



Examining the Role of the Library in Promoting the Academic Achievement of English Learners

The purpose of this article is to share findings from a qualitative study showing the positive influences the local public library and the school library had on the personal and academic lives of 18 low-income English language learners of Mexican descent while they were adjusting to the numerous demands of school in the US. For these students, the library represented a resource and a safe haven, a direct link to the academic world they knew little about and a strong connection with librarians who not only supported them with reading materials and guidance for homework assignments, but who also encouraged them to pursue their formal education against all odds. These particular findings are consistent with evidence from related research in the last 3 decades pointing to the vital roles played by well-stocked and properly staffed libraries in the lives of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially English learners.

Considerable research data reveal that numerous factors are associated with facilitating academic success for English learners, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.¹ Parental support, active participation in before- or after-school programs, positive self-concept, strong mentorship, and financial aid are just some examples of such factors (Bissell, 2002; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; de Souza, 2006; Kaplan, 1986; Levine & Nidifer, 1996; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). One important enabling variable that has been either overlooked or underestimated in the professional literature, however, is access to library materials, in both the public and the school library. Students from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds, who (in the US) are usually native speakers of English, generally come from print-rich homes with parents who have formal education and can guide them through the educational system. This is not the case for many linguistically and culturally diverse students who come from low-income backgrounds and whose parents have minimal levels of formal education. To complete their school assignments and develop their literacy skills, these students rely mostly on books they can check out from the school and the community public library. Because of increasing budget cuts to library funding in recent years, the number and condition of

school library books vary significantly from district to district and from neighborhood to neighborhood.

The number of volumes in the school library can be one of the most valuable predictors of student test scores (Greve, 1974) and reading achievement (Krashen, 1993, 1995; Krashen & Shin, 2004). Loertscher, Ho, and Bowie (1987) found that elementary schools labeled “exemplary” offered their students a great selection of library books. Similarly, Elley (1992) discovered a “clear link between reading ability and the size of school libraries” (p. 66). Findings from what has come to be known as the Colorado Study (Lance, Hamilton-Pennell, & Rodney, 2000, 2002; Lance, Rodney, & Hamilton-Pennell, 1993, 2001) strongly suggest that extensive high-quality print and digital collections along with knowledgeable, experienced librarians who work collaboratively with teachers to design learning activities contribute to improved student achievement in reading, writing, and critical thinking. Students who have access to books both at home and at school simply read more; when they pursue the habit of leisure reading and do it frequently, they start experiencing the many benefits that derive from extensive reading: increased fluency, improved vocabulary, better comprehension, and the development of higher-order thinking skills (Allington, 2001; Calkins, 1996; Didier, 1985; Greaney, 1980; Irving, 1980).

The power of the library in supporting student learning cannot be underestimated. But what is the role of the library when it comes to English learners? What impact does it have in their personal and academic lives? In my earlier work (de Souza, 2006), I examined key factors in the academic success of 18 high-achieving Mexican-origin English learners, 12 of whom explicitly indicated that the school and public library had made a positive difference in their lives, especially upon arriving in the US and attending an American school for the first time. The accounts of these 12 immigrant students will be analyzed in the present paper in an attempt to answer the question posed above. Related research findings will also be cited to lend support to correlations between the library as a resource and its effect on minority student academic achievement.

The aforementioned study followed a qualitative research design (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and the grounded-theory method originally developed by Glaser (1967). Open-ended, semistructured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 English learners meeting the selection criteria. Each interview was audiotaped and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The entire data collection took 5 months to complete (August through December, 2005).

Of the interviewees, 12 pointed out the significant role the library had played in their second language literacy development, and their accounts constitute the basis for this paper. All of them had emigrated from Mexico between the ages of 4 and 14 when their parents found seasonal work in a central valley of California. All of them were native speakers of Spanish and knew no English at all. Being eager to learn the new language and to adjust to the new land that promised a world of opportunities, they enrolled in public school, where they received English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. For some, ESL support continued into their high school years.

