Illuminating with Broad Appeal
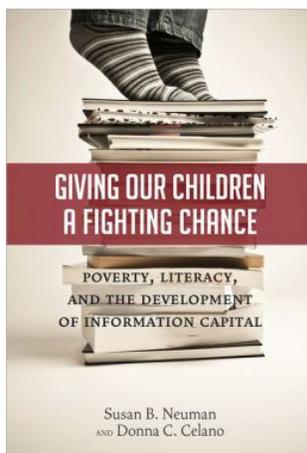## A Review of *Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance*
by Susan B. Neuman and Donna C. Celano

Review by Cat McManus

IN *GIVING OUR CHILDREN A FIGHTING Chance: Poverty, Literacy, and the Development of Information Capital* (Neuman & Celano, 2012), the authors paint a powerful portrait of two Philadelphia communities—the "Badlands" and the well-to-do neighborhood of Chestnut Hill—existing six miles from one another and yet universes apart in terms of poverty and privilege. The authors eschew a direct focus on socioeconomics, however, instead approaching their themes through the lens of "information capital," which they describe as bimodal: first, knowledge-based reasoning resulting from cumulative experiences with words and concepts and, second, conscious- and rule-based reasoning involving logical analytical thought (p. 5).

Commissioned by the William Penn Foundation in 1998 to "examine the long-term impact of major transformations in library services and technology for enhancing students' access to information" (p. 145), the authors spent 12 years conducting 21 distinct studies centered on activities taking place in each community's public library. As they carefully point out, their story is not about libraries themselves. It is instead a story about the development of information capital that examines the library as one locus of production. Moreover, it is a story that aims to elucidate how differential development of information capital "harden[s] . . . the class stratification system . . . creat[ing] a set of mutually reinforcing patterns that . . . institutionalize one's class position" (p. 3), from education to the literacy skills of one's children.

The main question of interest over the course of their research was whether equalizing technological resources could close the knowledge gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged children. The answer, for Neuman and Celano, is a resounding no. While some consider computers a panacea for differences in learning, achievement, and life outcomes, the authors show vividly that the "new skills [needed for effective use of the Internet] are . . . built on . . . [the] foundational 'old' literacy skills . . . [of] decod[ing] and comprehend[ing] text" (pp. 98–99). The most troubling finding is that the problematic pattern of adults' relative lack of involvement in children's reading persists *regardless of medium* (e.g. computer versus books). The negative effects of this pattern are the same and "even the most comprehensive software cannot substitute for the power of adult guidance and support for enhancing student learning" (p. 128). More computers, in other words, cannot offset earlier deficits. It is this finding, coupled with the nation's inexorable march toward a knowledge- and Internet-based economy, that leads the authors to sound the alarm that poorer children are at risk of being left behind ever more quickly than before the digital revolution.

Despite its huge topic of focus this is a brief volume: just 164 pages. Brevity does not detract from impact, however; both structure and content progression reinforce the authors' assertion that early lags in the development of information capital cannot simply be made up later by an infusion of technology. Eight chapters lead the reader through pertinent descriptions that scaffold the subsequent discussion of how early-stage literacy practices lead to differential uses of digital technology and ultimately to disparities in how information capital is acquired and built upon. Appropriately, the authors trace literacy development by organizing studies around children's development, moving from studying ambient print within communities, to print and very young children, to parent–older child interactions, and finally to technology use by tweens and teens. They conclude by drawing the threads together to consider how policies might be reconsidered in light of their findings.

Rich, long-term engagement with their sites and subjects allows the authors to make assertions that, more than simply feeling "correct" to the interested reader, are deeply credible accounts of "how information capital develops, and the [factors]

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that provide either a dearth or an abundance of resources for its formation" (p. 6). In order to develop an "ecological perspective" (**p. TK**) of the communities, the authors employed ethnography, frozen time checks, community profiles, and audits of books, computer access, and even local signage. Their use of quantitative data to bolster qualitative findings is particularly helpful in enriching the reader's understanding of the mechanisms at work.

