

## **Limiting Access to School Libraries for Children of Poverty: A Road Block to Student Achievement**

Tracy D. Creech

*The University of North Carolina Charlotte*

*The access to quality print and electronic library resources is often an illusion for students of poverty who rely on their school library for research and technology (Pribesh, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011). This lack of access is just one issue in regards to libraries in schools with a high population of low socioeconomic students. There is also the issue of a lack of qualified staff. This paper examines the factors that lead to a lack of access to print and electronic materials and quality staff for students of poverty in their school libraries.*

*Keywords:* school libraries, media centers, poverty, school librarians

There have been a number of educational research studies that bolster the point that school libraries boost the academic performance for all students (Kachel & Lance, 2013; Lance, Schwarz & Rodney, 2014; Littman, 2014). These studies suggest that school libraries are a potent force in eradicating illiteracy by improving reading and technology skills for students. School libraries are an essential component in the educational arena. This crucial component is one that *all* students should have access to, regardless of socioeconomic classification. Unfortunately, some of the most vulnerable students in America's public schools have limited access to the services provided by school libraries. Students of poverty often have to contend with a lack of access to print and electronic resources in their school library (Pribesh, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011). Oftentimes, the scant resources that are available are outdated or are in

need of repair. Additionally, school libraries in high poverty areas often have staff that are not qualified or certified to meet the needs of students. All of the aforementioned factors feed negative academic growth which puts children of poverty significantly behind their more affluent counterparts. The purpose of this paper is to examine the correlation between access to appropriately staffed school libraries with abundant print and electronic resources and the impact on academic achievement for students who live in poverty.

A review of relevant literature in regards to the abhorrent state of libraries in high poverty schools is explored. The literature regarding school libraries is sparse; however, what has been researched and reported is a powerful testament as to why libraries are very much needed in high poverty schools. The literature will examine how school libraries contribute to positive academic growth in addition to supporting literacy and technology skills among students. Additionally, data from educational databases is analyzed which further strengthens the point that there are significant gaps in regards to appropriate school library access and the lack of qualified school library personnel. Finally, recommendations are made in regards to increasing access to print and electronic resources. Recommendations are also made regarding appropriate staffing for libraries in high poverty schools.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Access to print and electronic resources**

Educational researchers have established that more access to books leads to more reading in general (Kachel, & Lance, 2013; Krashen, 2004). This additional reading leads to improved literacy development (Krashen, 2004). Krashen, Lee and McQuillan (2012) conducted a multivariate study that closely reviewed access to school library media centers and literacy for grades four through eight for children that live in poverty. They found that the negative effect of

poverty on fourth grade reading scores is significant; however, access to books can improve reading regardless of socioeconomic status. Poverty is a strong predictor of reading scores; however, access to books makes an independent contribution to reading achievement. They found that students who read proficiently in grade four also tend to read better by grade eight. In each case, access to quality reading material is essential. Library access, both school library media centers and public libraries for the purposes of the aforementioned study, was a consistent predictor for reading scores. The amount of quality reading materials and school library media center circulation made an important impact on increasing literacy.

Neuman and Celano (2001) also conducted extensive research regarding the effect of poverty in relation to school library media center access. Their study actually looked at access to all types of libraries; however, the data in regards to school library media centers is consistent with similar studies (Kachel, & Lance, 2013). The study compared middle-income and high poverty neighborhoods in the same city. One important discovery from the Neuman and Celano (2001) research study is that children from middle-income neighborhood were deluged with a wide variety of reading materials; however, children from poor neighborhoods had to aggressively seek out such materials. Children of poverty had to be persistent in order to obtain quality books (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Another result of the study was that the data collected showed that children from middle-income communities had roughly thirteen titles for each child to choose from whereas the children from the high poverty community had one book for every three students. In addition to the importance of print and electronic resources in school media centers, they also report that books should be made available in the home as well. The data represented in this study shows the glaring disparities in regards to access to quality literacy

resources for children who live in poverty. Without the appropriate access to print and electronic resources, literacy is nearly impossible.

According to Pribesh, Gavigan and Dickinson (2011), schools that have a high poverty student population were more likely to have access to fewer school library resources than students who do not live in poverty. Additionally, they found that students who need the most support had fewer new resources and their libraries were closed more than schools with students who come from more affluent backgrounds. Such disparities have a direct correlation to negative academic growth. Pribesh, Gavigan and Dickinson (2011) terms this an access gap as opposed to an achievement gap. The differences in access to print and electronic resources has a significant impact for a student's early literacy development. Pribesh, Gavigan and Dickinson (2011) argue that students who have access to resources are more likely to read, thereby improving their reading motivation and achievement. They also make the argument that school library media centers are an important component of learning.

### **The need for qualified and certified school library staff**

Kachel and Lance (2013) conducted studies which prove beyond a doubt that school library media specialists positively contribute to overall student achievement. They argue that schools who employ full-time certified media specialists often have students who score higher on reading and writing examinations. Additionally, economically disadvantaged students benefit substantially more than other students when their school library is staffed by a certified school library media specialist. Often, there is a shortage of qualified and certified school library media specialists in schools with a high student poverty rate. This has a negative impact on literacy which in turn leads to a negative impact on student achievement in general. Kachel and Lance (2013) further argue that staffing school media centers with certified librarians

ultimately helps to close achievement gaps. Overall, school library media specialists provide positive contributions to student achievement and as such, should be seen as essential personnel in all schools.

