

ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY, DIVERSE BOOK COLLECTIONS ACROSS A VARIETY OF CHALLENGING TIMES AND CONTEXTS



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ABSTRACT

Literacy education scholarship is replete with calls for making available to children robust collections of exceptional books that represent diverse perspectives, noting the immense value of high-quality books that can serve as windows to the lives of others and as mirrors for readers' own experiences (Bishop, 1990). Despite intentional efforts to increase the availability of well-diversified children's literature collections in schools and communities, dependable access remains a challenge. The article discusses contexts and circumstances that pose access challenges, focusing on financial constraints and biases of availability.

"I WANT TO surround them with *all* the books!" a middle school English language arts teacher exclaims as we are walking toward our cars after a three-hour graduate class that followed a long day of teaching. Her passion and commitment are palpable as she explains how she is cobbling together school monies and personal funds to identify and bring to her classroom a diverse collection of well-written books for her students. She attends workshops on children's and young adult literature, she connects with book creators on social media to stay informed of new publications, she spends weekends in thrift stores and independent bookstores, and she reads, reads, reads.

As she is talking, I am impressed and delighted by all she does to pursue her crucially important goal of surrounding her students with "all the books" and supporting them as they explore titles, select books they are interested in reading, read those books, and choose how they respond to them in

personally meaningful ways. At the same time, however, I am also struck by how much of what she does represents extraordinary effort on the part of a singular teacher, who must circumnavigate a complex system to make possible this kind of important access to new, high-quality literature that represents diverse perspectives and experiences and is the work of diverse book creators. What is even more troubling is the knowledge that dependable access to rich, well-diversified collections of exceptional children's books remains an intractable challenge for school communities faced with compounding factors that work in both obvious and insidious ways.

Access Matters

Kiefer et al. (2018) asserted that surrounding children "with books of all kinds" is a vital predisposition to them becoming readers and noted that "children should have immediate access to books whenever they need them" (p. 335). Early immersion in "a book culture" in which books are present, read, and responded to in a variety of ways was described as "critical" by Neuman and Moland (2019), who explained that "when there are no books, or when there are so few that choice is not an option, book reading becomes an occasion and not a routine" (p. 143). Ready access to books through their physical presence in children's environments, combined with plentiful opportunities to engage with books, has been linked to numerous benefits for children. Such access can enrich the personal lives of children (Cooper, 2009; Kiefer et al., 2018; Shaver, 2019; Temple

et al., 2018); help them make meaning of their own lives, cultures, and experiences and understand those of others (Bennett et al., 2021; Children's Literature Assembly, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2018; Temple et al., 2018); support the cultivation of literary insight and a critical perspective (Bennett et al., 2021; Hadjoannou & Loizou, 2011; Parsons et al., 2011; Prior et al., 2012); hone their skills as effective and efficient readers and writers (Allington et al., 2010; Hoffman et al., 2004; Kiefer et al., 2018; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Serafini, 2013; Strickland & Abbott, 2010); and frame their literate identities (Dutro & McIver, 2010).

When describing classroom environments that incorporate sustaining conditions for literacy learning, Cambourne (2000) began by focusing on the "physical paraphernalia" of classrooms, noting as important the presence of "a large and diverse range of readily available books, magazines, and other texts" (p. 513). The value of a rich text environment is corroborated by Hoffman et al. (2004), who also emphasized the significance of the social practices that surround those texts. In classrooms, text resources are typically concentrated in library spaces, which should include a wide selection of trade books of different genres, formats, reading levels, and themes, while also representing a rich diversity of human lives and perspectives (Bishop, 1990; Boyd et al., 2015; Fractor et al., 1993; Hoffman et al., 2004; International Literacy Association, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2018; Temple et al., 2018). Additionally, text resources are housed in school libraries with knowledgeable professional librarians who build rich collections and make them accessible to the school community (Kiefer et al., 2018).

The need to make available to children a "wide range of high-quality literature representing diverse experiences and perspectives" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006) is emphasized by several professional organizations, which have encoded it in resolutions (National Council of Teachers of English, 2006), position statements (Children's Literature Assembly, 2019), briefs (International Literacy Association, 2018, 2019), and standards (National Council of Teachers of English & International Reading Association, 1996; these standards were also reaffirmed in 2012).

