

## **WHY INVEST IN LIBRARIES**

Stephen Krashen

This paper is based on a presentation to the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education, February 11, 2014. The actual presentation lasted about five minutes and is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAui0OGfHQY>.

To discuss libraries, several important results from educational research will be of use.

## **POVERTY COUNTS**

The impact of poverty on educational achievement has been documented again and again. Poverty means, among other things, inadequate diet, lack of health care, and lack of access to books. Each of these has a powerful impact on achievement (Berliner, 2009; Krashen, 1997). The best teaching in the world has little effect when children are hungry, undernourished, ill, and have little or nothing to read.

Martin Luther King recognized this: "We are likely to find that the problems of housing and education, instead of preceding the elimination of poverty, will themselves be affected if poverty is first abolished" (King, 1967). Research done since 1967 has confirmed that Dr. King is right: (Baker, 2007; Zhao, 2009; Ananat, Gassman-Pines, Francis, and Gibson-Davis, 2011).

## **FREE VOLUNTARY READING IS THE MAJOR CAUSE OF LITERACY DEVELOPMENT**

Free voluntary reading is reading because you want to, self-selected reading for pleasure. A wide range of studies have confirmed that free reading is the major factor in literacy development.

Sustained silent reading (SSR) studies: In SSR, a short period is set aside for self-selected reading, with little or no accountability. Students who participate in these programs consistently outperform comparison students on measures of literacy, especially if the program is given sufficient time to run (Krashen, 2004; 2007).

Multivariate studies allow researchers to determine the impact of a predictor controlling for the effect of other predictors, that is, assuming that other predictors have no effect on each other. In multivariate studies, free voluntary reading has been a consistent winner, successfully predicting scores on the TEOFL test among ESL students, as well as other measures. Traditional instruction has not done well in these studies (Gradman and Hanania, 1991, Constantino, Lee, Cho and Krashen, 1997, Lee, 2005).

Case histories are valuable when we have a lot of them; then we can see what factors successful cases have in common. In case after case, free voluntary reading is given credit for academic success and for the development of higher levels of literacy.

The cases include Geoffrey Canada, the founder of the Harlem Children's Zone, who tells us: "I loved reading, and my mother, who read voraciously too, allowed me to have her novels after she finished them. My strong reading background allowed me to have an easier time of it in most of my classes" (Canada, 1995, p. 89).

Liz Murray, who grew up under extreme poverty, relates that she only showed up for school just before the spring exams, in order to see what the tests would be like. She says she owed her education to her dad's habit of borrowing library books from all over New York City and never returning them: "Any formal education I received came from the few days I spent in attendance, mixed with knowledge I absorbed from random readings of my or Daddy's

ever-growing supply of unreturned library books. And as long as I still showed up steadily the last few weeks of classes to take the standardized tests, I kept squeaking by from grade to grade." (from Shanahan, 2010). (For additional cases, see Krashen, 2004.)

## **CHILDREN OF POVERTY HAVE VERY LITTLE ACCESS TO BOOKS.**

Children of poverty have very few books at home, live in neighborhoods with few bookstores and inferior public libraries, and attend schools with inferior classroom and school libraries (Krashen, 2004). Thus,

## **THE MAJOR SOURCE OF BOOKS FOR CHILDREN OF POVERTY IS LIBRARIES.**

In fact, libraries are their only chance.

## **LIBRARIES CAN MAKE UP FOR THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY**

The results of a series of multivariate studies suggest that access to a good library can balance, or can make up for the effects of poverty on reading achievement. These studies are reviewed in Krashen (2011) and I present one here in detail.

Krashen, Lee and McQuillan (2012) analyzed the results of the 2006 PIRLS test, given to ten year old children in 40 different countries. Children took the tests in their own language, and tests were of equal difficulty regardless of language. Table 1 presents the results.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis: predictors of achievement PIRLS 2006 reading test

Predictor	Beta	p
SES	0.41	0.005
independent reading	0.16	0.143
library: 500 books	0.35	0.005
Instruction	-0.19	0.085

$r^2 = .61$

The important data are the beta's – the larger the beta, the stronger the effect. Clearly, poverty (SES) is the strongest predictor, consistent with many many previous studies: Higher socio-economic status meant better performance. The percentage of students allowed to do self-selected reading during the school day was a positive predictor, but of modest strength, consistent with the SSR research reviewed above.

