Public Media's Impact On Young Readers

Time for a Fresh Look

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By Susan B. Neuman

For the average middle-class American, it might be hard to comprehend just how devastating the effects of poverty are on children's early literacy development. But the social and educational deficits poor children must overcome to learn to read are all too clear from numerous research studies.

When compared with their more affluent peers, young children from low-income families tend to have very little access to books, magazines, or reading materials of any kind, much less high-quality materials. Many lack even the most basic writing tools, such as paper, pencils, or crayons. Poor children are much less likely to be taken to the library, shown how to use a computer, or told a bedtime story. At home, they hear much less conversation, and are exposed to a much narrower range of words. They tend to be asked fewer open-ended questions, and they are less often invited to discuss abstract ideas or to make and defend arguments. Moreover, their parents and other caregivers tend to be much less confident that they know how to teach early literacy skills effectively, or that they can find resources that can help.

The cumulative result of such circumstances is that millions of kids enter kindergarten each year having already fallen so far behind in vocabulary, content knowledge, and the mechanics of reading that they are unlikely ever to catch up, no matter how good their teachers.

What can be done to give America's most vulnerable children a better chance to begin elementary school on solid footing? For answers, policymakers tend to look to preschool programs such as Head Start, or to "wraparound" strategies of the sort made famous by the Harlem Children's Zone, which supplements preschool with parenting courses, home visits, and other services. Largely absent from recent policy discussions, however, has been one of the most intriguing approaches of all: Using public television and its related electronic media to distribute high-quality literacy resources to low-income families, and to show parents, teachers, and other caregivers how to use those resources effectively.

Since 1985, the federal government has funded the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS to pursue precisely that mission, by way of shows like "Sesame Street," "Between the Lions," and a newer generation of programs created under the federally supported Ready to Learn initiative (also known as PBS Kids Raising Readers). The latter includes programs such as "Martha Speaks," "Super WHY!," and an updated version of "The Electric Company."

But, while Congress continues to support that work, policymakers rarely describe it as an integral part of the country's larger education reform strategy. Perhaps because of its association with the now seemingly ancient medium of television (and despite the fact that the CPB and PBS have invested heavily in digital and Internet-based formats), public media have come to be viewed as old hat.

That could soon change, though, thanks to a recent surge in scholarly attention to public media's impact on early literacy development. In 2005, the U.S. Department of Education dramatically scaled up the Ready to Learn program's investment in research, requiring that fully one-quarter of its five-year, $70 million grant go toward independent evaluations and studies (with an emphasis on randomized control group designs).

For any branch of education research, that would count as a major infusion of dollars. Given how little is known about the impact of media on literacy learning, though, the investment is especially valuable. Researchers have gathered more data in five years than they had collected over the previous four decades combined. Rather than having to speculate about the ways in which young readers interact with television, digital content, and the Internet, they have begun to assemble solid, scientific evidence about the effectiveness of specific public-television programs, websites, and multimedia tools, as well as classroom models that rely on both old and new media.

Already, the findings have provided strong support for what the producers of children's media have long argued: Television isn't necessarily an "idiot box." When carefully designed to reflect what's known about effective reading instruction, TV shows (and all sorts of digital resources) can make valuable contributions to the literacy development of kids from poor families. For example, in a series of studies, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of California, Davis, found that low-income children who watched the PBS show "Between the Lions" made significant gains in early reading skills, compared with peers who did not, and that gains were especially pronounced for children whose preschool teachers were

PAGE 37>

SUSAN B. NEUMAN is a professor of education at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, and the director of the Michigan Research Program on Ready to Learn. She was an assistant U.S. secretary of education under President George W. Bush.

Public Media's Impact On Young Readers

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 44

trained to use the show's videos and related materials in the classroom.

Similarly, in one of my own recent studies, children at a Head Start program in a high-poverty Detroit neighborhood posted extraordinary gains in expressive vocabulary and sorting and categorizing skills after preschool staff members were given intensive professional development that featured a combination of video content, online activities, and print materials adapted from "Sesame Street" and "Elmo's World." Not only did those kids outpace their control group, but they also caught up to a comparison group of relatively affluent children, entirely closing what had been a wide gap on standard measures of vocabulary learning.

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Steve Braden

A few major Ready to Learn-funded studies are still under way. But already, the findings should be enough to convince policymakers that, at the very least, they should take a fresh look at public media's potential to boost the early literacy development of children living in poverty—not only by delivering high-quality content via the Internet and broadcast television (which continues to be a popular medium, especially for kids in low-income households), but also by complementing the work that goes on in preschool and wraparound programs.

It's time for policymakers to acknowledge that progress in K-12 education will depend on progress made in preschool education. And if they're ready to take early literacy instruction seriously, they should consider *all* the resources at their disposal, including public media. The research effort is still young, but it offers tantalizing evidence that an established federal program of support can make important contributions to the current generation of young readers. ■