

The Value of Book

“When you come . . . bring my books . . .”
St. Paul: second letter to Timothy

Cicero, the Roman politician and orator, said, “A room without books is like a body without a soul.” Many avid readers feel similarly. But books are often difficult to find in Africa. There is little publishing on the continent.

In America there is a public library in every community. How many public libraries are there in Africa? Every day there are new books coming out and new ideas being discussed. But these new books and ideas don't reach Africa and we are being left behind.

George Weah: Liberian Senator, former professional footballer

The Africa Leadership Study (www.africaleadershipstudy.org) underscored a strong desire for African publishing. Christian leaders continue to emphasize its importance.

We cannot do a student ministry without taking seriously the production of books. Publishing is a part of our DNA. We cannot survive without writing and without publishing in all formats.

In such a context as French speaking Africa where you have very little material for the evangelical churches, it's really key and important to develop a publishing house. It's also from my view a best way to contribute to the society, giving out to the students but also to the churches

IFES World Assembly 2015: edited from interview with Daniel Bourdagné,
General Secretary

Experiences and opinions such as these could be multiplied without exhaust. However, is there any *quantifiable evidence* that such benefits exist? In short, *what is the value of a book?*

The following findings have been culled from several thorough sociological studies. They are not mere opinions or impressions. Studies referenced in this paper are listed in the bibliography.

Stephen Krashen in his seminal *The Power of Reading* argued that ‘free voluntary reading’ (FVR) is intensely beneficial. Its benefits are not “guaranteed admission to Harvard Law School.”¹ However, they are real and pervasive. According to his research, FVR is “a powerful means of developing reading comprehension ability, writing style, vocabulary, grammar and spelling.” He continues: “In addition, evidence shows that it is pleasant, promotes cognitive development, and lowers writing apprehension.”² Reading, and reading “because you want to—no book reports, no questions at the end of the chapter”³ —is the key to unlocking reading’s greatest benefits. Over the last 50 years,

¹ Stephen Krashen, *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. (Englewood: ABC-CLIO, 2004), x.

² *Ibid.*, 37.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

thorough sociological research⁴ has revealed “what should be an uncontroversial conclusion: *reading is good for you.*”⁵ This is the “Reading Hypothesis.” When a person engages in the act of reading voluntarily, the mind and soul is enriched and developed, and the wider society in which that person conducts their life is benefited.

Access to Books

Yet, this begs several specifics. First, is the issue of *access to books*. How is one to engage in FVR if no written material is available? Several studies have shown that increased access to literature increases the frequency of reading. Those without access to printed material, one study found, “are less likely to be skilled at the initial acquisition process, less likely to become involved in reading related activities, and less motivated to read, beginning the spiraling effect of the rich-get-richer, poor-get-poorer phenomenon.”⁶ While these studies focus on students in poorer American neighborhoods, there are undeniable similarities with many Africans’ situations. Access to printed material is the essential first step to encouraging literacy and promoting the positive experience of reading.

McTague and Abrams note that central to the “improvement in attitude toward reading” was “the students’ opportunity to own self-chosen books.”⁷ Surveyed students with access to books they *enjoyed* read more in turn, and demonstrated increased reading comprehension and reading rates. Particularly with second-language students (L2), one study found that when students had interest in the material available for them to read, they “developed L2 reading abilities and especially increased L2 vocabulary acquisition, even though only 30% of the existing class time was used for extensive reading instruction.”⁸ Another study found that frequent school-associated trips to the local public library, especially when students had their own library cards, “supported a love and appreciation for literature”⁹ with palpable results: “high access to print,” “more time reading voluntarily in the home,” increased reading comprehension, accuracy, attitudes towards reading, and generally “high averages in every measurement of study.”¹⁰ Frequent voluntary reading promotes positive experiences of reading: the *joy* of reading itself, it seems, is an innate effective pedagogical tool for language-learning.

⁴ For a full list of sociological research and reports, cf. Krashen’s collected references (Ibid., 157–88) as well as his first chapter (Ibid., 1-55) entitled “The Research.”

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Susan B. Neuman and Donna Celano, “Access to Print in Low-Income and Middle-Income Communities: An Ecological Study of Four Neighborhoods,” *Read. Res. Q.* 36.1 (2001): 24. They continue: “Once children are in public schools, the problem often becomes exacerbated through remedial instruction that exposes less skilled children to fewer interactions with text than their more skilled peers, providing them ultimately with the very poorest language and literacy instruction. Such unrewarding experiences in reading multiply, with the consequence that children attend less to the comprehensibility of reading, its purpose, and its potential usefulness” (Ibid.). This includes access to all forms of print, including logographic signs (road signs, business marquees, etc).

⁷ Becky McTague and Barbara Abrams, “Access to Books: A Scaffolded Program Creates Readers,” *Read. Improv.* 48.1 (2011): 10.

⁸ Namhee Suk, “The Effects of Extensive Reading on Reading Comprehension, Reading Rate, and Vocabulary Acquisition,” *Read. Res. Q.* 52.1 (2017): 73–89.

