

The Role of School Libraries in Elementary and Secondary Education

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To a great extent, this conference is a celebration of Andrew Carnegie's vision and largesse. Carnegie's vision was to create places, where children and their families could have to free access to books and information. Even a decade ago, people could enter our libraries and see very much a scene reminiscent of Carnegie's dream: large rooms with great tomes, people quietly reading, lights dim, voices in whispers throughout the building.

Today, this scene would look far different than a decade ago. Our libraries of today include open shelving, computer access, a virtual as well as a physical space. They are community centers, literacy playgrounds for many of our children. This transformation led the William Penn Foundation in Philadelphia to sponsor a 50 million dollar effort to create model urban library system in Philadelphia and to sponsor a study that would examine how these transformations affected children's literacy development, particularly for poor, minority families, and its relation to reading achievement.

This study was conducted over a 5-year period during this transformation, and involved methodological strategies that were far different than clinical trials or experimental research. Rather, the study took us into neighborhoods, both middle- and well-to-do and poor communities as well to examine how people used libraries, the relationship between public libraries and school libraries, as well as the hidden stars of libraries—the excellent children's librarians that make a difference in their children's lives.

What we learned, based a wide variety of methodological strategies, including ethnographies, interviews, time on task studies, as well as frozen time checks, challenges some common folk wisdom and myths about library use in these neighborhoods. And these myths often perpetuate the belief that library use is important to some children but not **all** children which has led to some unfortunate consequences. In brief, let me focus on some of our key findings, providing data to support these conclusions.

First, the good news.

Libraries are vital to all children, poor and well to do. Previous methods of counting “use” in libraries have been based on circulation figures—simply how often children and their families check out books. In many library systems across the country, this figure will be used to determine budget allocations for the next year, leading to some libraries to have larger budgets than others. Libraries in poor areas have dramatically lower counts than middle-income. In our exit interviews, for example, we found those children in middle-class neighborhoods checked out an average of 6 books per hour; compared to 0 in poor neighborhoods.

Yet our interviews revealed that many of these families did not own a library card, or were reluctant to check out books due to overdue fines, or fear of getting them. We therefore conducted an extensive ‘in-building’ library use study, clocking the number of children engaged in reading activity, adults reading—actual time spent in the library. Over 80 hours of analysis was conducted.

Our study revealed an important finding. Across all these branch libraries, in-building use was approximately the same for children in poor- as well as middle- and well-to-do communities. Over a 4-hour period for example, we clocked an average 3,992

minutes for 72 patrons in libraries in poor neighborhoods, compared to 3,255 minutes for 72 patrons in middle-class neighborhoods. This chart provides an average time for individual reading per child, and the average number of materials used. (Chart In-building library use). Regardless of wealth, libraries were busy places, active information centers for children in these communities.

But there is concerning news as well.

Library use is different in different communities. Although libraries were important in all communities, we found that children in poor- and middle-income neighborhoods used them differently. For example, we observed preschool areas in libraries in the summer months and found dramatic differences in how these were used in communities. Children in poor neighborhoods often came for long periods of time unaccompanied, or perhaps with a sibling. Their activity in the preschool setting could be characterized by ‘short bursts’—brief glancings of books, followed by periods on the computer, followed by activity to activity with little direction. In contrast, parents almost always accompanied children in middle-class neighborhoods, visits were short, to the point, books were selected, and the children would be on their way.

Libraries served as a major resource for homework help in poor neighborhoods. Children would come almost immediately after school and often stay until the libraries closed, receiving help on individual worksheets or projects in poor neighborhoods. Parents regarded it as safe and secure. Literally, at times there were crowds requiring security guards to only allow children to come in when someone would leave. And when a child misbehaved and was told he was no longer allowed to visit the library, we would find the parent pleading with the librarian for her understanding.

Greater access to computers in libraries provided another glimpse of these differences in behavior. Computer use in general created a good bit of ‘hang time,’ as children waited to use them. But in middle-income areas, grade school children were likely to use the computers for reading and literacy related conversations, than those in lower-income areas.

Quality of library use is related to children’s efficacy in reading

Relatedly, there were striking differences in the quality of the reading experience for children in different neighborhoods. More often than not, children in middle-income neighborhoods used library materials, books and computer programs, either at their estimated age/grade level, or above. For example, we found that 93% of the materials read with at their grade level, while 7% were above. Contrast this with children in low-income communities who read 42% below level, and 58% materials at grade level. Comparing number of lines read, minutes with particular applications, and time spent without interruption on reading materials, we found stark and growing contrasts in activity.

Perhaps most troubling, we found that technology exacerbated the gap. Middle-income children reading more than before, and low-income children reading only slightly more than before with materials of lesser challenge. Contrary to a ‘digital divide,’ therefore we found a ‘**literacy divide.**’ Children who regarded themselves as struggling readers did not seek to read challenging materials.

Librarians can make a difference. A number of libraries in deeply poor, troubled neighborhood, however, belied these patterns. These libraries have similar access to books, computers and activities, but they had something more—excellent

librarians. We observed these exceptional librarians over time, trying to understand why they seemed to make a difference. Several qualities stood out: Librarians made an effort to know the children, called them by their first names, developed a personal relationship that went beyond the child, to the family and the kin. Librarians did not just point to materials, but taught children how to use them, not in a formal way, but by showing, and demonstrating the activity themselves. They would do, “over the shoulder” teaching, taking the time necessary so that the child could succeed. In the most difficult of circumstances, these librarians formed writing clubs, chess clubs, reading groups, using field trips to attract and keep their patrons. These people were enablers, pushing children to reach beyond their current abilities.

A missed opportunity

Given the potential for libraries to foster achievement, our last analysis was particularly troubling. We sought to compare what we had seen in public libraries to school libraries. Once again we found dramatic differences. Despite similarities in budget allocations, there were striking differences in the quality of school libraries in schools across this large urban city. Children in poor areas had mediocre to poor libraries, no librarian on site; further the libraries were often closed during the week, compared to those in middle-class schools in the same city (show chart). School library funds were designated as discretionary to be used for computers if the instructional leader chose to do so. Thus, many of these schools in poor areas had no libraries, but computer labs, often empty of anything but the technology itself.

In conclusion, libraries are vital for children’s achievement and developing informational needs. Children need libraries in their classrooms, schools, and

communities. But all children will not use the materials to their fullest extent without supportive adults and librarians who will continue to make Carnegie's dream of an informational society that provides access to all live on forever.