The Children's Literature Assembly (2019) has defined diverse children's literature as referring "to depictions of people, bodies, voices, languages, and ways of loving, living, and being that have been traditionally underrepresented in media like children's literature," and noted that "these narra-

tives may intersect, overlap and braid together in an infinite number of ways among those individuals, communities, or histories it seeks to represent." The need for children to have access to and be purposefully supported in engaging with such diverse stories cannot be understated. Bishop's (1990) metaphor of mirrors and windows remains a valuable frame in articulating this imperative, as does Adichie's (2009) warning over the danger of a single story. By having access to multiple voices and their stories, children's interest in and engagement with literature are ignited through opportunities to read texts that reflect their experiences and preoccupations and help sustain their identities and clarify their inner world, as well as texts that reveal, humanize, and validate experiences and perspectives outside of their own lives (Bennett et al., 2021; Children's Literature Assembly, 2019; Kiefer et al., 2018; Mukunda & Vellanki, 2016).

Indeed, in a recent research brief, the International Literacy Association (2019) recognized access to "supportive learning environments and high-quality resources," including access to well-diversified collections of books, as a children's right (p. 2). However, despite the broad recognition of this need and despite intentional efforts to increase the availability of diverse literature in school libraries and curricula, there are multiple indications that such access is substantially limited for many children, and particularly for children from minoritized communities and those who live in poor communities for extended periods of time (Allington et al., 2010; Neuman & Moland, 2019; Wolf et al., 2010). In the sections that follow, I explore realities of modern schooling in the United States that encumber access to high-quality, well-diversified collections of children's books for students and their teachers.

Financial Constraints

The Impact of Persistent Poverty

In their examination of trends in family income segregation between 1970 and 2009, Bischoff and Reardon (2014) reported growing residential segregation by income, noting that this segregation is most pronounced in metropolitan areas. In unpacking these trends, the authors remarked that income segregation is linked to poor families' limited access to high-quality schools that are well-staffed and well-resourced, which is compounded by a divestment from the development of public resources. They explained, "If socioeconomic segregation means that more advantaged families do not

share social environments and public institutions such as schools, public services, and parks with low-income families, advantaged families may hold back their support for investments in shared resources” (p. 227).

In terms of access to books and other print materials, children who live in poor neighborhoods face significant scarcity and limitations in what is available in their schools, in their homes, and in the adjacent community resources, such as libraries and community centers (Allington et al., 2010; Bennett et al., 2021). When comparing print environments between poor and affluent communities, Constantino (2005) found statistically significant differences in the numbers of books available to affluent youth through their homes, their classrooms, and their schools as compared to the children of poor communities, adding that “in some cases, children in affluent communities have access to more books in the home than the other communities have in all school sources combined” (p. 24). Shaver (2019) described “book hunger” as an important challenge faced by low-income families in the United States and elsewhere, explaining that, though poor families recognize the importance of supporting their children as readers, they do not have the resources to maintain a collection of books that evolves as their children grow. This, according to Allington et al. (2010), is linked to lower reading activity by economically disadvantaged children, particularly during the summer months when school is not in session. In their investigation of the impact of economic disparities on children’s access to print, Neuman and Moland (2019) also found that access to books, and particularly to books geared toward young children, was significantly limited for those living in impoverished and borderline communities. This was so much the case that the researchers “suggest[ed] that neighborhoods of concentrated poverty constitute ‘book deserts’” (p. 127), which may have significant consequences for students’ academic performance, continuous growth as readers, and, ultimately, school success (Allington et al., 2010; Neuman & Moland, 2019).

In an era when electronic devices and the Internet are ubiquitous in modern living, we may be tempted to assume

that the scarcity of book and print materials in poor neighborhoods could be readily bridged by access to digital books and other media. And indeed, we have evidence that when Internet access is provided by schools, libraries, and other initiatives, “youth of all demographics naturalize digital technologies” (Lewis & Dockter, 2010, p. 86). However, even in the modern era of ready access to literary resources through the web, economic disparities continue to underprivilege children from impoverished communities, who not only still have limited access to texts, both print and digital, but also experience curtailed opportunities in their formal schooling for “run[ning] with stories” and responding to texts in creative and open-ended ways (Wolf et al., 2010, p. 2).