By American standards, all these students came from rather large families

with 4 to 12 children. In most cases, the participants were the first members of their immediate or extended families to complete high school on time and to pursue higher education. Despite having received very little or no education themselves, their own parents were firm believers in formal education. Elementary schooling was the highest educational level most of these parents had attained, and the majority of them had completed only the lower primary grades.

All but four of the participant's fathers were fieldworkers, the other four being factory workers or janitors. Most of the mothers of participants were homemakers, with the exception of a few who worked as housecleaners for an hourly wage, in the fields alongside their husbands, or in a packing factory. Because they knew how difficult life was without higher education, these parents consistently conveyed the message to their children that school was to be their priority. That message was received loud and clear. These immigrant Mexican families settled down in lower-middle-class neighborhoods in Central California where the majority of the residents shared their ethnicity and general background characteristics. Although the study participants acknowledged having very few material possessions while growing up, they reported an abundance of mutual support in their close-knit family constellations.

Study Participant Profiles

Patricia. Patricia was 7 when she arrived in the US and was placed in the second grade. She was assigned to bilingual classes during grades 2-6 and then to the ESL program in grades 7-8. Once in high school, she was able to take only mainstream courses. She has four brothers and six sisters. Her mother was a homemaker and her father had been a fieldworker up to retirement. Both parents had some elementary schooling. When interviewed for the study, Patricia was completing her bachelor's degree in Psychology with a minor in Child Development at Humboldt State University. Her goal is to obtain a doctoral degree in Psychology.

Mariel. Mariel was 10 upon arrival from Oaxaca, Mexico, and had a brother and a sister. Her mother, who had some elementary schooling, stayed home while her father, who had completed middle school, worked at a cooling company. Mariel started studying English in fifth grade and when interviewed for the study, she was completing an associate's degree from Heald College in Salinas. At the time she was planning on applying to a 4-year institution to pursue a bachelor's degree in Business and eventually a master's in Business Administration.

Juana. Juana was 4 when her family left Michoacán, Mexico, to find better job opportunities in California. She had two brothers and two sisters. Her mother worked at a cannery and her father was a janitor. Both parents had some elementary schooling that they had completed in Mexico. Once enrolled in school, Juana was placed in the pullout program for English instruction. Upon high school graduation, she attended Scripps College and then transferred to Pitzer College, where she graduated with a degree in Gender and Feminine Studies and a second major in Film and Video Production in 1993. She is now working as a teacher.

Joaquín. Joaquín was 7 when he arrived in the US from Michoacán, Mexico. He was placed in the second grade, where his teacher spoke Spanish almost all of the time, and then continued in the bilingual program until the fifth grade, when he began taking ESL classes. He had three brothers and four sisters. His mother was a homemaker and his father was a fieldworker; both had attended elementary school for a few years. At the time he was interviewed, Joaquín was completing his bachelor's degree in Architectural Engineering at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

Gema. Gema was 10 when her family emigrated to the US from Michoacán, Mexico, and was placed in the fifth grade, where she received bilingual instruction. She had two brothers and five sisters. Her mother was a food vendor with no formal schooling and her father was not involved in Gema's life. She graduated from Smith College in 1992 and held an administrative position in a school district in Central California at the time she was interviewed.

Cristina. Cristina was 10 on arrival from Morelia, Mexico, and was placed in a bilingual fifth-grade class. She had a brother and three sisters. Both her parents worked in the fields and had an elementary education. When interviewed for the study, Cristina was completing her bachelor's degree at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and her goal was to obtain a master's degree and a multiple-subject teaching credential.

Verónica. Verónica was 7 when she came to California from Morelia, Mexico, and had two brothers and eight sisters. Her mother stayed at home to take care of all the children while her father worked in the fields. Both parents had an elementary education. Verónica received ESL instruction in middle school only, testing out of the ESL program by the time she completed ESL 3. At the time she was interviewed, Verónica was in her 3rd year at California State University, Monterey Bay, working on a degree in Collaborative Health and Human Services and planning to apply to a master's program and eventually to a doctoral program in Psychology with the goal of becoming a bilingual school psychologist.

