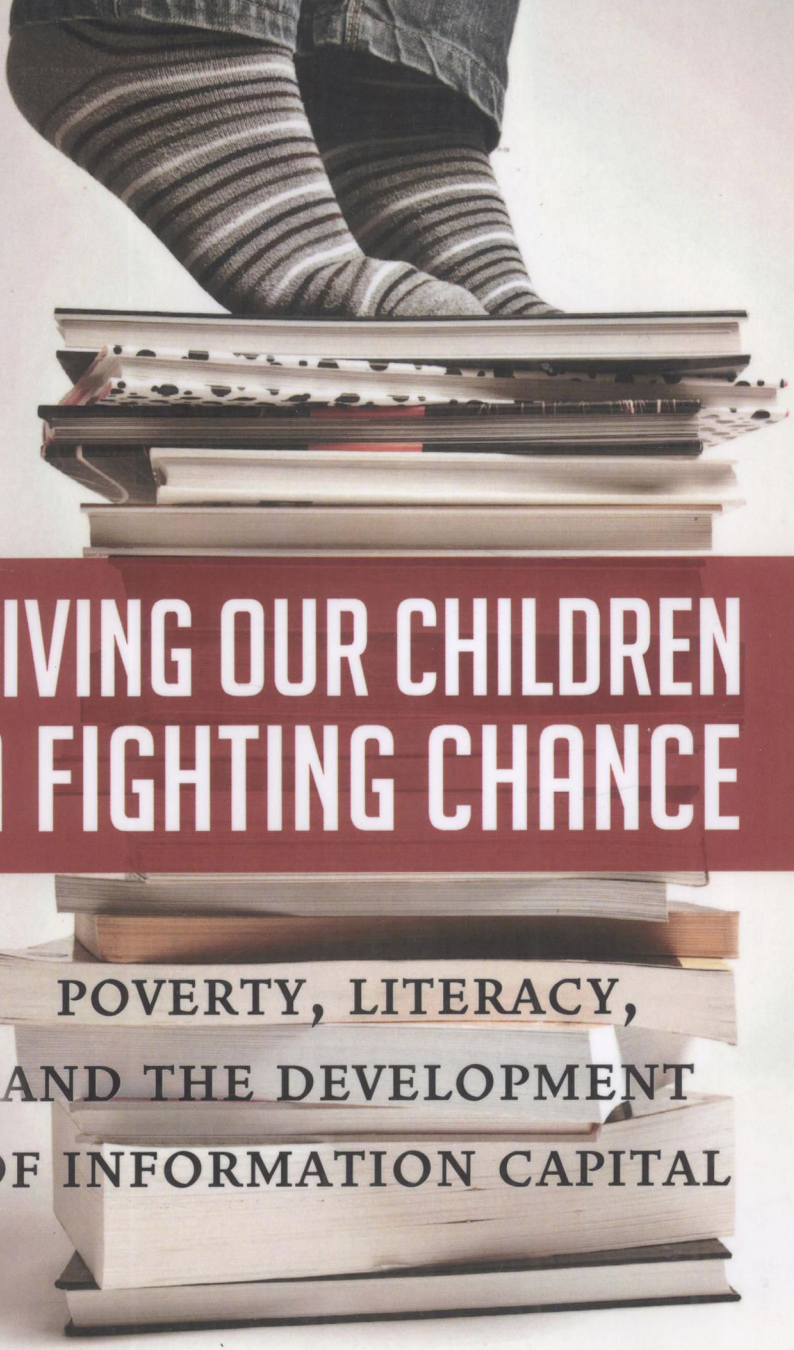

GIVING OUR CHILDREN A FIGHTING CHANCE

POVERTY, LITERACY, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF INFORMATION CAPITAL

Susan B. Neuman
Donna C. Celano

Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance

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To the Free Library—
the gift to the city of Philadelphia that keeps on giving

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with students, while always maintaining their sense of humor and delight in their work, was a pleasure to observe.

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Giving Our Children a Fighting Chance

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The Ecology of Inequality

Like a bright beacon on the hill, the Lillian Marrero public library rises majestically above the deserted buildings and bulldozed voids below on Germantown Avenue. Here in the heart of what is known as the Philadelphia Badlands, makeshift garbage dumps line the sidewalks. The tall grass that surrounds abandoned lots does nothing to obscure the stacks of tires, worn stuffed chairs, and piles of bottles, bags, and take-out containers indicative of the profound decline in the economy of this part of the city since its heyday in the mid-20th century. Although it's a stunningly beautiful summer day, one that normally would draw you outdoors, there's not a seat to be had in the library. By 10:15 a.m., you can hear the hum of dozens of people speaking in hushed tones, groups gathered around the computers, and some 40 others scattered throughout the library, browsing the stacks or reading quietly at one of its nine tables. Every 15 minutes or so, a library staff member sweeps through the room tucking in the vacated chairs, picking up trash and discarded books, and readying the room for the continuing onslaught of new patrons.

