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## Eliminating Book Deserts through Community Engagement

### About the Author(s)

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### Cover Page Footnote

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## **Eliminating Book Deserts through Community Engagement**

Tiffany A. Flowers, Georgia State University Perimeter College

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this commentary is to discuss equity and advocacy regarding book deserts for children in urban schools. This commentary includes a critical review of the research literature, practical considerations for eliminating book deserts in schools, and developing a long-term community engagement program to resolve book deserts.

*Key Words:* Book deserts, urban areas, community engagement

### **Introduction**

*“According to existing research, in some urban school districts, there is one age-appropriate book for every 300 children.”-Dr. Neuman & Dr. Moland, 2016.*

When Dr. Neuman and Dr. Moland illuminated book deserts as a critical issue in 2016, the initial research study caused professionals around the U.S. and especially literacy professors to realize that more must be done to combat book deserts. The reality of this inequity is both startling and unbelievable on the surface. Most people go into schools and see books in the library and classrooms and automatically think that all children have ample access to books. However, what most average citizens do not know is that not all schools have libraries or media centers. There are even some schools without a media specialist. Also, not all schools have media centers/libraries that have quality print copies of books. Additionally, some classrooms and school libraries/media centers may not have an adequate number of titles on the shelves. Further, there is no set formula or number of books that schools are required to have which signals that

school districts are planning to eliminate book deserts. Therefore, the number of available books within every single classroom within a school district varies depending on either a savvy administrator or a teacher's ability to get donations, grants, and free books for their classroom. Within schools, some classrooms could have over 2,000 books, and other classrooms where the only books include the student edition reading book. Considering how this reality will or can impact the literacy experiences of children, education professionals and policymakers must address this type of inequity to eliminate book deserts within urban schools.

### Critical Review of the Research Literature

#### *Why book deserts can cause savage inequalities*

Jonathan Kozol (1991) many decades ago highlighted the savage inequalities within schools describing them as warehouses for children. His work highlighting inequity within schools is just as salient today as the year his work was published. As we read in the news each year about more budget cuts regarding schools being proposed, literacy professionals must voice their concerns about the savage inequalities which exist regarding equity and literacy. The silence regarding this issue speaks to a reality of literacy professionals feeling powerless and complacent with the current system or angry and looking for alternative ways to get the resources to help children. I contend that it is noble to try to help as many children as possible under these often-adverse conditions. As a former early childhood educator, I wrote many grants, did book drives, and scoured thrift stores looking for books as well. However, what is needed is an overhaul of the current system which creates these systematic and savage inequalities.

#### *Who is impacted by book deserts?*

Book deserts make teaching more difficult for teachers in urban areas without access to books or funds to buy books. However, make no mistake in thinking otherwise, the people held

most accountable for book deserts within schools are the students. When children do not have access to books, are compared academically alongside children who have had access to thousands of books for a minimum of a least 4-6 years from Pre-K through Grade 5. By the time children reach the middle grades, they are often 2-3 grade levels behind their peers who have had access to texts. This is something that can impact children's reading scores and their overall development as lifelong readers. As literacy professionals, we must ask ourselves why there is an expectation that children will do well on standardized tests, and develop as readers in school, and as lifelong readers when they do not have access to ample reading opportunities and books which make this possible.

In 2016, I wrote a guest blog post about what it means to be a Black male living in a book desert and how this can impact learning. One year later, the national center for education statistics released scores regarding males and reading. Black males in 4th and 8th grade scored below all other racial groups in reading within the United States (U.S. Department of Education, IES/NCES, 2017/2019). Since a substantial number of Black male students reside in book deserts, this is an area of research and community engagement that must be addressed by literacy professionals. The building blocks of literacy include exposure to print, access to books, hours read aloud, access to various genres, independent reading, and of course literacy instruction (Allington, 2001; Beers, 2003; Snow, Griffin, Burns, 2005). However, the vast number of studies about Black males and literacy are solely focused on special education placement, the achievement gap, and literacy instruction in phonics. There are few if any studies that highlight African American males and their experiences with or access to books (Hunter, 2012; Rumble, 2013; Scullin, 2020). If we want to see a change in these systemic practices, we must change the nature and output of literacy research regarding Black males and access to books.