Karina. Karina was 13 when she arrived in the US from Michoacán, Mexico, and not knowing a word of English, she was placed in a beginning-level ESL class in the eighth grade. She had two younger brothers and three older sisters. Her mother was a homemaker and her father a welder. Both had some elementary education. In 2005, Karina graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara, with a bachelor's degree in Political Science with an emphasis in International Relations and a second major in Spanish. Her goals are to complete a master's in Business Administration and a law degree.

Laura. Laura was 9 when she, her two brothers, and two sisters came to California. Having completed fourth grade in Mexico, she was placed in a bilingual fifth-grade class. She was raised neither by her mother nor her father but by her oldest brother, who became her legal guardian. She reported that neither of her parents had any formal schooling at all. When interviewed for the study, Laura was completing her general education courses at Harnell College in Salinas. She was as yet undecided on what career path to embark upon.

Ana. Ana was 14 when she, her sister, and two brothers first came to the

US from Morelia, Mexico. Based on her age and limited proficiency in English, Ana was placed in an ESL 1 class in middle school. Her mother was a homemaker and her father a fieldworker who had shortly before become disabled. Both had some elementary schooling. At the time of her interview, Ana was completing her general education courses at Hartnell College in Salinas and was planning to become a kindergarten teacher.

Lita. Lita was 11 when she came to California from Guadalajara, Mexico, and was placed in ESL 1 as part of her seventh-grade curriculum. She had two brothers and a sister. Both parents were fieldworkers and only her mother had completed elementary school. When interviewed for the study, Lita was a senior at California State University, Monterey Bay, and about to graduate with a bachelor's degree in Social Behavioral Science with an emphasis in History. As a result of her positive experience doing volunteer work in the classroom with Mini Corps, she was also planning to become a teacher.

Manuel. Manuel was 9 upon arrival from Michoacán, Mexico, and from fourth grade until his junior high school year, he participated in the Migrant Program for 2 hours every Saturday morning. He had two brothers and a sister. His father was a fieldworker; his mother worked alongside her husband in the fields and then, returning home, cooked, cleaned the house, and cared for her children. Both parents had some elementary schooling. When interviewed for the study, Manuel was working on a degree in Electrical Engineering at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and was seriously considering applying to the PhD program in the same department.

The Library as a Resource and a Safe Haven

Since the students were unable to afford texts of their own, the library provided participants access to a wide variety of books—both in English and Spanish—that allowed them to develop their second language while still nurturing their mother tongue. As two of the participants put it:

I didn't like to write, but I liked reading a lot so I would read any books I could find in the school and the community library. At home we didn't have books, only a dictionary that my brother had bought and sometimes a newspaper that my father would buy, like *The Herald*. (Patricia)²

The books that I had at home were kids' books from the local library where my mother used to take me on a regular basis. Besides library books, we only had some magazines around the house. (Mariel)

For some of the other English learners participating in the study, the library not only represented a welcome source of reading materials needed to complete school assignments, but also a safe and quiet place away from the unpleasantness of the daily challenges often faced by recent immigrant children like themselves. One of the participants expressed these aspects in this way:

Once we came to the United States and we enrolled in public education,

we would visit the public library frequently, at least two times a week, and in the summertime, my mother would walk us to the bookmobile and she would leave us there for 2 hours. It was a respite from the summer sun in Southern California. So my sister and I sometimes were the only two people that would visit the bookmobile. It was like a win-win situation. We got to escape the city heat and enjoy air-conditioning with all those books and those adults giving us all the attention in the world. By the sixth grade, I used to spend my time in the library during recess and lunch because there was a really heavy gang population and there were all these fights and I didn't grasp with the disco fashion so people wouldn't hang out with me because I wasn't wearing the right clothing, so then my refuge was the library. In the library I wouldn't have to deal with students telling me anything. That was my haven, my safe place. Besides, my father has been sober for 10 years now, but prior to that, he used to drink a lot, and one way to escape my problems was to embed myself in reading and to escape into another world. So for me the library was my haven, the place where I could escape from my reality. When I was at the library, I felt safe. (Juana)

Much like Juana, Joaquín recounted the frequent trips he and his siblings would make with his mother to the local public library in search for interesting stories to read during the long summer break.