⁹ Nicole Whitehead, “The Effects of Increased Access to Books on Student Reading Using the Public Library,” *Read. Improv.* 41.3 (2004): 173.

¹⁰ Ibid., 174. Particularly, those with library cards were more likely to visit the library outside of school, leading to the presence of more printed materials in the home. Conversely, “students without library cards reported visiting the library almost 50% less frequently with a family member than those with cards. In short, students without library cards had the lowest report of average time spent reading in the home, few titles for voluntary reading in the home, lower DRA scores...Library card ownership clearly has a significant impact on student reading” (Ibid.).

Books and Literacy

Next, our attention turns to literacy. Here too, recent research grants insight: literacy is likely to improve with greater access to printed material. After all, one needs to be *literate* to read a book.¹¹ Krashen argues that FVR is “the only way to develop literacy.” Access to vast quantities of written material is meaningless without increasing *ability to read*. One researcher concluded after one study, that “access to books is critical to becoming a good reader.”¹² Literacy improves with practice. Brussel makes the argument that “It has been well documented that children read more when books are made available to them.”¹³ Krashen has proposed “the Reading Hypothesis,” which asserts that reading comprehension, writing style, grammar, spelling, vocabulary, are improved by frequent FVR. Reading is a skill. Like any skill, practice leads to proficiency.

Increased literacy is itself extremely valuable. The *Encyclopedia of Social Problems* proposes benefits, both individual and communal, specifically among adult citizens of developing nations as five-fold:

- 1) “Improved *productivity* at work, at home, and in the community, leading to higher tax bases for communities, decreased violence at home and in the community, and greater participation in citizenship activities by a larger segment of the adult population”;
- 2) “Improved *self-confidence* and other psychological and physiological aspects of health of adults, including activities that will help the brain grow throughout adulthood and contribute to reduced medical costs for adults as they age;”
- 3) “Improved *health* of children as a result of adults learning in adult education programs, leading to better prenatal and postnatal care, reductions in low birth weight infants, and better home medical care, thereby contributing to lowered medical costs for children and fewer learning problems in school”;
- 4) “Improved *social justice* from providing literacy education for marginalized populations to permit them to acquire skills and knowledge needed to take political action that allows them to achieve their civil rights and to overcome social exclusion and join in the mainstream of society;”
- 5) “Improved *productivity* in the schools by providing adults with the knowledge they need to better prepare their children to enter school, help them achieve in school, encourage them to stay in school, and increase their opportunities to enroll in higher education.”¹⁴

¹¹ Granted this is an arguable point in oral cultures where a great deal of learning is aural. However, if this is the case, simply jump to the last section—the *value of books* themselves. In either case, access to books is still at issue. Krashen defines literacy as “the ability to read and write on a basic level” (Krashen, *The Power of Reading*, ix).

¹² McTague and Abrams, “Access to Books,” 3. Cf. Danny Brassell, “Creating a Culturally Sensitive Classroom Library,” *Read. Teach.* 52.6 (1999): 651–53; Whitehead, “The Effects of Increased Access to Books on Student Reading Using the Public Library;” Neuman and Celano, “Access to Print in Low-Income and Middle-Income Communities: An Ecological Study of Four Neighborhoods.”

¹³ Brassell, “Creating a Culturally Sensitive Classroom Library.” Simply, Brassell writes, “[S]tudents read more when they had more books in their library.”

¹⁴ Thomas G. Sticht, “Illiteracy, Adult in Developing Nations,” in *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*, by Vincent Parrillo (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008). This information is garnered from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) tracking the progress of nations around the globe in achieving higher rates of adult literacy over a period of more than 60 years” (Ibid.).

Who can argue with such a vast and far-reaching list? Literacy unlocks an individual's potential as a citizen, encouraging the thriving of their local communities and families. By the literacy of its individuals, whole nations may flourish and grow. Infrastructure is implemented and developed, and, on the whole, life is better.¹⁵

The Value of Reading

With increased access to written material, readers become better and more avid readers. The final question, at the heart of this study, is *what is the value of reading?* Kaestle and Radway summarize the deep personal and sociological impact the act of reading can have on an individual:

“Reading...is a richly layered practice in which readers engage deliberately and intentionally, but which is often unconsciously shaped by the context in which it occurs. Consequently, it has both multiple and unintended effects, only some of which are noticeable at the time of reading. Others, however, operate in subterranean, undetected fashion; their consequences can only be discerned over time...The study of reading, it must be remembered, is always in some sense rereading—one must always know who reads, why, where and to what end.”¹⁶

Altbach, after analyzing the effect and status of the worldwide publishing industry, makes the case that even in a digital age, “[books] remain central to the development and distribution of knowledge.”¹⁷ He explains: “Knowledge, without question, is a key to freedom, development and autonomy. And knowledge distribution is a necessary part of achieving these important goals.”¹⁸ This is the “end” of reading. In this sense, discussing the impact of books is akin to contemplating the impact of *knowledge* itself. Altbach argues that the proliferation of localized indigenous publishing and literary institutions is essential for the “quest for intellectual independence”¹⁹ in Majority World nations. He summarizes his exhortation:

