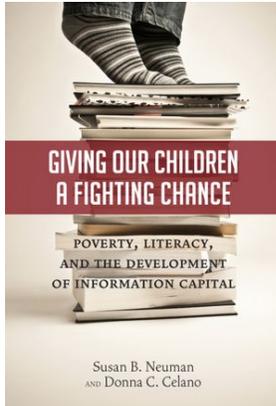


# Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance: Poverty, Literacy, and the Development of Information Capital

by Susan B. Neuman and Donna C. Celano



## Overview

*Giving Our Children A Fighting Chance* offers a compelling, eye-opening portrait of two communities in Philadelphia with drastically different economic resources. Over the course of their 10-year investigation—from 1998 to 2009—authors Susan Neuman and Donna Celano came to understand that this disparity between affluence and poverty has created a **knowledge gap**—far more important than mere achievement scores—with serious implications for students' economic prosperity and social mobility. At the heart of this knowledge gap is the limited ability of students from poor communities to develop information capital. This moving book takes you into the communities in question to meet the students and their families, and by doing so provides powerful insights into the role that literacy can play in giving low-income students a fighting chance. *Published by*

*Teachers College Press; 176 pages, \$29.95; <http://store.tcpspress.com/0807753580.shtml>*

## Key Findings

- There are massive differences in children's access to print in the early years.
  - In a neighborhood of poverty, they found a total of 358 reading resources available for a child population of approximately 7,000 children; in a neighborhood of privilege, 16,453 reading resources for a child population of 1,200.
  - In Chestnut Hill (neighborhood of privilege) for every hour in the library, 47 minutes of the time was spent by an adult reading to a child, or about 2,435 words read in that time; During the same period, we find not one single adult reading to their child in the Badlands (neighborhood of poverty); By our estimate, children in the privileged neighborhood heard nearly 14 times the number of words in print than those in poverty.
- These patterns are compounded as social worlds diverge, creating radical differences in parental expectations, access to knowledge, experiences and attitudes toward learning prior to entering the school doors. This has devastating effects on school readiness.
- These differences lead to a 'rich get richer, poor get poorer' phenomenon in school where children of poverty are provided instruction in the 'basics' while others received instruction in higher-order skills.
- Differences in the amount of reading (the sheer volume of challenging books read) lead to a growing knowledge gap—those who read a lot, know a lot; those who don't lack reading speed and comprehension, limiting their knowledge acquisition.
- As the digital age takes hold, it accelerates the divide, exacerbating the earlier advantages for students who are able to use the technology for the creation of new knowledge and/or for the manipulation of information. This further accentuates the knowledge gap.
  - In Chestnut Hill and similar affluent areas, most children have personal computers and laptops at their disposal in their homes. In many cases, there are more computers than televisions. Children in these homes have easy and regular access to computers and are comfortable with search engines, filtering and comparing information sources, and using computers to support learning.
  - By contrast, in the Philadelphia Badlands, there were about 2 computers for every 100 children, primarily located in public spaces, with many of the computers broken. In programs with scheduled computer time, the average daily use per child was 32.2

- minutes/day. Fewer than a third of the families living in the Badlands own a working computer; Internet access is rare.
- While the Internet may have fundamentally changed how we read, write and gather information, children still need strong literacy skills to decode and comprehend text.
  - The ability to use information strongly predicts college and career readiness.
  - In our knowledge-based economy, information capital is critical, creating information-rich and information-poor citizenry.
  - Giving our children a fighting chance means not just “leveling the playing field” by equalizing educational resources. Rather, we need to tip the balance by providing more resources and additional supports to students in poor neighborhoods. This includes increasing access to all kinds of print, digital and educational resources, as well as creating learning opportunities through parent/adult involvement and technology mentoring.

### **About the Authors**

- **Susan B. Neuman** is a professor of Educational Studies at the University of Michigan, and has served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education. Her books include *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk*.
- **Donna C. Celano** is assistant professor of Communication at La Salle University in Philadelphia.