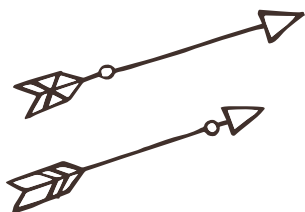
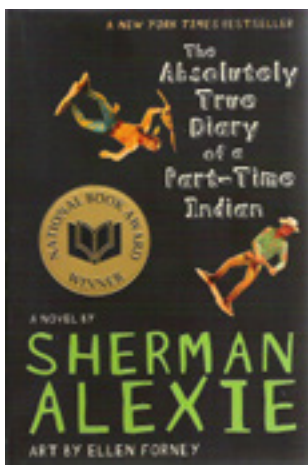


# THE POWER OF FIVE HUNDRED BOOKS

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An interesting unintended consequence of being bullied and reading a lot as a result can be found in Sherman Alexie's (2007) autobiographical novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* where Arnold, the Alexie character in this book stays in his bedroom and reads books to avoid the bullying he receives on the Spokane Indian Reservation because of his stuttering, lisp and other physical disabilities. When Arnold, changes schools from the Indian high school on the reservation to the white high school off the reservation to take advantage of its more rigorous curriculum, it is his extensive reading at home that helps him survive academically.

Stephen Krashen (2004) in his book, *The Power of Reading*, reviews the research that shows that students who read a lot build larger vocabularies that allow them

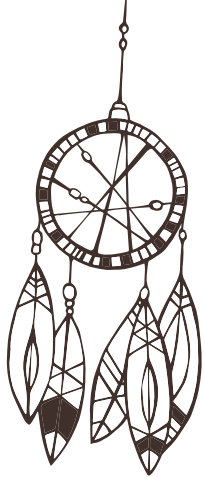
to be more successful in school, and he emphasizes the importance of finding reading material for youth that engages their interests. Luis J. Rodriguez (1994), in his autobiography *Always Running*, describes storming out of a high school literature class because the teachers insisted he read

Wordsworth's *Preludes* instead of Beatrice Griffith's *American Me*, which dealt with his Mexican heritage. More recently the use of high interest

STUDENTS WHO READ A LOT BUILD LARGER VOCABULARIES THAT ALLOW THEM TO BE MORE SUCCESSFUL IN SCHOOL, AND HE EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF FINDING READING MATERIAL FOR YOUTH THAT ENGAGES THEIR INTERESTS.

—STEPHEN KRASHEN (2004)

curriculum material can be seen in the success of the Tucson Public Schools ethnic studies program as shown in the documentary film *Precious Knowledge* (2011), where the high school graduation rate of Hispanic students nearly doubled for those who participation in the ethnic studies program.



"GROWING UP IN A HOME WITH 500 BOOKS WOULD PROPEL A CHILD 3.2 YEARS FURTHER IN EDUCATION, ON AVERAGE, THAN WOULD GROWING UP IN AN OTHERWISE SIMILAR HOME WITH FEW OR NO BOOKS"

Using books like Rodriguez's *Always Running* and Alexie's more humorous *Absolutely True Diary* can both motivate

students to read more and also to negotiate cultural conflicts they may face if they are ethnic minorities. As Krashen documents, a book rich environment is crucial to student success. Evans, Kelley, Sikora and Treiman (2010) pooled data from 27 countries and found that "Growing up in a home with 500 books would propel a child 3.2 years further in education, on average, than would growing up in an otherwise similar home with few or no books" and "A child from a 500-book family is 36 percentage points more likely to graduate from *high school* than an otherwise similar child without a home library" (pp. 179–180, emphasis in original). Of course, the number of books in a home is highly correlated with family income, since a single book can represent two hours or more wages for a minimum wage worker in the United States. However, even when family income was taken into account, children with more books in the home, on average, received more schooling. While homes with 500 books in them probably include many children's books, it is the scholarly home culture these books represent that influences children to see schooling as more important in their lives. Evans' and his colleagues' research points to the critical importance for classroom, school and public libraries stocked with books that students can relate to and find interesting, especially when they are growing up in poverty and have little reading material at home (Reyhner & Cockrum, 2015).

Additionally it has been known for decades that children learn best in school when they learn to read in the language they bring with them from home. ★

UNESCO published *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* in 1953. In their introduction the authors declare, "It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue" (p. 11) and they conclude,

*On educational grounds we recommend that the mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. In particular pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue, because they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible.*

*We consider that the shock which the young child undergoes in passing from his home to his school life is so great that everything possible should be done to soften it....*

*The use of the mother tongue will promote better understanding between the home and the school when the child is taught in the language of the home. (pp. 47–48)*

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## About the Author

**Jon Reyhner** is a Professor of Education at Northern Arizona University. He taught and was a school administrator in Indian schools for over a decade. He has written extensively on American Indian education and Indigenous language revitalization and served as a commissioned author for the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force. His most recent books are *Teaching Indigenous Students: Honoring Place, Community and Culture* (University of Oklahoma, 2015) and *Honoring Our Elders: Culturally appropriate Approaches for Teaching Indigenous Students* (Northern Arizona University, 2015). He maintains a Teaching Indigenous Languages web site at <http://nau.edu/til>.