*Why must literacy professionals prioritize eliminating book deserts?*

Richard Allington (2001) penned a salient text addressing years of work he did with struggling readers, entitled, *What really matters for struggling readers?* The most salient recommendation within his work was that readers who struggle, need to spend most of the day reading. Struggling readers need books to read, browse, research, practice, and enjoy books. The underlying message in his work for both teachers and the readers within their classrooms was that books for children who are learning to read, matter. This sentiment was echoed by other researchers in the field as well who center their work on ensuring that the field of literacy emphasizes why children are struggling and use research directly tied to children and reading to address this issue. However, the research falls short in this area.

Call for Research and Practice

In the past six years since Neuman & Moland, (2016) study, there have been few if any research studies related to book deserts. Most of the published work on book deserts includes blogs, editorials, Op-Ed pieces, book chapters, and crowdsourced campaigns (Cobb, 2016; Flowers, 2016/2018/2019/2020; Miller, 2019/2020; Martell, 2017). The qualitative and quantitative research in this area is lacking as well as the calls for policies to end this persistent reality. The research in this area should include ethnographic studies of changing book deserts in a community. Longitudinal studies look at how book deserts impact student achievement and access within a community. Also, more research is needed on the distinct types of book deserts that exist within communities. This could include communities not having access to degreed literacy professionals and lack of access to books.

*Partnerships to Eliminate Book Deserts*

Jim Trelease penned one of the most important books regarding access to literacy, *The Read Aloud Handbook*. Before he retired, Mr. Trelease shifted his interest from solely discussing read aloud, to making access to books the norm within schools. He spent time centering on teaching school principals and teachers what it meant to develop a well-rounded, bountiful, and attractive school that provided books in every corner of the school. As literacy professionals, concentrating on the development of readers, book deserts should be a top priority. Not only should teacher educators know about book deserts, but the research regarding this issue should also be added to the canon of research regarding equity, early literacy, and access. Colleges and universities can either establish local or state initiatives with state legislatures to resolve this issue. Or develop a long-term plan with professional development schools in urban areas to set up model classrooms. Once model classrooms are established, this should become the norm of what a classroom or school should look like. Schools that do not have a similar plan or model in place should not be classified as quality schools. The fact that many schools which reside in book deserts are classified in this manner, with so many children lacking access to books, is a questionable practice.

### Practical Considerations

When eliminating book deserts at the school, district, and community level, it is important to emphasize five key issues: (a) A Community goal; (b) Drop-off locations; (c) Criteria for text selection; (d) Equitable distribution of texts; and (e) the longevity of the project. These factors will help to solidify the project. Additionally, this helps people who participate understand that this project has actual goals which can impact the students who receive books. *The community goal* allows community partners to help establish a reasonable and achievable goal. This could include starting with collecting 5,000 books. *Drop-off locations* are

also key to the success of the project. There must be several locations where people can easily donate texts for the project. *Criteria for texts* should be created by the school sites. This could include either a pre-existing list of books to donate or books that include a theme. The criteria could also include the appropriate grade/reading levels for the students. *The equitable distribution of texts* to partnering schools is a key component of this project. All schools need ample texts to eliminate book deserts within schools and communities. Finally, *the longevity of the project* is a necessary component to ensure that this project is not a simple book drive once per year. Eliminating book deserts should be a culture change for schools that are in dire need of texts. As educators begin to eliminate book deserts through partnerships, below is a planning sheet for book deserts to help organizers develop programs at their local school sites:

ELIMINATING BOOK DESERTS PROJECT PLANNING SHEET

**Year 1:**

**Community Project Goal:** The goal of this project is to collect \_\_\_\_\_ per year.

**Community Partners/Stakeholders:**

**Drop-off Locations for Project:**

**Partnering Schools:**

**Book Delivery:**

**Social media hashtag:**

**Main Project Contacts:**

**Additional Project Logistics:**

### Future Recommendations

There are many promising projects underway to eliminate book deserts. However, it is up to colleges and universities to link up with nonprofit initiatives to expand and study the effectiveness of these initiatives. Many colleges and universities may find it expedient to also start a long-term initiative within the communities where they reside. Further, researching book deserts in rural areas can also better inform our knowledge and practices regarding book deserts. As inequitable school and library funding continue to be a major problem in the United States, book deserts will continue to persist.

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