At least twice a week, my mother would take us to the library in town where they would sponsor reading every summer. The objective was to see who would read more pages, so we would check out books, read them, and the librarian would then add up the pages that we had read, and there would be prizes for whoever had read the most. (Joaquín)

Regardless of socioeconomic status, children who read during the summer do better at school when they return in the fall. However, for children from low-income households without learning opportunities and enrichment experiences, the loss of academic skills over the summer can be quite significant (Alexander, Entwistle, & Olson, 2007). A longitudinal study of 800 children conducted by Alexander and his colleagues led them to conclude that two-thirds of the academic achievement gap between high SES and low SES students during the regular school year can be explained by what happens during the summertime. Consistent with these findings were the results Kim (2003) found with sixth graders: Those who read more during the summer performed better on a reading test in the fall than the peers who had not read as much. The cumulative effect of summer-reading gains continues to widen the achievement gap between low-income/at-risk students and their more affluent peers.

For the participants in this study, once access to high-interest, recreational books was no longer a problem, reading went from being a homework requirement to an activity avidly sought after:

I went strictly by required reading and writing because I wasn't a student that would get things really very quickly. I had to work at it. I had to read

things very carefully, and I was a slow reader. When I was in middle school, I participated in a library project called “Read a Hundred Books.” I enjoyed learning and that’s what made a difference, I think. Except for an encyclopedia my oldest sister had bought, we didn’t have any schoolbooks; honestly, we didn’t even have a bookshelf, but my brothers, sisters, and I would go to the library and choose something that was of interest to us so that we would have plenty to read. (Gema)

In some cases, it took a teacher who could share her enthusiasm for reading with her students for them to “try it out” and see that reading really could be an enjoyable activity. The following is such an example:

In high school, there were some teachers that I really liked, especially one who would recommend me titles by authors like Víctor Villaseñor, Octavio Paz, Guatemo Sánchez, and just because of her, I started going to the public library. (Cristina)

In middle school, a number of the participants went to their school library to spend recess. The library was a quiet, clean, inviting place where they found no threats of any kind. While some of the students would make these routine visits by themselves, others did so in the company of their best friends:

Most of the time I would spend recess with my friend Bianca. We’d go to the library and work on homework or study for tests. I still remember the little kids’ books we would pick up and read every single word from them. Now everything has changed and I feel proud of it. (Verónica)

I remember spending recess in the library when I was in middle school, and then again, when I was in high school. Looking back, that actually helped. (Karina)

When I was in the seventh grade, I didn’t have any friends, so I would just go to the library and stay there during recess. I used to read little kids’ books like Dr. Seuss and Dora’s books. (Laura)

During recess in middle school, I would go to the cafeteria with my friends or to the library to read or to do my homework. When I was in high school, I joined a program called AmeriCorp and I received tutoring in English and math Monday through Thursday for an hour after school. We always met in the library. I remember getting interested in this program after seeing a lot of my friends go to the library. So I have pleasant memories associated with the library. (Ana)

When we came to California, we used to go to the César Chávez Public Library, which was the closest one to where we lived, and we would check out a lot of books, especially during my middle school years. (Lita)

The findings reported in this paper echo the results of related research of English language learners who manage to succeed in an educational system where many have traditionally failed. Two of the main characteristics that set these successful students apart are their high drive for achievement and the faith in their own ability to do well. They would look for and find at school the academic support they could not find at home because of their parents' limited or nonexistent experience of formal schooling and the lack of material resources other than those for basic needs within the family. The study participants soon learned to resort to the school and local public library not only for good reading materials, but also for words of encouragement, assistance with homework, and accessibility to a welcoming, nonthreatening environment. They realized that a knowledgeable and caring librarian was waiting for them, ready to help and to give them undivided attention. For one participant, the school librarian provided a valuable work opportunity and served as a role model:

I also started working in the high school library and there I would talk to my boss, who was the main librarian. He would encourage me and tell me that I was doing very well. He is a great person that I really look up to and keep in touch with. (Manuel)