“Third World publishers...have the potential of building effective knowledge industries which can serve specific local needs and perhaps have a regional relevance within the context of the international networks. Careful planning, sufficient infrastructures, and of course a domestic or regional market that can support books and journals are all necessary. Large expenditures of capital are not required—human skill and willingness to carve out a niche in an infinitely varied intellectual landscape are the prerequisites.”²⁰

¹⁵ An example of this phenomenon can be seen in Robert D. Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 106.2 (2012): 244–274, who argues that “historically and statistically that conversionary Protestants (CPs) heavily influenced the rise and spread of stable democracy around the world” (Ibid., 1) especially through printed and written means (newspapers, tracts, etc.).

¹⁶ Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway, “Reading in Situ,” in *Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880–1940*, ed. Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway, vol. 4, *A History of the Book in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 475.

¹⁷ Philip G. Altbach, *The Knowledge Context: Comparative Perspectives on the Distribution of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., xviii.

¹⁹ Ibid., 25.

²⁰ Ibid., xvii–xviii.

Surely, then, if the very *act* of reading is beneficial for the development of the individual, and by consequence, the community in which that individual, alongside other individuals benefiting from the act of reading, reside, then reading itself must be strongly promoted. However, we must note that the *content* of what is read will irreducibly shape the individual involved in the act of reading.

Of all literature, history has seen no greater impact on the world than the impact of the Bible. Those conversionary missionaries who spread Christianity by teaching the Bible “advocated mass literacy so that everyone could read the Bible and interpret it competently.”²¹ Woodberry claims that “much statistical research suggests that [this] formal education increased both the level of democracy and the stability of democratic transitions,” in turn “influencing class structure by dispersing education to women and the poor, making texts widely available, spawning civil society among non-elites, and moderating abuses of power—with demonstrable economic and political consequences.”²² There is no doubt that the Bible has radically affected the societies of the world.

This is hardly surprising to one who publishes Christian literature, as the Scriptures claim themselves to be “words of life”—the very words of God Himself. Merely skimming Psalm 19 is enough to astound one with its claimed capabilities and value: they are “perfect, reviving the soul... trustworthy, making wise the simply... right, bringing joy to the heart... clear, giving insight for living... more desirable than gold, even the finest gold.” (Psa. 19:7–8, 9b–10). Surely, the act of reading Scripture—both as God’s Word and as literature—carries clear compounded benefits.

Statistical research has demonstrated time and time again that reading is intensely formative. It reaps action. A Changana proverb from Mozambique says, *Loku ungha tsamanga u djondza, ungha yimi u djondzissa*, meaning “If you do not sit down to learn, do not stand up to teach.” Learners, readers uniquely, become impactful teachers. Thorough research has concluded that reading, particularly FVR, provides a powerfully formative experience, through which individuals and communities are impacted for the better.

We return to Krashen’s insight: “Studies showing that reading enhances literacy development lead to what should be an uncontroversial conclusion: *reading is good for you.*”²³

Bradley Cameron is a graduate student at Wheaton College, earning a M.A. in Biblical Exegesis in December of 2017. He received his Bachelor’s degree in Bible from Biola University.

²¹ Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” 251.

²² Ibid.

²³ Krashen, *The Power of Reading*, 37.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altbach, Philip G. *The Knowledge Context: Comparative Perspectives on the Distribution of Knowledge*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.
- Brassell, Danny. "Creating a Culturally Sensitive Classroom Library." *Read. Teach.* 52.6 (1999): 651–53.
- Kaestle, Carl F., and Janice A. Radway. "Reading in Situ." Pages 471–475 in *Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880–1940*. Edited by Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway. Vol. 4. *A History of the Book in America*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Obama's Secret to Surviving the White House Years: Books." *The New York Times*, January 16, 2017.
- Krashen, Stephen. *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. Englewood: ABC-CLIO, 2004.
- Lincoln, Abraham. "Address Before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society." *Literary Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Edited by Carl Van Doren and John Steuart Curry. New York: Heritage Press, 1942.
- McTague, Becky, and Barbara Abrams. "Access to Books: A Scaffolded Program Creates Readers." *Read. Improv.* 48.1 (2011): 3–13.
- Neuman, Susan B., and Donna Celano. "Access to Print in Low-Income and Middle-Income Communities: An Ecological Study of Four Neighborhoods." *Read. Res. Q.* 36.1 (2001): 8–26.
- Sticht, Thomas G. "Illiteracy, Adult in Developing Nations." *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*. By Vincent Parrillo. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008.
- Suk, Namhee. "The Effects of Extensive Reading on Reading Comprehension, Reading Rate, and Vocabulary Acquisition." *Read. Res. Q.* 52.1 (2017): 73–89.
- Whitehead, Nicole. "The Effects of Increased Access to Books on Student Reading Using the Public Library." *Read. Improv.* 41.3 (2004): 165.
- Woodberry, Robert D. "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy." *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 106.2 (2012): 244–274.