

Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance: Poverty, Literacy and the Development of Information Capital

Susan B. Neuman and Donna C. Celano
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As an urban teacher currently living in Philadelphia, I was drawn to *Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance*, a book by Susan B. Neuman and Donna C. Celano. Set in two drastically different communities within the same city limits of Philadelphia, this ten-year research study works to answer a commonplace urban education question: Why is there an achievement gap based on race and class and what can we do about it? Many studies of this nature focus on urban versus suburban communities and look within schools themselves. This unique study analyzes two Philadelphia communities: Chestnut Hill, a community many consider a suburb within a city, where 93% of residents have graduated from high school and 63% have a bachelor's degree; and the North Philadelphia "Badlands," a community with a controversial name where fewer than half of the residents have their high school diploma and only 3% have a bachelor's degree. The central thesis of the study is that geographical segregation by class leads to a differential access to print for children of these communities. This, in turn, leads to an unequal development of literacy skills, either limiting or increasing the development of information capital, ultimately solidifying the Matthew Effect where the rich become richer and the poor become poorer.

An important aspect of the study is that it

takes place in the libraries located within these communities. Integral to this study is that both of these libraries offer comparable resources to their communities. In the past, the presence of an achievement gap was often attributed to the availability of educational resources to students or the lack thereof. It was thought that "leveling the playing field" and providing equal or greater material resources would lessen the gap. However, equalizing the amount of resources offered in the libraries of these communities is not having a lasting impact and the book sets out to find out how and why.

This study uses the setting of the library to analyze everything from the engagement of children of many ages, to the involvement of parents, to the accessibility of technology. Each chapter begins with a smaller question pertaining to the larger thesis. Then it follows a detailed explanation of the research methodology and the data collected. Finally, the authors offer the major conclusions and implications of each chapter, ultimately deciding that while necessary, an improved access to material resources does not make up for a lack of psychological and human resources in lower socioeconomic communities. The reader thus understands why there is a literacy development gap and why the foundations, organizations, and policies that are trying to "level the playing

field” are not working.

The most important part of this book is the broader implications the research draws in regards to urban education policy. Within these two communities of Philadelphia, the achievement gap prevails even though the libraries have similar amounts of material resources. Some policy makers have argued that giving more monetary resources to lower socioeconomic school districts is not working and therefore should be done away with. This book shows that these material resources are necessary and would be effective if accompanied with the proper psychological and human support and training. Some possible examples given in the last chapter of the book are parent involvement training, computer training and assistance, and more expert librarians.

The major criticism I have with *Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance* is the addition of what I found to be a random postscript that does not apply to the study. The conclusions drawn in the postscript were not within the jurisdiction of the scholarship of the authors, nor directly related to their study. The postscript discusses three diverse effective urban schools and the importance of a content-based curriculum. Although this discussion may be of merit elsewhere, I did not find it logical to include this as the postscript of a study pertaining to literacy development through the medium of two urban libraries.

The research within *Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance* about libraries and literacy within two urban communities brings a new dimension to the debate on how to lessen

the achievement gap. These findings are extremely important for urban policy makers, as well as individuals interested in the development of literacy in urban communities. In order to give our children the opportunities they deserve, material resources must be accompanied with the human and psychological support necessary to use the materials effectively.

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