The third predictor, percentage of children with access to a school library with at least 500 books, was not only positively related to reading scores, but was nearly as strong as the negative effect of poverty: In other words, the school library had a strong positive effect which balanced the impact of poverty's negative effect. This result makes sense: A major reason children of poverty have low reading test scores is because they have little access to books. When we supply access, in the form of libraries, they read about as well as children from more affluent families.

The final result is that those receiving more direct instruction in reading actually did somewhat worse on the reading examination.

## LAUSD

**Poverty:** The child poverty rate for the US is 23.1%. This is very high, the second highest among all advanced economy countries (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2012), This is the major reason for our unspectacular performance on international tests: When researchers control for the effect of poverty, American children score near the top of the world (Carnoy and Rothstein, 2013).

Finland, which always scores at or near the top of the world in reading achievement, has only 5.3% child poverty.

**Eighty percent of LAUSD children live in poverty, the second highest of all big cities in the United States** (<http://laschoolreport.com/how-laUSD-compares/>).

**Access to books.** The high rate of poverty among LAUSD means little access to books, among other major problems. For LAUSD students, libraries are of little help.

Public Libraries: In the library category of the America's Most Literate Cities study (Miller, 2013), Los Angeles public libraries ranked near the basement: Los Angeles public libraries **ranked 69th out of 77 cities.**

I was not able to find data on holdings in Los Angeles Unified school libraries, but the figures on school librarians are alarming. Several studies confirm that the presence of a certified librarian is an independent predictor of reading achievement (e.g. Lance and Hofschire, 2011). In the US, there is one school librarian for every 916 students. California ranks last, by far, in the US, with a ratio of approximately one school librarian per 5,124 students (California Department of Education, 2012). LAUSD has one certified school

librarian for every 6,500 students (based on data from Ratliff, 2014).

### **The TECHNOLOGY solution**

"Be not the first by whom the new are tried,  
Nor the last the lay the old aside."  
Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*. (From Rogers, 1983).

It is often suggested that technology can solve the problem of access to books, through high-powered computers with internet access and through e-books and e-book readers.

It appears to be best to be a "deliberate" early adopter, not the very first to use innovations (Rogers, 1983). Deliberate adopters wait until basic problems are solved and prices go down. This is sensible practice in educational technology. There is, at present, no evidence supporting the current technology fever that has gripped the schools, stimulated by the requirement that all testing related to the Common Core be online.

In The National Education Technology Plan (US Dept of Education, 2010), the US Department of Education insists that we introduce massive technology into the schools immediately, because of the "the pressing need to transform American education ...", even if this means doing it imperfectly: Repairs can be done later: "... we do not have the luxury of time: We must act now and commit to fine-tuning and midcourse corrections as we go." In other words, we should all be super-early adopters.

But jumping in without proper preparation wastes our students' time and will cost more money in the long run. The cost of connecting all students to the internet, of providing up-to-date computers for all students, the constant upgrading and replacement as the computer industry makes "progress" as well as repair of

glitches will run into the billions, and will only increase in time. And all this is happening with no pilot studies, no clear data showing the new technology will help students, and, as far as I know, no plans to do such studies.

In contrast, we already have an astonishing amount of evidence that providing access to interesting, comprehensible books has a strong impact on literacy development. Given access to interesting, comprehensible books, most students will read them (Krashen, 2001, 2004), and when they do, their vocabulary, grammar, writing style, vocabulary and knowledge of the world will improve.

The conservative, careful and fiscally responsible path to improving literacy is by investing in libraries and librarians, and delaying massive investment in technology until there is good reason to believe that it will really help.

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