

Bridging the Gap: a policy brief on supporting low-income readers

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This policy brief addresses the literacy disparities among low-income individuals in the United States. With 43 million U.S. adults facing low literacy skills, the brief emphasizes improving literacy policies to better the lives of many Americans, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. The brief explores the Achievement Gap, highlighting how socioeconomic status impacts reading proficiency through factors such as home and school literacy environments. Additionally, the brief outlines hypothetical solutions, including Turning Pages Together and the THRIVE teacher intervention program.

Overview: An orientation to bridging the literacy gap

Reading is an essential life skill. Without proficiency in reading, day-to-day life can become increasingly challenging, with negative impacts on self-esteem as occupational success is limited. Unfortunately, this is a widespread problem. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 43 million U.S. adults have low literacy skills (OECD, 2013). Due to insufficient reading proficiency, these adults are at risk for low self-concept (McArthur, G., Castles, A., Kohnen, S., & Banales, E., 2016): they devalue themselves in various domains of life such as physical, social, or academic (Cole et al., 2001; Harter, Whitesell & Junkin, 1998; Marsh & Seaton, 2013, 2). Therefore, working to improve literacy policy is necessary to improve the literacy skills and, ultimately, the lives of many American students and citizens. Specifically, low-income Americans face the greatest challenges in reaching proficient reading ability, resulting in an Achievement Gap between low-income and high-income readers. A combination of factors located in homes and schools causes these students, on average, to develop at a slower pace than their higher-income counterparts during early elementary school years. These years are critical to a child's reading success; inadequately developing their skills during this time can indefinitely set

them back. This policy memo summarizes research on reading development and provides hypothetical solutions to bridge this gap by further aiding low-income communities and schools.

Background: The science of reading development

Simply put, reading is the ability to extract meaning from the written word. School, work, and everyday life can quickly become an extreme challenge without reading proficiency. To enact a literacy policy, it's crucial to understand the cognitive mechanisms of reading development. Working in tandem, linguistic comprehension and decoding skills are essential tools that enable someone to read comprehensively (Gough and Tunmer, 1986, 766). Linguistic comprehension is extracting meaning from text or spoken word while decoding skills help a reader translate the written word to speech. These skills are independent domains that are equally necessary for a reader to extract meaning from the written word; a reader would be impaired if one of these domains were nonfunctioning (Lonigan, 2015, 766). Beyond basic science, controversy has always existed in this field about how to teach students to harness these skills. Some literacy scholars, such as E. B. Huey and Rebecca S. Pollard, believed that due to the orthography (rules for letter-sound coding) of English, reading should be taught by learning the sound of each letter. Their phonic methods included creating symbols to indicate the sound a letter would make or attaching an action to a letter, indicating its sound (McGuffey, 1879, 502). For example, correlating a "pant" to the letter h (Lindamood & Lindamood, 1998, 502). These methods raised concerns that children would learn to say the word but not derive meaning from what they read. Horace Mann, a renowned educator, encouraged a holistic view of literacy as students should learn to read a word in its entirety, not letter by letter (Snow, C. E., & Juel, C., 2005, 503). He wrote, "When we wish to give to a child the idea of a new animal, we do not present successively the different parts of it – an eye, an ear, the nose, the mouth, the

body, or a leg; but we present the whole animal as one object,” (Matthews, 1966, pg. 80, 503). Nevertheless, there is an emerging consensus among those who research literacy pedagogy: a mix of whole-word and phonics-based learning is a general best practice (Snow, C. E., & Juel, C., 2005, 518-520).

The Achievement Gap

Today, there is a concerning gap in reading development between high and low-SES students. This “Achievement Gap,” as it is often called, refers to the average differences in reading proficiency among students of different socioeconomic strata (SES), where SES is defined as an index of a child’s access to social and financial resources reflected in their home, school, and neighborhood (Entwisle & Astone, 1994; Mueller & Parcel, 1981). Researchers identified educational resources, early literacy experiences, language exposure, and academic skills as factors that affect literacy development and are influenced by SES. In 2019, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found consistent gaps in reading scores through 4th, 8th, and 12th grade since 1998 (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Efforts to reduce this gap may be organized around interventions targeting both the Home and School Literacy Environments as crucial contexts for children’s early literacy development. Understanding the essential role they each play in development helps create solutions to bridge the gap.

Home Literacy Environment

SES is thought to be a distal environmental factor that does not directly influence a child but rather acts as a major influence on a child’s proximal environment and day-to-day life (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). An example of a proximal environment is the home literacy environment (HLE), which is the amount and quality of exposure a young student has to literacy within their home. More specifically, the HLE is measured by the number of books available, the quality of the books and the frequency that they are read, a parent or guardian’s efforts to teach reading or the alphabet, and the adults’ reading model. (Payne et al., 1994, Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Research has found that students of lower SES lag behind in reading ability due to HLE and insufficient exposure to literacy during school breaks and summer vacations (Alexander et al., 2007). Moreover, it was also found that HLE is a better and more efficient predictor of reading capabilities than SES (Bracker & Fischel, 2008; Christin et al., 1998; Gottfried et al., 2015; Payne et al., 1994; Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda., 2011; Smith & Dixon, 1995) (Romeo, 2022). (More productive way of addressing achievement gap) Therefore, looking to improve HLE is a more productive way of addressing the achievement gap.

