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OP-ED COLUMNIST; The Medium Is the Medium

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Recently, book publishers got some good news. Researchers gave 852 disadvantaged students 12 books (of their own choosing) to take home at the end of the school year. They did this for three successive years.

Then the researchers, led by Richard Allington of the University of Tennessee, looked at those students' test scores. **They found that the students who brought the books home had significantly higher reading scores than other students.** These students were less affected by the "summer slide" -- the decline that especially afflicts lower-income students during the vacation months. In fact, just having those 12 books seemed to have as much positive effect as attending summer school.

This study, along with many others, illustrates the tremendous power of books. We already knew, from research in 27 countries, that kids who grow up in a home with 500 books stay in school longer and do better. This new study suggests that introducing books into homes that may not have them also produces significant educational gains. ...

....But there was one interesting observation made by a philanthropist who gives books to disadvantaged kids. **It's not the physical presence of the books that produces the biggest impact, she suggested. It's the change in the way the students see themselves as they build a home library. They see themselves as readers, as members of a different group.**

A person who becomes a citizen of the literary world enters a hierarchical universe. There are classic works of literature at the top and beach reading at the bottom. A person enters this world as a novice, and slowly studies the works of great writers and scholars. Readers immerse themselves in deep, alternative worlds and hope to gain some lasting wisdom. Respect is paid to the writers who transmit that wisdom.