The Library and Student Achievement

The educational attainment of English learners has been the focus of attention of social science research for several decades, and special emphasis has been placed on trying to better understand factors that contribute to the underachievement of a high percentage of these students (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005). The groundbreaking and still most comprehensive school library research project was started by Keith Lance and his colleagues in 1993. The body of research they have produced—often referred to as “the Colorado Study”—thus far comprises 15 individual studies. Over and over, their ongoing research documents what an important predictor of school success the school library actually is. The team concluded that students at schools where the library is well equipped and managed by a qualified librarian tend to achieve higher test scores, irrespective of whether they come from rich or impoverished communities. In 1998, Offenbergh and Clark found that students who attend schools with quality library programs scored higher on the reading section of the SAT 9 (Stanford Achievement Test, 9th ed.). More recently, Hamilton-Pennell, Lance, Rodney, and Hainer (2000) confirmed that “a school library media program with a full-time media specialist, support staff, and a strong computer network leads to higher student achievement, regardless of social and economic factors in a community” (p. 46).

We know that reading not only promotes literacy, but that children learn to read by reading (Smith, 1988). We also know that a home and school environment that is text-rich leads to more reading (Gaver, 1963; Morrow, 1983). Not surprisingly, students who have access to classroom libraries spend more time reading than students who do not have such a privilege (Morrow, as cited in Constantino, 1998, p. 55). If children have ready access to a variety of inter-

esting books, they will naturally read more, both for schoolwork and for pleasure. Children become fluent readers when they have plenty of opportunities to practice reading. Their reading skills develop effortlessly and sitting down with a good book becomes a habit. Research has shown that children who do a substantial amount of voluntary reading develop a positive attitude toward reading and tend to become very good readers (Calkins, 1996; Greaney, 1980). Krashen (1987, 1993), an early and enthusiastic proponent of free voluntary reading, emphasizes the significant impact this type of reading has in literacy development because people who read more not only improve their reading ability and speed, but they also write better and develop a larger expressive vocabulary than those who do not read in their leisure time. Sometimes all it takes is exposure to a good book for people to renew their interest in reading (Cho & Krashen, 2002; Ramos & Krashen, 1998).

Through the years, Krashen has done extensive research on how crucial ready access to books is for developing habits of reading. Recently (2004), he gathered and synthesized data from studies conducted between 1963 and 2001. What his analysis revealed was that 30% to 99% of the children participating in the studies had obtained their reading materials from a library.

It appears, then, that we should do everything we possibly can to make sure as many students as possible have access to appropriate reading materials. Recreational reading has the added benefit of facilitating both first and second language acquisition (Constantino, 1994). As research has indicated, literacy in the native language promotes the acquisition of a second language; that is, when students are encouraged to maintain their heritage language, the process of acquiring a second language is accelerated (Cummins, 1981; Krashen, 1996). Providing English learners with a quiet, comfortable place to read and a selection of reading materials in both the first and second languages will have a positive impact on their second language development.

If access to a library can have so many positive effects in a language minority student's academic life, one cannot but be appalled at the barriers to library use faced by English learners, particularly when they come from low-income backgrounds. Research shows that such students may experience a number of obstacles that make access to the library very difficult (Payne, 1992). Two obstacles discussed by Payne are a lack of knowledge of the library's potential benefits and of how to avail oneself of this potential.

A student—whether a child or adult—who is a nonnative speaker of English may lack sufficient proficiency in his or her second language to feel comfortable enough to approach a librarian who may be a monolingual English speaker. In addition, the library may be far away from the student's home and the student's family may not have the means of transportation to get there. Moreover, the library may lack culturally relevant materials and may perhaps be understaffed. Despite the high proportion of immigrant students in its classrooms, California ranks last in the nation in the ratio of school librarians to students. While the national average is one school librarian per 900 students, in California the ratio is about one certified librarian per 5,009 children (ALA, 2007; CDE, 2009).