Grabbing the #23 bus, and traveling just 6.6 miles from the Badlands, you'll find a strikingly similar scene at the graceful Chestnut Hill library, next to the old trolley turnaround. Its front doors are located only 20 feet from the same busy two-lane Germantown Avenue, but its tiny carefully tended gardens inside the wrought-iron fence and under a canopy of century-old shade trees gives it the feel of a sylvan oasis far removed from traffic. Inside, here too, the library is bustling with about 20 adults, either at the computers or selecting books. On this fine warm day, more than 20 preschoolers are cuddled along an architect's replica of a trolley filled with benches and murals that hearkens back to the day when trolleys were the primary means of public transit on this Avenue.

"CUT"—AN ENTERPRISING YOUNG VIDEOGRAPHER might say at this point, for this is where the parallels end. Although there are remarkable similarities in the number of people who use these libraries, the nature of the activities within them could not look more different. There is Aquanette at the Lillian Marrero library, who is struggling to use the computer, looking for Section 8 housing after being told that she must vacate her residence

immediately. There is Christian, totally engrossed in reading the *Hazardous Material Endorsement Renewal Manual*, hoping to renew his commercial driver's license from the Pennsylvania State Department of Transportation. Several pages of copious notes by his side offer evidence of just how seriously he takes his study, while a thick pamphlet, "Purgatory and Prayer," hints at what sustains him. There is Michelle, watching her only child Theo play on the computer, recognizing that her own computer illiteracy will limit the potential for academic achievement of her unusually inquisitive child. Regardless of the specifics, their stories take on a saddening refrain: Our society has failed to school these young adults.

In the Chestnut Hill library, the contrast could not be more stark. There is the mother dutifully looking for guided leveled readers, coaching her 6-year-old son so that he's ready to zip right through to grade level 3. There's little 2-year-old Phoebe whose mother can't seem to resist giving an informal vocabulary lesson while she reads a story: "It says he has a puzzled expression. What do you think 'puzzled' means?" And there is Beth with her two children in tow, grabbing the latest John Sandfords and John Archers mysteries for herself along with a couple of books by Peggy Rathmann and Judith Viorst, which apparently are always winners with her young girls.

The underpinnings of desperation so palpable in the Lillian Marrero library result from a confluence of circumstances hardly imaginable by their Chestnut Hill counterparts: Poverty. Segregation. Environments where joblessness and lost hope are the norm. While many of us may vaguely recognize the ghettoization of poverty, few can appreciate how it concentrates environments that are progressively isolated geographically, socially, economically, and educationally.

Today, for example, a majority of urban Black residents in Philadelphia will live under conditions of racial isolation so extreme that they satisfy the criteria of hyper-segregation–places where Blacks are highly segregated on multiple geographic dimensions simultaneously (Massey, 2007). Discrimination against Latinos is hardly less virulent. Whereas in 1989 Hispanics were 19% *less likely* than Blacks to experience adverse treatment in residential markets, in 2000 they were 8% *more likely* to suffer such discrimination (Mason, 2004). Extensive *linguistic profiling* in metropolitan areas along with increasing anti-immigration fervor has only intensified the effects of such residential segregation (Ryan, 2010).

Exacerbating these conditions is yet a newer form of segregation–this one based on class (Reardon, 2011). Over the last 20 years, demographer Douglas Massey and his colleagues (Massey, Gross, & Eggers, 1991) have reported astonishing increases in the degree of residential segregation. Designating families earning incomes below the federal poverty line for a family of four as poor, and those earning incomes more than four times above the

poverty level as affluent, he reports increases in class segregation by more than 50%. Those with money are more likely to live in homogeneously privileged neighborhoods like Chestnut Hill, interacting almost exclusively with other affluent people. Those without money are increasingly confined to homogeneously poor neighborhoods like the Badlands, yielding a density of material deprivation that is unprecedented in our history.