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The COVID-19 pandemic brought these inequities of access to literary and other educational resources into sharp relief. As schools shut down in the spring of 2020 and stayed closed for many more weeks than originally imagined, the resource divide between poor and affluent communities was unmistakably obvious, raising significant concerns over an outsized impact of the pandemic on the educational opportunities and educational attainment of underprivileged youth (Bennett et al., 2021; Reimers, 2022). The dearth of books and other reading materials in the homes of poor families precipitated concerns over disproportionate reading loss during their time away from school. In the months that followed, as school systems attempted to resume formal schooling through cobbling together virtual learning initiatives and piloting hybrid learning models, access remained an issue as low-income students had limited access to digital devices, reliable Internet connectivity, and adult supervision for at-home schooling (Bennett et al., 2021).

These patterns of inequity that persistently characterize the experiences of poor families cannot be treated as simply a matter of finances and funding; “inequities in book access and poverty critically intersect with racial/ethnic inequities because of historically high poverty rates among children of Color” (Bennett et al., 2021, p. 785). Indeed, Bischoff and Reardon (2014) reported a significant uptick in residential segregation by income for Latinx and Black families, which

is connected to their escalating clustering in impoverished neighborhoods. They also reported that middle-class Latinx and Black families tend to live not alongside white families of similar income but in neighborhoods with white families of lower income, which suggests that they are not afforded the advantages of the improved communal resources available to their white income-peers. Arguably, this would also include access to more robust children's literature collections through school and community resources.

Eroding School Library Budgets and Scarcity of Selection Resources

As mentioned earlier, school libraries are a vital component to creating and sustaining a literacy-rich school environment. Though classroom libraries are important, and digital devices bring literary and other texts right to the fingertips of young readers, school libraries and the librarians who staff them have a special, irreplaceable role in making rich and well-diversified children's literature options available to students. Owing to school librarians' evolving roles into library and media specialists, these options not only come in print book form but also include digital collections, as well as other resources for identifying and previewing titles of interest (Everhart, 2016).

Under optimal conditions, school librarians leverage their professional expertise to continually enrich their library's holdings with new, exceptional children's titles that reflect high literary quality and an attention to building a rich collection that is not only well diversified but is also in tune with curricular priorities and with the students they serve. Ideally, beyond building their collections, school librarians continue their curating work by organizing shelves, displays, and instructional events to highlight different selections and invite students to explore them. This includes featuring works that would be of particular relevance to members of the school community, as well as works that highlight minoritized voices and perspectives. In addition, they work with groups of students and individual learners to match readers with books they are likely to enjoy (Lagarde & Johnson, 2014; Lance & Kachel, 2018). In this sense, school librarians are crucial agents of access to children's literature for all members of their school community.

In substantiation of the value of librarian-mediated access, Lance and Kachel (2018) reported on a series of impact studies for school libraries, which showed that students

in schools with library media centers staffed by full-time, qualified librarians performed better in standardized tests for reading and writing regardless of student demographics and school characteristics. "In fact," the authors stated, these impact studies "have often found that the benefits associated with good library programs are strongest for the most vulnerable and at-risk learners, including students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities" (p. 15).

About 38% of responding librarians indicated that their library budget had decreased in 2020–21 compared to the previous year, and 15% of schools reported having no library media center budget for the year. In addition, about half of the respondents reported facing restrictions in how to spend their budgets, with many indicating that they must secure prior approval for any purchases.

Despite the documented benefits of well-staffed school library media centers, eroding budgets and competing priorities have led to a decline in their presence in schools and in their work with children's literature (Everhart, 2016; Lance & Kachel, 2018). According to the latest data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), in 2015–16, 91% of schools had a library media center (NCES, 2021b), which represented a drop from 94% in 2003–04 (NCES Blog Editor, 2019). In addition, though 92% of suburban schools and 94% of rural schools had library media centers, the percentage dropped down to 88% for urban schools (NCES Blog Editor, 2019).

Though overall school expenditures actually appear to have modestly increased in recent years (NCES, 2021a), the latest School Library Budget and Spending Survey of the *School Library Journal* found that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental impact on school library budgets (Kletter, 2021). About 38% of responding librarians indicated that their library budget had decreased in 2020–21 compared to the previous year, and 15% of schools reported having no library media center budget for the year. In addition, about half of the respondents reported facing restrictions in

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Beyond the shrinking of funds for purchasing literary texts and other resources, the effects of budgetary declines for school libraries are also obvious in staffing. According to the NCES (2021b), in 2015–16, there were only “0.7 full-time certified librarians or library media specialists” per library. In further analysis of the NCES data, Lance (2018) reported that between 1999–2000 and 2015–16, about 10,000 full-time school librarian positions were lost, which represented a 19% drop. Though Lance (2018) acknowledged that some of this decline may be attributed to school librarian jobs reforming into differently named positions, such as “digital learning specialist” or “technology integrator,” this shift nevertheless signals an undervaluing of the school library and the professional experts that make it a vital conduit of access to high-quality children’s literature for school communities. And, as Lance and Kachel (2018) observed, this becomes “an issue of social justice, especially when we see that schools in the poorest and most racially diverse communities have the least access to library services” (p. 19).

