Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance

Professional Resource Evaluation Summary

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Our authors, Dr. Susan Neuman and Dr. Donna Celano, began their research in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the early 1990s with comparison of literacy immersion, access, and quality of material in four distinct neighborhoods (Neuman & Celano, 2001). After implementing several projects, including a book flood, Dr. Neuman paired again with Dr. Celano to embark on a twelve-year research study funded by the William Penn Foundation. Using an ecological perspective, Neuman and Celano (2012) detailed how the, “contrasting ecologies of affluence and poverty contribute to disparities in the development of information capital” (2012, p. 5). In total, 21 studies were performed, giving rise to Giving Our Children A Fighting Chance: Poverty, Literacy, and the Development of Information Capital.

Libraries serve as the “heart and hub” of many communities; they provide an invaluable resource to gather information/learn; hold meetings; socialize; and (hopefully) break down social, economic, or educational barriers (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 16). Inequalities in terms of access to information have further reinforced the Matthew Effect, the maxim that the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 7). Any initiative or policy should always be based upon a plan of action, connecting the root of the problem to a path toward a solution. The authors introduce the “gap hypothesis,” a growing gap between those with the resources and access to information (e.g., more opportunities to read and learn) and those who do not. Though resources come in all forms (material, emotional, symbolic), the most valuable for students to reach their full potential (and also the most important in creating and maintaining inequality) are often immaterial. This book discusses several components of the gap hypothesis, and how (and if) it can be closed.

One of the first exposures to print/literacy that a child has outside of his home is in his observation of neighborhood signs, public demonstration of reading, access to libraries, and both quantity and quality of print materials in his day care center. There are inequalities in these
between the lower income Badlands neighborhood and the middle income Chestnut Hill neighborhood in Philadelphia. While there are more signs in the Badlands, the quality of the signs is, overall, much worse than in Chestnut Hill. The authors argue that this is one example of the ecology of inequality that affects children as they attempt to learn how to read (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 37). The signs are also easier to read in Chestnut Hill, as compared with those in the Badlands. The comparison of other important environmental factors discussed in this chapter is also striking. The chart on p. 32, for example, shows a comparison of reading spaces in these two neighborhoods -- factors such as availability, comfort level, level of disruption, adequate lighting, friendly staff, etc.

There is a remarkable difference in how both adults and children from these low SES and middle SES utilize the library. From story time to number of books checked out, parent-child interaction could not have been more disparate. Library visits in Chestnut Hill are certainly family events. Children in Chestnut Hill benefit from “instructional scaffolding.” The authors explain that by reading to their children, asking them questions about the text, and explaining new vocabulary words, the parents in Chestnut Hill are boosting their children’s literacy. Children in the Badlands are much more likely to come to the library alone. If they are accompanied by an adult, they are often distracted and unengaged.

They were often observed “flipping” through books quickly before setting them down and walking away (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 45). As a result, children in the Badlands see their literacy suffer because they do not have adults there to guide and push them. There is a lack of supervision of the children who visit the Lillian Marrero branch. The children who come are often coming during their daycare’s free hour, and the children run around with no adult supervision, and the scene becomes hectic -- a type of “bedlam” (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 55). "Flipping books in the early years is a poor substitute for being read to. It indicates
children's eagerness to learn, but it also indicates their lack of access to print without the scaffolding support of the adult" (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 53). Additionally, children always check out books in Chestnut Hill, the children in the Badlands almost never take books home from the library.

Introducing computers into the two branch libraries did not, in fact, level the playing field. When comparing the amount of time spent reading, browsing, etc. in the library before and after the introduction of technology, the results were startling. In Chestnut Hill, the introduction of technology did not affect the amount of time spent reading books. In the Badlands, however, computers displaced books. (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 60-61). Rather than bridging the gap between the two neighborhoods, the introduction of technology further exacerbated the divide. Children in the Badlands, overwhelmed and confused by the new technology, often resorted to random-clicking. This led to computer freezes, time wasted, and frustration. Again, these kids were often at the library alone. But, when they were accompanied by adults, the adults were also uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the technology and were unable to help their kids. Over time, adults in the Badlands become more comfortable with technology, but their lack of knowledge was evident.

For teenagers, the introduction of computers led the library to acquire a video-arcade vibe. In Chestnut Hill, technology was used to aid in literacy development skills. Adults helped their children use programs to learn about letters and numbers. Even computer-challenged adults (as in the case of the grandmothers accompanying their toddler-aged granddaughters) encouraged the use of technology in order to boost literacy education (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 69-70). Interaction between the children/parents (or grandparents) and the computers were drastically different. These startling comparisons can, in large part, be attributed to a running theme of the book -- resources and access. Because the Chestnut Hill library patrons have
these material resources at home (updated computers/technology), there are not as pressed to use them during their library time and prefer to read books instead. Library time, however, is often the only opportunity for residents of the Badlands to use computers. “For families with limited access to these resources in the home, the library has become an important safety net. For families in homes where computer access is ubiquitous, such as in Chestnut Hill, no such safety net is needed” (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 61).