Lack of Access

As has been amply demonstrated in the research, people who have access to books read more, and people who read more will read better and improve their writing, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. It is not surprising to find that those students labeled “struggling readers” (those who read below grade level and for whom reading is both difficult and boring) and those labeled “reluctant readers” (those who read at or above grade level but read only what is assigned to them) often have limited access to books. In a study of elementary school children, Worthy and McKool (1996) found that most of the students who reported that they “hated to read” did not have books readily available to them either at home or at school. Such children miss out on the invaluable experience of getting to know themselves better by learning about the world and about other people and by linking the stories to their own lives. Lack of access to books keeps them from making personal connections to texts that have the potential to change their lives.

Lack of access to print is a serious problem for children from impoverished backgrounds. Such children face a limited availability of books in their schools, in their community public libraries, and at home. In a recent 3-year study of four neighborhoods in Philadelphia (two low income and two middle income), Neuman and Celano (2001) found that “children in middle-income neighborhoods were likely to be deluged with a wide variety of reading materials [while] children from poor neighborhoods would have to aggressively and persistently seek them out” (p.15).

Constantino (2005) reached similar conclusions after conducting a survey study to examine access to books in the home, the classroom and school libraries, the public library, and bookstores. The results indicated statistically significant differences between print accessibility to students of high and low socioeconomic status for home, classroom, and schoolbooks ($p < .001$). Libraries in high-income areas possessed a greater number of books. Along the same lines, LeMoine, O’Brian, Brandlin, and McQuillan (1997) found that the checkout policies of school libraries in the country could differ from district to district, allowing middle-class students greater access to books than children in low-income communities had.

Unlike many middle-class mainstream students who are surrounded by books, English learners from economically disadvantaged households rely heavily on library books both for recreational reading and homework assignments. If reading more leads to reading better, frequent access to books significantly influences students’ reading achievement. In 1992 Elley led a team of educational researchers in a cross-national comparative investigation of reading literacy to explore major factors that affect academic success. These researchers found that the size of the school library was an important predictor of student reading ability and “an indicator of the extent to which schools are prepared to encourage students to read” (p. 66).

We can agree that students from bookless homes can be taught how to read, but will they be able to develop the habit of reading? These students need ready availability of high-interest, developmentally appropriate books to

improve their reading skills and to learn to associate reading with pleasure. Noteworthy is a national survey on the public library conducted by the Marist College Institute in 2003. This survey of 1,004 New York state residents reflecting the population of the entire country revealed that two-thirds of their respondents considered having access to a public library in their local community as “very valuable,” while almost a third deemed it “valuable.” Similarly, a document compiled by the American Library Association Office for Research and Statistics shows that the number of children attending library programs increased by over 40% between 1993 and 2001 (from 35,573,000 to 51,800,000). During the same period, however, the number of children’s reading materials in circulation increased by a mere 7.3 %.

In a study of 13,123 students in grades 3-12 conducted in Ohio, students responded that the school library was helpful in a number of ways: It allowed them to obtain information to complete schoolwork; to use computers; and to get motivated to work harder and get better grades. For many of the students, the school library became “an agency for active learning” where opportunities were created by credentialed librarians so that students could read and solidify their own patterns of learning (Ross & Kuhlthau, 2003).

Lack of Funding

Although a growing body of research strongly suggests that there is a correlation between a quality school and public library staffed with full-time certificated librarians and higher student achievement, budget cuts affecting library funding continue to take place across the state and around the nation.

Though not all libraries suffer the same fate, some of them have had their operating hours vastly reduced. This has been the case in El Gabilan, Cesar Chavez, and John Steinbeck public libraries in Salinas, California. As of 2005, these library branches—originally scheduled for closure—were open only 33 hours a week, kept alive by funds raised by Rally Salinas, a community campaign that had drawn about \$700,000 to keep the branches from closing. Being able to offer only a reduced schedule in some of its branch locations is just one of the challenges the Salinas library system faces at present. In 2002, it had a ratio of 1.37 books for every resident in a city with approximately 152,000 residents (ALA, 2007).

In recent years, funding for school libraries across California has plummeted from \$28 per student per year to considerably less than \$1 (Gorman, 2005). In 2006, the Federal Way School District in the state of Washington cut 20 teacher librarian positions to save the district \$1.1 million. As a result, 22 out of the 23 elementary schools in the district ended up being managed by part-time librarians. During the times the librarian was not there, the library was in the hands of a noncertificated aide. Mark Twain Elementary School, which serves a high-poverty community, was the only school in the district that was able to use some of the district’s reserves to retain a full-time librarian (Maynard, 2006; Montgomery, 2006).