Another important access issue, related to eroding budgets and the loss of qualified librarians in school communities, is the insufficiency of access to selection resources that can support teachers’ quests for identifying and securing new, high-quality children’s literature titles to support their instruction and their students’ reading diets. Without access to qualified librarians who can offer reliable recommendations or to expansive databases such as the Horn Book Guide or the Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database that can inspire and facilitate their searches and selections, teachers are left without essential support in making well-informed choices. The limited selection resources made available to teachers by their schools, combined with the common trend of removing children’s literature courses from teacher certification requirements and from teacher education degrees (National Council of Teachers of English, 2018), creates a precarious context for student access to robust literature collections.

Thankfully, similarly to the middle school teacher I referenced at the beginning of this article, many teachers make admirable efforts to educate themselves about the need to make available to their students well-diversified children’s literature collections, contrive an assortment of information sources for encountering and evaluating children’s

books, and work to secure funding for making worthwhile titles available to their students. In the absence of such extraordinary efforts, schools and classrooms are in danger of being areas of literary stagnation, where the only literature to which students have access are older titles that narrowly reflect the curriculum, which frequently excludes books written by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and other minoritized creators.

Availability Bias

Whose Stories Are Published?

Giving children access to well-diversified children’s literature collections includes making available literature representing traditionally marginalized perspectives and experiences, such as the stories of minoritized racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities, of LGBTQ+ people, of immigrants and refugees, of people who are poor, who are neurodivergent, who have disabilities or live with mental illness. Access to such titles is certainly constrained by patterns in acquisition and title spotlighting that are influenced by selection process biases and censoring at different levels of the educational system. In many ways, however, the capacity of school librarians and teachers to be richly inclusive in their selections hinges on the availability of such stories in the catalogues and bundled collections to which they have access.

The matter of whose stories are published, both in terms of protagonists and in terms of book creators, constitutes a de facto throttle to access, particularly when publishing, promotion, and compensation decisions reflect patterns of inequity. According to data compiled by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC; 2021), there has been steady yet slow improvement in the publication of children’s books with BIPOC main characters and books written by BIPOC creators. Tyner (2021), a CCBC librarian, shared her excitement about the many wonderful books published in 2019 that “offer deeply authentic depictions of characters and subjects across a vast array of identities” and noted the increase of books that “explore the intersectionality of identities” (p. 51). Still, she reported that “the number of books with BIPOC creators and protagonists lags far behind the number of books with white main characters—or even those with animal or other main characters” (p. 51).

The CCBC’s (2021) data also indicate that in many situations, books about BIPOC are not written by creators who belong to the communities whose stories they tell. This

is particularly true in the case of books about Black/African people; in 2019, of the 451 books about Black/African people received by the CCBC, only 224 had at least one Black creator. Gardner (2020) argued that though on the surface, having more books with Black main characters may satisfy the call for more diverse books, in essence, it is the expression of a long-standing, “anti-Black selective tradition” (p. 10). Ultimately, this creates an access problem for readers; when stories that conform to Eurocentric values and aesthetics and to their framings of Blackness are what is commonly published, books by Black authors that resist assimilationism and center the Black experience never reach readers. Gardner (2020) connected the subversion of Black authors to the proliferation of books that reflect “stock tokenism” and continue “to privilege particular stories, visualities, and meanings about Black people and their experiences while ignoring others” (p. 13). Though Gardner’s analysis is specific to the Black experience, it can be instructive more widely by making visible the dangers of subjugating the drive for more diverse books under colonizing practices that continue to silence the voices of marginalized people by privileging white tellings of their stories.