It is this hardening of the class stratification system, as poverty and privilege grow ever more geographically concentrated, that significantly impedes social mobility. It creates a set of mutually reinforcing patterns that more or less institutionalize one's class position, a set of patterns closely linked to one's education and, even more closely, with one's literacy skills: Children from low-income families with poorly educated parents, little experience reading books, and multiple social problems will end up in schools with the fewest resources and the most inexperienced teachers to help them learn. On the other hand, children from affluent families with well-educated parents and extensive experiences with books and reading, attend high-achieving schools with the finest and most well-paid teachers that are in the best position to promote learning. In short, the spatial concentration of poverty and affluence–in this case within the same school district–virtually guarantees the intergenerational transmission of class position. Poor children don't have a chance to succeed. Rich children have little option not to.

You can see how this social geography works against human capital formation at the Lillian Marrero library in the Badlands. Reynaldo, a young Latino man, 22 and out of work, spends time at the library every day trying to learn more about anime, a form of film animation that originated in Japan. He dreams of being a film director or a screenwriter, an interest he developed thanks to his English teacher in middle school. But due to family problems he dropped out of school in 11th grade. Now he finds himself without the skills or the connections to qualify for even an entry-level position. He says that he might work on his GED in the fall, but his furtive glances at the door plainly indicate that he would rather not talk about his future.

Chris, 25, also a regular at the library, enjoys the quiet air-conditioned setting to support his interest in poetry–mostly Langston Hughes. He also studiously works on learning another language, and occasionally uses the Rosetta Stone software on the library's computer. But he, too, dropped out of school. "I enjoyed math at one point, then it all fell apart." As he describes his experience at the local high school, the brightness in his eyes now dims. Until now, Chris had been sitting tall, leaning slightly forward, animated in describing his interests. Now he leans back and slumps down, his body language divulging volumes.

It would be easy to attribute Reynaldo and Chris's problems to some personality or dispositional factors; they were irresponsible, lazy, or lacked

the desire to excel in school. Such designations reflect a characteristic feature in social psychology known as the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977), the general tendency for people to overestimate individual factors and underestimate situational factors. But the very fact that we see them and their friends daily at the *library,* not at a bar or a pool hall, indicates that the situational characteristic which has produced this hourglass economic structure is at work. It is not that Reynaldo and Chris have few aspirations; it is that neither has been born into a social position with the resources that could give them a fighting chance.

Resources come in a variety of forms. They may be material, such as income; emotional, such as love and family stability; or symbolic, such as prestige and social standing. Paradoxically, it is often the nonmaterial resources like social and cultural capital that carry the greatest potential for inequality (Putnam, 2000). Social capital relates to your social standing, the informal networks of friends and colleagues that you can draw upon for any kinds of tangible benefits. For example, you might learn about an upcoming but unadvertised position through the "grapevine," or find out what company might offer opportunities to get ahead with higher income or greater prestige. Moreover, within your circle of contacts, there develops a set of cultural practices that act as identifiers of your class membership. You might attend the same elite colleges, send your children to the same private schools, or buy the same foreign cars. Cultural capital in some ways acts like a secret handshake, defining your social group. Those with cultural capital, for example, will find ways to get their child the "best" teacher in the "best" school, influencing all those around them to get things done. They seem to know how to navigate the various power structures with confidence. They believe in themselves and expect achievement.

But as important as these resources are, the forces of computerization and market expansion have brought on yet another intangible resource, one that might trump all others: the rise of information capital. Today, the prosperity of companies and nations has come to demand high-level human and information capital–knowledge workers–who can mobilize their skills and talents to promote innovation and greater productivity (Levy & Murnane, 2004). As the newest form of human capital, information is seen as having an intrinsic value in and of itself; further, sharing information can be a means of sharing power. China, India, and Russia, for example, have expanded postgraduate education to 30 million students, almost double the numbers for the United States, to fill knowledge-intensive industries in their own developing economies (Jones, 2008). And what is true about today's rising skill needs will be even truer tomorrow as the pressure to compete and expand into specialized global markets increase, forcing knowledge workers toward even higher stakes characterized by innovation, artistry, out-of-the-box thinking.

Information capital is comprised of two modes of reasoning. The first and most common mode is knowledge-based (Hirsch, 1987). This sort of reasoning is rapid, extensive, and automatic, and powerfully evolves as the cumulative product of a person's experiences with words and the concepts to which they refer. The second mode of reasoning is conscious and rule-based, and involves logical, analytic thought (Bereiter, 2002). Both forms of information capital accrue through firsthand and secondhand experiences. Young children frequently acquire knowledge about the world through firsthand experience. Everyday play activities and conversations with adults and their peers provide many initial opportunities for knowledge-building. However, much of the information they will need as they grow older will not be available through conversations and experience. They will need to rely on a second source of information: print. In fact, cultural anthropologists and historians have long argued that reading represents a unique interface with the environment, providing access to the cumulative wisdom and knowledge built by current and previous generations (Scribner & Cole, 1973).