Technology (radio, television, or computers) did displace reading in a lower SES, but not in the higher SES environment. Teens’ patterns of computer usage in the library shows a broad range of skill sets, competencies, and differences in information capital. The kids in the Badlands tended to use computers more for entertainment purposes than for research and studying, which was how the Chestnut Hill teens tended to use computers. The researchers mostly chalked this up to the fact that the Badlands teens and students weren’t really given the opportunity to learn basic computer skills.

We live in a digital society where assumptions are made regarding the ease of access to technology and that students have innate working knowledge of computers/Internet. Time may be the largest contributing factor in widening, not closing, the gap. We live in a society in which the digital divide is overlooked. It is assumed that all people, regardless of their SES background, have access to the same information freely. What we don’t realize is that people from lower income backgrounds often don’t have computers at home, and so they depend upon their local libraries for Internet access. This is often an issue, because there are long lines to use the library, and individuals only receive computer time in small increments. On the other hand, the students who live in Chestnut Hill take for granted the ease with which they can use the Internet, because they often have computers and other handheld devices at home which can access the Internet. What also makes this saddening is the fact that people in lower
income neighborhoods most often rely on their libraries to access information, but these libraries are most often targeted for budget cuts. The opportunities to gain information capital and 21st-century skills are not equal across neighborhoods. Students gaining expertise through enrichment activities or trudging through lackluster summer programming where they sadly completed the self-fulfilling prophecies of disengagement.

**How a library can interact within this framework:**

1. Have classes and training sessions for parents about how to read with their children. Give free books to parents who come, so that they can practice at home. These books can come from higher SES branch libraries.

2. Encourage (or require) that parents stay with their children or have the children dropped off in a specific program where they will be engaged, as opposed to the kids running wild and free “flipping” through books without learning. A major consideration is the having staff available to do so, whether it means hiring new library staff to do so or just or adding/rearranging job duties.

3. Have outreach programs that bring the community partners into the library. Seminars, trainings, and workshops about the importance of early literacy AND how to engage and interact with young readers. For example, Boys and Girls Club. Also bring in local business leaders and see if more reading material can be placed in their retail outlets.

4. Host afterschool programs that target literacy, such as the R.E.A.D (Reading Education Assistance Dogs program) or Tail Waggin’ Tutors. Combine character development and literacy in a low-pressure environment.

5. Extend hours and get rid of late fees. Parents may be willing to bring their families after work or on the weekend if it is worth the bus ride. Or they might check out more
materials if they don’t have to worry about paying a fine if it is late. Extended hours would be really good for the weekends, especially, because kids aren’t in school then and it would be really helpful for working on homework, because there would be more opportunities for kids to use computers.

6. Work in conjunction with the “food backpack” non-profits that send home food every week with kids. This is a perfect opportunity to increase immersion in written word.

7. Host exciting and engaging summer camps. I know that we try to keep the “summer slide” from occurring, but kids need to see how education can be fun as well educational. The summer camps could be personalized by age or topic. For example, the Dan story, where the kids were learning science. There could be reading camps, science camps, etc.

8. It would be interesting to have a program where kids and parents/guardians got to stay together -- a program that could help both children and their parents with reading.

9. Computer literacy courses for adults. Parents in the Badlands were uncomfortable using computers, and their children suffered because of that. If they knew how to use the computers, they could assist their kids and encourage them to use computers for educational pursuits instead of just using them to play games.

10. Increase the number of bookmobiles, etc. Access, as we’ve discussed, is a huge issue. The kids who need to be reading more are limited because they don’t have access to printed materials. Sending library vans, or bookmobiles, into struggling communities full of children’s books would get books into their hands and eliminate transportation and access issues.

11. Create programs to help children with homework or school projects. Provide tutoring
in specified subjects/grade levels. This could really be a draw for parents who find themselves spending too much time helping their children with homework, and they may be more encouraged to bring their children in. However, library staff would need to draw a fine line and make parents aware that this is strictly a program for facilitating school achievement (i.e., not a babysitting service).
References


Questions for the class (after/during presentation):

1. What types of after-school/summer programs could be the most beneficial for the kids in the Badlands?
2. In your opinion, is it possible to “level the playing field” between the two communities highlighted in this book? How can the examples, statistics, and trends demonstrated in this book be turned into positive, action-oriented initiatives in other communities with inequalities like those written about by Neuman and Celano?
3. What are your memories of your parents, family, and/or community reading?
4. Do you have kids? How do you help to scaffold their reading? What interactions do they have with the library?
5. Are you an educator/librarian? What differences in reading capabilities and digital proficiency do you see between SES levels?
   a. What are you hours? Do you have after school programs?
   b. Is your public library on the busline?
   c. Do you offer computer ed classes for students? For community (parents) members?