Efforts have recently been made to improve the situation. One example is the initiative of U.S. Senators Jack Reed of Rhode Island and Thad Cochran

of Mississippi, who have introduced the SKILLS (Strengthening Kids' Interest in Learning and Libraries) Act requiring that all K-12 public schools in the country have a certified librarian by 2010. In an interview for the *School Library Journal* on June 22, 2007, Senator Reed stated that "school libraries are a critical component in improving student literacy skills and academic achievement ... and this legislation recognizes what makes this success possible: highly trained librarians" (p. 15).

Conclusion

Although not widely considered a pressing educational issue, the need to place books in the hands of all students, particularly those who do not have the ability to buy their own, is so basic it should no longer be neglected. It is basic because the access to up-to-date book collections—or lack thereof—can have a major impact on students' academic achievement and on the quality of education they receive. Other needs often take priority, but this is an issue that should be put back on the agenda—high on the agenda, in fact—of current concerns in education.

The decreasing use of the library could be a direct corollary of the expansion of the Internet. The accessibility of up-to-the minute information on the Internet from the comfort of our own homes, schools, or offices may have justified the budget reductions that have forced public libraries to either reduce the number of services available to the public or completely close down. Carlson (2005) asserts that some library premises are so outdated that they cannot compete with the appeal of popular coffee shops in accommodating the needs of students in the 21st century, yet many of today's students do not own a personal computer and rely on the ones at school or in the library to complete course assignments that require Internet access, a word-processing program, or some other educational technology.

Although for most Americans Internet access is part of their everyday routines, there is an important segment of the population for whom the library still fulfills a number of important roles. As noted before, the participants in the study that generated this article found sanctuary in the library in addition to a wide selection of reading materials, assistance with homework, and even role models. Based on compelling data from students and teachers in 39 schools taking part in the Ohio Research Study, Ross and Kuhlthau (2003) concluded that "an effective school library is not just informational, but formational" (p. 40). Similarly, Michael Gorman, president of the American Library Association, stated that "the love of reading, the excitement of research, the empowerment that comes with the ability to find the information and recorded knowledge [one needs] ... are more easily acquired when a young person is inspired by the dedication and the skills of a librarian with a particular interest and training in library service to young people" (2005, p. 5).

Numerous variables directly or indirectly affect student achievement, among them socioeconomic status, parental level of education, intrinsic motivation, and amount of financial resources. The complex relationships among these variables make it difficult to isolate any one variable in terms of its influ-

ence on student success. However, we should take note of more than 3 decades of rigorous research into the role of the library in helping students that clearly indicates that we must carefully consider the impact that libraries—both public and in our schools—have in our students' lives, particularly low-income English language learners.

In his article for the *Carnegie Reporter*, Daniel Akst (2005) asks whether libraries still matter in the era of the Internet. I wonder if as a nation we can truly afford to answer “No.” In a democratic society that guarantees its citizens equal rights under the law, the library fulfills a significant social mission: facilitating the development of a literacy that makes possible personal growth, access to higher education, and consequently, enhanced career choices and job opportunities. In other words, the library promotes educational equity and opportunity for all.

The study and related research reported in this article provide substantial concrete evidence of the strong link between the library and the academic and reading achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly English learners. The participants found much more than books in the library. For them, the library was a safe haven, “a quiet place away from the unpleasantness of daily challenges,” the welcoming space where they could receive undivided attention and a wealth of information from a caring, knowledgeable adult. At times such as these when we are faced with diminishing funding for education and difficult budgetary decisions, we must recognize how powerful the library is in lessening socioeconomic disparities on student achievement.

Acknowledgments

The author would to thank Dr. Steven Lasswell for his valuable suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.

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Notes

¹This article is rooted in data generated by the author's dissertation study of academically successful English learners of Mexican descent.

²For purposes of confidentiality, all the names have been changed.

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