Kaplan (2007) addresses the importance of having a qualified school librarian by providing evidence that they are collaborative partners in education. Kaplan argues that school librarians are information specialists responsible for knowing the sources of information in all formats, both print and electronic. He or she is also knowledgeable and understands the importance of integrating technology into the educational setting. The school librarian can therefore assist students as well as teachers with didactic information. Kaplan further argues that school librarians should be considered teachers and as such, should be required to meet the same standards as other highly qualified teachers as defined by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Currently, school librarians do not have to meet the requirements for NCLB which makes staffing school libraries acceptable if there are unqualified personnel. If school librarians obtain that status, then the school would be required to employ certified school librarians who meet the criteria. This will be a clear path to showing district and school level administrators that certified and highly qualified school librarians are a requirement for student achievement.

### **Relevant Data**

Data obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (2013) indicates that 79,000 of the 85,500 traditional public schools reported that there was a school library present at the school during the 2011-2012 school year which means that roughly 6,500 schools had absolutely no media center. The data are worse for charter schools. It was reported that out of the 4,500 charter schools, 2,200 reported having no school library which means that over 2,000

charter schools did not have a school library available to students for research or reading. As shown in Table 1, these numbers point to a significant access gap for students in public schools.

In regards to school library staff, the National Center for Education Statistics (2013) found that 20.9 percent of public schools did not have a certified school library media specialist (full or part-time). Once again, charter schools fared much worse as it was reported that 56 percent did not have a school library media specialist. As indicated in Table 2, in order to increase literacy among all students, access to qualified library personnel is key.

### Discussion

Based on the available literature and the aforementioned data, it is crucial that appropriate resources be made available to school libraries that serve students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. It is also imperative that these schools also employ qualified personnel to staff their school libraries. The disparities are striking and should be addressed by district and school level administrators. If educators are serious about increasing student achievement for students who live in poverty, then school libraries and the resources housed therein should be deemed essential to that goal. Urban school library reform, much like urban school reform, is needed to effectively remedy this issue.

### Recommendations

In regards to providing the appropriate print and electronic resources and staff for libraries housed within schools that have a high poverty student population, the following recommendations are suggested:

- **Ensure that all school libraries in any given school district have a common collection.** All schools within a particular school district should have access to the same

print and electronic materials. It is suggested that the *district* library services department be tasked with ordering the print and electronic materials for each school for the common collection. The collections may vary depending upon the school's grade level status (elementary, middle or high school). This will ensure that no matter where the student attends school, he or she will have access to a collection that is the identical for all students in the district. School level library staff should still be able to have some autonomy in regards to their individual school collection; however, the common collection should be the default for all schools.

- **Discard outdated print materials.** Print resources should be discarded after ten years if possible to ensure that up to date and relevant materials are available for student research and literacy. It is especially important that non-fiction print materials are the most current resources in the collection. Neuman and Celano (2014) found that school library media centers with a robust and up to date print collection has a significant and positive impact on reading among students who live in poverty.
- **Provide adequate space within the school library for pleasure reading.** A reading room or other similar area should be housed within each school library as a way to encourage reading for pleasure. Reading for pleasure enhances literacy skills (especially for students in lower grades). It is hoped that a child who reads for pleasure (as opposed to merely reading to complete an assignment) will become a life-long reader.
- **Hire only qualified and certified full-time school library staff.** The contributions that certified full-time school library media specialists make in regards to student achievement is quite substantial (Kachel & Lance, 2013). Data suggest that students that attend a school with full-time and certified school librarians do better academically. It is

imperative that school libraries that serve low socioeconomic students have access to qualified personnel.

- **School libraries should form partnerships with public libraries.** School and public libraries should work in concert to ensure that students can access appropriate resources when needed. This partnership becomes essential during school respites such as summer, winter and spring break. A positive partnership among school and public libraries will demonstrate to students that library resources are always available to them.
- **Limit or eliminate late fees for books or other materials for children of poverty.** Late fees for books often keep children of poverty from being able to access the materials that they need for research or pleasure reading. It is suggested that students be responsible for materials that become *lost* but not late. Limiting or eliminating fees for late materials ensures that children of poverty have access to much needed items when necessary.

### Conclusion

The paucity of adequate print and electronic resources and qualified staff in school libraries that have a high population of low socioeconomic students is endemic. As the aforementioned research studies suggest, appropriate access to libraries are an important factor in regards to increasing literacy. Relevant and contemporary print and electronic resources are desperately needed in high poverty school libraries to assist in closing the access and achievement gaps. These gaps are especially problematic in school districts that fund school libraries in affluent schools while high poverty schools in the same district are deficient. Positive reform of this issue is desperately needed and will lead to positive results in regards to student academic achievement.



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