In a study of computer games and preschoolers, for instance, counts of minutes spent at the computer revealed how long children spend playing games and that children in the wealthier Chestnut Hill library spend more time at the computer. The addition of observational data on the type and quality of adult-child interaction significantly enhanced the picture by depicting how adult companions engage fully, distract children, or refuse to get involved, thus enhancing or detracting from the utility of games. With quantitative data alone, it could be temptingly easy to make the erroneous assumption that poor kids are distracted more easily than rich kids. Similarly, a count of the number of minutes teens spend at the computer tells only half the story. Only a close look at what students do on the computer, how effectively they are able to use their time, and what kind of guidance they receive can complete the picture. In Chestnut Hill many students have laptops and tend not to use the computers at the library; they can easily get online at home and therefore use the library for socializing, collaborative work, and reading. In the Badlands' library—with an ostensibly equal number of computers as the Chestnut Hill branch—students spend hours waiting for a 30-minute slot only to use their time and then go to the back of the line to wait for another slot.

In both instances, observation revealed much more to the story. In the first case, observational data uncovered complicating factors like the relative comfort of adults with technology and how this affected their ability (or interest) in engaging alongside children. In the second, teens in the Badlands were observed to be less savvy about search engines, navigating menus, and printing, making what little time they have at the computer far less effective. The methodologies employed, therefore, not only argue on behalf of the continued usefulness—one could even say *necessity*—of mixed methods research in establishing the whole picture, but also suggest that one of the benefits of this pairing is its power to unearth rich avenues for future exploration.

Despite its incredible wealth of information, *Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance* is deeply illuminating without being overwhelming, useful for policymakers and educators alike, and provides many lenses through which to view the construction of information capital. The authors successfully make a case for why their study matters, but even more so, they make a case for why the people and communities that populate the book matter. By firmly grounding their studies in the large body of research on shared book reading, word learning, and conceptual development and scaffolding by an adult, the authors enhanced their ability to make claims about how differences in information capital deepen the pattern of children becoming adults with an impaired ability to participate in the new knowledge economy.

The authors make a compelling case for reexamining policies that aim to bridge the digital divide by proving that "media habits established in . . . formative years result in differential practice with reading [and thus] create differences in the speed of information gathering and knowledge acquisition" (p. 91). These differences persist regardless of medium, and therefore policies that simply equalize certain resources—computers or number of books—are insufficient. The authors effectively undermine the easy solutions that require money but no adaptive change in attitude and practice and instead suggest "un-level[ing] the playing field" through a policy of "tip[ping] the balance on comparability . . . by providing more resources and . . . supports to students in poor neighborhoods" (p. 124). Their further suggestions for policy include parent involvement training, computer training and assistance, access to information, and—perhaps most important and most difficult—economic integration (pp. 124–130).

These neighborhoods could hardly pose more of a contrast to one another, and the contrast is all the more galling for their proximity. Yet no particular rationale is given for why these communities were chosen. It would also be interesting to understand the patterns of computer and book use within a more socioeconomically mixed community and what this can tell us about the overall question. In places, ideas begged further elaboration: In chapter 7, for instance, the authors touched on the notion of the desire for expertise being a driver of student motivation to learn, but that initial spark itself—how it might be ignited, what their data suggest—went unaddressed. Finally, while the authors could have had no way of knowing in 1998 how much influence smartphones would have on our lives—and their research would seem to indicate that smartphones, like computers, are unlikely to bridge the divide—any updates to this volume should consider the role phones play in forming information capital, digital literacy, and bridging the divides between communities.

Neuman and Celano have written a book with broad appeal to researchers, practitioners, community members and policymakers. They illustrate in alarming detail the cascading problems that begin with early deficiencies and are magnified by the realities of our knowledge economy. Most important, they have shown how the equalizing of library technology resources—while well-intentioned—cannot hope to compensate for early-life disparities and, moreover, that computers are not the cure-all some claim. Perhaps most inflammatory—and powerful—is their challenge to the idea that "media have a homogenous use and effect" (p. 89), and that it is universally positive. The authors strike the appropriate balance of rigor and call to action, emphasizing that we ignore the traditional and informational literacy of our nation's poorest children only at the risk of peril to our democracy.

References

Neuman, S. B., & Celano, D. C. (2012). Giving our children a fighting chance: Poverty, literacy and the development of information capital. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.