools with many poor children.

If we want to develop readers, children must read and read widely. If we want children to read widely, we must provide children with access to books. These may seem simple enough axioms, but some schools seem to provide children with both greater access to books and an opportunity to read those books during the school day than others do. A half-century ago Waples (1937) demonstrated that physical proximity to supplies of books and magazines predicted the extent to which people engaged in reading activity. In other words, those who had easy access to books and magazines were more likely to read than those who did not have easy access. A similar result has been reported in schools through the use of "book floods" (Elley & Manguhabi, 1983; Fielding, Wilson & Anderson, 1986; Ingham, 1981). Given the importance of access to books, we studied patterns of access in elementary schools implementing literature-based instruction because these schools seemed good candidates for asking about the availability.

One element of children's access to books is the school library. Huck, Hepler and Hickman (1987) suggest using the American Library Association (ALA) minimum standards of roughly 10,000 books for elementary schools for 500 or fewer children (or about 20 volumes per child). We studied six elementary schools

in five school districts that served substantial numbers of low-income children and only one exceeded the ALA standard. On the other hand, in the six comparison schools that enrolled few poor children (i.e., less than 10 percent), four met the standard. Schools with few

poor children had 21.5 volumes per child available, whereas schools with many poor children had shelves with only 15.4 volumes per child. Children who attended schools that enroll few poor children had access to about 50 percent more books than those enrolled in schools with many children from low-income families.

A similar difference was found in access to magazines with the low-poverty schools averaging 38 subscriptions and the high-poverty schools averaging 22. We also examined the size of classroom tradebook collections as another aspect of access. Huck et al. also suggested that classroom book collections of about 500 volumes are needed, but none of the high-poverty schools achieved this standard. In most of the high-poverty schools

classroom libraries of 50-100 books were available, although the school with the greatest concentration of poor children (95%) had the smallest classroom libraries (25-50 books).

District policies on providing books for classroom libraries varied considerably in these six schools. Nonetheless, classrooms with the largest collections of

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trade books were those where teachers reported they purchased most of the books. Teacher purchase of books for classroom collections differed by school. In some schools very few teachers reported such purchases, while in others the majority of teachers bought books from their personal funds. At one high-poverty school neither the district nor the teachers purchased many books for classroom collections and as a result that school ranked last in size of classroom collections. At another school, the district purchased many books but few teachers did. Still the school ranked first in the average size of classroom collections. But it was the few teachers who purchased many books over a period of time and who worked in districts that also purchased many books that had the largest and most diverse classroom library collections.

Finally, we must note that in the schools serving many poor children access to the library was usually restricted to a single weekly visit. Several schools also restricted the number of titles that children could borrow (usually to one or two per visit). Two schools barred children from taking library books out of the building! No low-poverty school had such a restriction, and it was more common in these buildings for children to have relatively open access to the library throughout the day and, in some cases, before and after the regular classroom schedule.

Discussion

Eight of the twelve elementary schools studied had school library collections that failed to meet the minimum standards for number of volumes needed. Only one high-poverty school met the standard. Schools with many poor children, on average, had 50 percent fewer titles in the library per child than schools with few poor children. Additionally, many, if not most, of the books were very out-dated in the libraries of schools serving many poor children. In one school over half of the titles available had been purchased prior to 1970 (usually with ESEA funds). In some cases children were selecting books that were older than their parents! In too many cases the book collections were not only terribly out-dated but also largely failed to reflect the diversity of American culture. High poverty schools provided children with substantially fewer opportunities to visit the library and placed greater restrictions on access to books once at the library.

But school libraries are no longer the only source for books in most schools. Classroom tradebook collections have become increasingly popular in the past five years. Such collections can provide an immediate access to books. Unfortunately, none of the high-pover-

ty schools met the standard set for adequacy of classroom libraries.

No matter how we consider our findings, it seems that children from low-income families are treated unfairly. These children have the fewest books at home. They attend schools that have the smallest classroom and library book collections with the most restrictive book lending policies. None of this seems to the authors to be a prescription for creating readers.

We present our findings in the hope that more support for school and classroom library collections will soon be forthcoming. In our view the ALA minimum standards, which were developed in 1975, are themselves dated and inadequate to meet the literacy needs of children today. But developing school and classroom libraries even to those standards will represent true progress in schools with many poor children. There is good evidence that the sheer quantity of reading that children do is the best predictor of reading achievement (Cunningham & Allington, 1994). There is also evidence that access to a rich range of appropriate books fosters more reading in and out of school. Finally, there is evidence that children from poor families have limited access to books at home. Our findings provide good evidence that children from poor families have limited access to books in school. If we want children to become readers, the question that needs to be answered is, "What are they supposed to read, anyway?" (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1993).

...children from poor families have limited access to books in school.

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