School Literacy Environment

Reading instruction and the environment of the classroom also play a major role in literacy development (School Literacy Environment (SLE)). The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is a way to qualitatively evaluate the quality of a classroom rather than use quantitative methods such as standardized testing (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008, 774). Some of the items in the evaluation include social climate, classroom routines, reading as meaning, and student engagement. Using CLASS, a study conducted in 2017 assessed the impact of quality instruction and classroom environment on academic achievement and engagement. There were 314 students in the study who were all from low-income families and were finishing the third grade. The study found that higher teaching quality had more of an impact on lower-performing students. This is believed to be because higher-quality teachers make persistent efforts to change their instruction for those students who are not following along with the rest of the class. Their observations showed that these teachers engaged their students in conversations that furthered the children’s understanding of the material (Stipek, D., & Chiatovich, T., 2017, 786). This implies that placing quality literacy instruction in the classrooms of low SES schools could help improve SLE. More specifically, this means providing access to the mix of whole word and phonics-based interventions that research has proven to be a best practice.

Successful Interventions: examples for home and school

In order to cultivate long-lasting literacy skills, reading should be encouraged both in school and at home. However, SES may impact the resources available as well as the motivation of parents due to stressors that affect the time and energy they have to help their kids learn to read. On average, studies have shown that lower SES households have fewer reading materials compared to higher SES homes (Feitelson & Goldstein, 1986; Neuman & Celano, 2001). Reading is Fundamental (RIF) is an example of a successful intervention to improve HLE. RIF focuses on providing underserved schooling districts and towns with the literacy resources they may lack. Programs such as RIF could help expose children to various types of books, which could pique their interest in reading outside of school, ultimately improving their home literacy environment. Additionally, having these resources to keep in their homes may encourage reading during breaks, specifically during the summer when they do not have constant exposure to literacy through school.

Researchers support specific pedagogical practices in schools to hone and improve these skills. In 1995, the National Research Council (NRC) formed a committee focused on Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children tasked with creating a report on the current status of literacy in the nation

and how pedagogical practices should be conducted based on proven methods (Snow, 2005, 509). The report breaks down how literacy instruction should progress through early schooling and specific strategies that help children enhance their skills. These included but were not limited to daily opportunities for self-selected reading, assisted reading, and reading aloud (Snow, 2005, 510). Read-alouds have commonly been reviewed as an effective teaching method as they are vessels of both intentional learning and incidental exposure to new vocabulary and ideas. In a systematic literature review on literacy development from the years 2006 to 2015, it was found that children performed better when their teacher exposed them to advanced vocabulary through read-alouds with explicit word explanations than those who did so without (Teale, 2006-2015, 21). Previous studies have shown the implication of a classroom environment through theories such as the attachment theory, which emphasizes the importance of the emotional support and trust relationship a teacher provides for their student (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Pianta, 1999, 774), and self-determination theory, the importance of a student feeling they belong, (Connell & Wellborn, 1991, 774). Another predetermined correlation was between task-based learning, with clearly defined goals, and enhanced student engagement (Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson, & Brock, 2009; Sterling-Turner, Tingstrom, & Wilczynski, 2006, 775). Another strategy evaluated was the ability of the teacher to teach reading in a way that overlaps with other concepts and disciplines (CCSS for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, 2013, 778). These strategies are deemed high quality as they cultivate strong skills for developing readers. As proven in a study above, high-quality instruction is, on average, more beneficial to low-SES students than to high-SES students. Therefore, teaching methods similar to or exactly like the ones mentioned above should be encouraged in low-SES schools.

Recommendations: hypothetical solutions to the ongoing problem

Below, we present hypothetical programs geared to close the gap by addressing key spheres of literacy development. The proposed programs are partially based on pre-existing organizations or research that have proven successful in aiding low-income learners. Turning Pages Together is an organization that would bring a variety of books to low-income neighborhoods and allow children to choose what comes home with them. Allowing children to choose may make them more inclined to read the book with their parents or even by themselves. Additionally, this organization would hold parent information sessions to stress the importance of reading for their child's future. Moreover, TPT meetings will spread awareness about the available online resources to parents and their children, such as the PBS Kids For Parents site.

PBS offers free instruction for parents to help expose their children to reading. Additionally, there are educational games and videos. An exemplary solution to improving SLE is creating a teacher intervention program, THRIVE. Standing for task-based learning, holistic conversations, relational support, interconnected topics, valuing belonging, and emotional support, this program focuses on improving a teacher's abilities in low-income schools to aid students who need extra support. As presented in the study above, nurturing and attentive teaching have a major impact on those students who are not keeping up with the rest of the class ((Stipek, D., & Chiatovich T., 2017, 786). Therefore, conducting this educational program before the start of the school year annually will help normalize these strategies in methods. Although the solutions I provide are research-based, not all communities' needs are the same. Sensitivity to the needs of specific contexts require varying solutions that are difficult to account for when presenting the issue more broadly. However, these recommendations may lay the foundation for more specific policies. Moreover, these recommendations are one way to apply research to policy. As this field continues to develop, research may guide us toward alternative policies.

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