



## A NOVEL IDEA

Literacy's Secret Weapon

**F**or the past decade or so, school children have been the collateral damage in the language wars. Kids have been threatened, bribed, quizzed, tested, recovered, retained and hooked on phonics all in pursuit of an elusive goal—learning to read. The “best and brightest” have devised clever inventions to assist in this effort. We have elaborate computer programs that value rushing through literature towards a multiple-choice test so that publicly displayed student-ranking tables can praise some and humiliate others.

Recess has been eliminated in some communities in the hope that less play will lead to increased achievement. Elementary school teachers, especially urban educators, will tell you that there is not an extra second of class time available for more reading instruction. The study of other disciplines has taken a back seat to the development of isolated reading skills except in the rare classroom where reading is authentically integrated across the curriculum. In the name

**The more books children have access to in their school libraries, the more they will read.**

of higher and tougher standards, high school students in my California school district are now required to read two novels per year. It is most ironic that actual reading has somehow come to be viewed as a detriment to the development of literacy.

While marching systematically through a sequence of 43 sounds something has been lost: a sense of purpose and love of reading. However, scientists in The Hague have discovered a remarkably flexible and powerful technology to help us in our mission. This technology has been sitting right under our noses for centuries but is increasingly rare in schools. What is this tool? It's the book.

Toddlers embrace books with love and curiosity before they can even turn the pages. Book sales and the number of published children's books are at an all-time high. Severely at-risk learners in a state prison for teens mobbed me when I delivered two bags full of books from Borders. One young lady yelled to a friend, “Oh, come hither.” A teenage boy said to a classmate, “I'll read mine real fast if you read yours real fast and then we can trade.” The scars of illiteracy and learning disability heal when a caring adult nourishes their environment with a diet of interesting books.

A remarkable Los Angeles researcher named Rebecca

Constantino is doing something about the absence of “pleasure” books in public schools. Her organization, Access Books, [www.accessbooks.net](http://www.accessbooks.net), is working hard to raise awareness of the book deficit and to close the gap. Constantino's research indicates that children in affluent Los Angeles suburbs have access to more books in their bedroom than their urban peers are likely to have in the home, classroom and local public library combined. There is a nine-month waiting list to read Harry Potter in local public libraries. Some urban school libraries have as few as one book for every three children. Many of those books are outdated.

Access Books' research shows that: Children need access to high interest, enjoyable books; Children who read for pleasure, read more; Children who read more, read better; Pleasure reading provides the foundation for all reading—including academic reading. The group's Web site says research has validated the close correlation that exists between successful reading and the number of books in school libraries. In fact, the size of the school library collection is the best predictor of academic achievement.

**BRINGING BOOKS TO THE POOR** Access Books attacks the simple yet serious problem of kids having too few books to read in a simple grassroots fashion. Suburban students conduct school-wide book drives collecting books they believe other children will enjoy. These books must be either new or in good condition. In at least one book, the donating child writes a note saying, “I like this book because ...”

When a child reads the note taped in their new book, they are encouraged to write a similar note that is sent to the donating school. These notes are displayed on a bulletin board so that students can learn how much other children share a love of reading despite the economic disparity experienced just miles apart. Children on both sides of the effort learn about each other's diversity, the joy of giving and the power of reading.

So, the next time the person in the airplane seat next to you complains about the state of public education, do what I do. Tell them to put their money where their mouth is and drop a bookstore gift certificate off at their local elementary school. They could also visit . A little pleasure reading can go a long way. Now that's a novel idea. **D**

---

*Gary Stager, [gary@stager.org](mailto:gary@stager.org), is editor-at-large and an adjunct professor at Pepperdine University.*