Critical Note: The Access Gap

Using nonexperimental research, the authors of the article *The Access Gap: Poverty and Characteristics of School Library Media Centers* investigate and explore the ways in which library access affects student success, centering on low-income access. Their primary focus of the research is on public schools, but ranged from elementary school to high school level. In order to study potential correlation between library access and poverty, the researchers looked into what percentage of the student body qualified for FRPL (free and reduced-priced lunch), which is a program requiring a family to prove they are below a certain income.

The central issues of this article are around library hours (when the library is *physically* available), the access of library staff (how many full-time librarians and how many hours worked), and the availability of resources (new books available to use). Through their literature review, the researchers found that libraries which were open longer had higher student usage in their media centers, as well as higher test scores. Additionally, the literature review revealed that higher staffing and hours improved reading scores. Last they found that books with more hours and larger collections caused materials to be checked out by students more often (p. 146). Each of these findings gave the researchers the basis for their research.

What I found most interesting about the research done for this article was deep connection between Library staffing and low-income school libraries. This is a problem which many of us already know exists. Places with less funding have less availability. However, seeing the evidence of this in clear numbers paints a devastating picture. We as librarians hope to even playing fields by offering resources which are available to everyone. However, the numbers showed that at least a third of schools which have more than 50% of students on the FRLP programs only have one full time librarian. Meanwhile, at least a third of school libraries which

have less than 10% of students on the FRLP program have more than one full time librarian. This means that schools in which students' families are struggling the most have the least access.

The researchers also pointed to the issue of fixed versus flexible hours. Libraries with fixed hours have less student engagement, where as those with flexible hours have greater engagement. However, having only one full-time librarian on staff makes flexible hours extremely difficult.

The implications of these findings are deeply concerning, particularly in the context of educational equity and the perpetuation of socio-economic disparities. As the digital age continues to reshape the landscape of learning, the role of school libraries becomes even more critical. Access to information and resources is not just a matter of convenience but a fundamental factor influencing academic achievement and future opportunities. Addressing the access gap highlighted by this research will be difficult, but extremely necessary.

One potential avenue for change lies in advocating for increased funding and support for school libraries in low-income areas. By restructuring and bolstering the infrastructure of school library funding, policymakers and educators can help level the playing field and close this access gap. Furthermore, the findings display the need for innovative approaches to cater to the diverse needs of students. While there are clear limitations due to constrained resources, perhaps volunteer programs or digital outreach initiatives could help extend library services beyond traditional constraints.

References

Pribesh, S., Gavigan, K., & Dickinson, G. (2011). The Access Gap: Poverty and Characteristics of School Library Media Centers. *The Library Quarterly (Chicago)*, *81*(2), 143–160. https://doi.org/10.1086/658868