Beyond English and the American Gaze

One of the benefits that come from having a large market of potential readers is the creation of a sizable publishing industry around children’s literature (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2013), which boasted a market size of \$2 billion in 2021 (IBISWorld, 2020). Because of its size, however, the U.S. children’s book publishing industry is rarely compelled to look outside of its own domain for new voices and new creative products. Therefore, when pursuing the objective of diversifying the selections made available to the U.S. public, the industry looks inward to American creators and American stories. And though this introspective look is crucial in recognizing and honoring the diversity within and in amplifying minoritized voices, it is also closed to experiences and perspectives that do not represent an American gaze—a situation that poses another issue of access for U.S.-based readers, whose access to a more cosmopolitan collection of literary material is hampered by the limited availability of titles written by non-U.S. creators and particularly of titles written in languages other than English.

Several voices in the children’s literature field acknowledge the need for a global perspective and for making avail-

able to U.S. readers books in various languages in support of bilingualism and biliteracies. The United States Board on Books for Young People, with its annual list of Outstanding International Books for young people (the OIB honor list), is a vital resource in this effort, as is the Mildred L. Batchelder Award of the American Library Association, which recognizes translated books that had originally been published outside the United States and in a language other than English. Also worthy of recognition is Worlds of Words (<https://wowlit.org>), which provides resources to educators for integrating global literature in their classrooms. Yet, these recommended titles and particularly books in languages other than English are not prominently present in schools and classrooms, though EPIC, which is widely used in U.S. schools, does include a respectable number of recent OIB titles in its collection.

Digital Holdings

Another noteworthy aspect of availability bias involves the increasing shift for school and other libraries that serve young people toward digital holdings. The practice of enhancing collections through the purchase of licenses for ebooks and audiobooks had been gaining momentum for several years, despite challenges related to expensive and complicated licensing cost structures and to the technology requirements for getting etexts into the hands of teachers and students (Collette, 2015; Maughan, 2015). For many schools, moving toward digital options for literary texts was a natural extension of their media literacy priorities. Plus, ebooks had the benefit of not getting lost or damaged, they included accessibility features and other supports for various learning needs and disabilities, and they were often prepackaged and organized in ways that addressed some of the selection and curating work the increasingly scarce staff librarians could no longer do. In addition, the trend was fueled by assumptions that the proximal convenience of ready access to literary texts through digital devices, combined with children’s and adolescents’ affinity toward digital media, would lead to increased reading overall (Merga & Mat Roni, 2017). Though a tide was already forming, the COVID-19 pandemic was a watershed moment in the acquisition of digital collections by schools; the move to virtual learning and the resulting adoption of 1:1 device programs for many schools not only alleviated the technology problems of pre-pandemic

adoptions but made digital access to literary texts a vital component of students' return to school learning.

Making ebooks available to students requires schools or districts to establish relationships with ebook vendors, who, as Maughan (2015) explained, employ a variety of models, "including subscription (e.g., Storia from Scholastic, and Epic!), perpetual access, term license, license with a set number of circulations (publishers including HarperCollins), concurrent use, bundled within another digital product, and pay per use (e.g., Brain Hive's \$1 per circ/check-out)." As digital holdings become more ubiquitous, command increasingly higher portions of school library budgets (Kletter, 2021), and acquire privileged curricular positions, it becomes important to scrutinize them in terms of access. For instance, it becomes significant to ask whether there are any marginalizing patterns in the titles that become available as ebooks and particularly in those bundled in collections that are popularly acquired by school systems.

In a recent examination of the availability of award-winning titles in ebook platforms, Lear and Pritt (2021) found variability in the inclusion of award-winning books across platforms, with Overdrive having the broadest selection, with 80% of desired titles, followed by Follett and Mackin at around 75%, Hoopla at 24%, and Tumblebooks at 0.3%. The researchers also reported that some publishers (e.g., Candlewick, Learner, Disney, and Eerdsmans) were not well featured in the collections of the vendors studied, and neither were smaller, independent publishers. They also found a scarcity of titles about American Indians, as well as of high-quality science-related titles as compared to other subject areas. Ultimately, though the inclusion of award-winning titles in the collections of widely used ebook vendors is heartening, some of the imbalances identified are troubling. In addition, though Lear and Pritt's (2021) work is very informative, it points to the need for further studies that critically examine the makeup of collections that appear poised to claim more of young students' reading time inside and outside of classrooms.

Conclusion

Access is a matter of justice. Our young people have the right to have unfettered, ready access to exceptional literature that tells a variety of compelling stories; that ignites their passion for literacy; that opens the world to them as a multivoiced,

pluralistic place where they matter; and that talks to them head-on about injustices that need fixing. Our responsibility lies not only in connecting individual readers with exceptional individual books but in working to remove any access obstacles that may hamper their opportunities to read books and run with them. •

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