Reading has cognitive consequences that extend beyond the immediate task of understanding particular texts. Although many used to think that knowledge is merely a proxy for intellectual ability, recent evidence has shown that knowledge is highly related to the amount of reading (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Studies have shown, for example, that as a primary source of information, students who are likely to read a lot, know a lot; those who are reluctant readers are likely to read less, and know less (Stanovich, 1986). In short, avid readers–regardless of general ability–tend to know more than those who read little, demonstrating what reading does for the mind. Further, these consequences are reciprocal and exponential in nature. Those who know a lot are likely to learn a lot more, faster; in other words, knowledge begets more knowledge (Willingham, 2006). This is a stunning finding because it means that children who get off to a fast start in reading are more likely to read more over the years; further, this very act of reading can develop vocabulary, general knowledge, and build information capital. Consequently, children's earliest experiences with print will establish a trajectory of learning that is cumulative over time–spiraling either upward or downward, carrying profound implications for the development of information capital.

This book describes how the contrasting ecologies of affluence and poverty contribute to disparities in the development of information capital. It begins early on with the differential access to exposure to print. It develops through parental supports that either nurture children's early independence or their intense involvement in print. These patterns are reified and compounded as their social worlds diverge, creating radical differences in parental expectations, access to knowledge, experiences, and attitudes toward

learning prior to entering the school doors. As the digital age takes hold, it does not diminish but merely accelerates the divide, exacerbating the earlier advantages for some students who have come to use the technology for the creation of new knowledge and the manipulation of information.

Our laboratory for understanding these extremes of inequality, paradoxically, has been the neighborhood library. You might think it a curious choice. Carnegie libraries, after all, represent the very symbol of our country's commitment to equality, to lifelong learning, to free and equal access to information. Yet it is in these settings, where people have the freedom to come and go as they wish, that we could develop an acute sense of the juxtaposition of geographically concentrated wealth and poverty and how this new ecological order might contribute to educational inequality. For over 10 years–roughly 1998 to 2009–our research team examined the development of information capital, conducting observations and interviews, following story hours and special events. We walked every block in each neighborhood to better understand how the physical environment played a role in children's development and preparation for schooling. We counted every logographic sign, and spent time in public places to examine how print was used in the neighborhood and how children might be developing as young readers. Given the demands that reading imposes, we observed how teens and young adults transitioned from learning to read to reading to learn, using reading in the service of finding things out and knowing. And finally, recognizing how computerization has greatly altered reading and writing, we examined its use not only in the libraries themselves but in their communities as well.

Using this ecological perspective, this book tells the story of two Philadelphia neighborhoods, one of poverty and one of privilege. Our research context is the neighborhood public library, but the story is not about libraries. Rather, it is about how information capital develops, and the contributing resources that provide either a dearth or an abundance of resources for its formation. Chapter 1 sets the stage for analysis, providing readers with our theoretical framework, our research context, and the purpose of our analysis. Chapter 2 describes the differences in early access to print for young children in these neighborhoods. Chapter 3 begins to detail the basic paradox that has often flummoxed policymakers and educators. It argues that even when we "level the playing field"–therefore creating equal access to material resources–we still have an unleveled playing field, suggesting that other factors, namely scaffolding adults, may make the difference in children's literacy lives. Chapter 4 then moves to the promise of new technology for closing the gap, and finds that the early patterns set by parental interactions in reading have profound effects on how children use digital technology. Chapter 5 records the beginnings of the transition from learning to read to reading to

learn for tweens, and it is here that we begin to record the growing knowledge gap. In Chapter 6, as students become aware of the capabilities of these new media, the disparities increase, leading some students to move toward using the medium for information purposes, and others entertainment. In Chapter 7, we argue that discrepancies in resources have further diverged so that some children are using the media to develop expertise, demonstrating their increasing use of media for information capital. In Chapter 8, we sum up, highlighting our conclusions, before turning to policy implications–both immediate and in the long term.

The end result is that the intensification of class status has given rise to a new set of self-reinforcing mechanisms that have deepened unequal access to information capital. Class status, intensified by increasing geographic concentrations in urban communities, has further accelerated the Matthew Effect, the maxim of the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It has created a knowledge gap which has a far more detrimental effect on social mobility and educational opportunity. Without serious and far-reaching educational and societal reforms, as we describe in our postscript, students who live in concentrated poverty will not have a fighting chance.