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Steve Krashen on how the rich get richer. Those who are rich in literacy fortify their children with good stories and beautiful books long before they enter school; the poor readers don't even understand that process and so perpetuate illiteracy from generation to generation.² Now, having no invitation to intervene, I was forced to witness this true life drama of what Krashen calls how "the poor get poorer."

Having already repeated the 1st grade, Mitzi was facing the dreaded prospect of failing the 2nd, due to poor performance in language arts. Her mother was an adult nonreader. "I can read the words," she had explained, "but when it comes to explaining it, it's just like a wall goes up, and I can't say what I mean." By a wall going up, I'd immediately figured she was talking about stress, the *Affective Filter*³ that stops learning and performance. But Mitzi's mom meant instead that she couldn't comprehend text. I was there to help her learn to read when Mitzi had come home from school. Not knowing

whether the child knew why I was visiting her mom, and having gotten no introduction, I was not free to move in on the mother/daughter ritual that served only to teach Mitzi that schoolwork is tough and she is never able to do it well.

Krashen had lectured about the ease with which students accustomed to print-rich environments breeze through schoolwork on words they had already learned through pleasure reading. "Those who are readers typically know

what most of the words mean already. They have seen them before, in Judy Blume's novels or in Dungeons and Dragons. . . ."⁴ Meanwhile, children from nonprint homes and classrooms are left to flesh out the loser's end of the bell-shaped curve. When children of the literate elite need help, their parents can fill in the blanks the school has missed. When children of the print poor need help, they have nowhere to turn. The girl who already knows 9 of the 10 assigned spelling words from pleasure reading will make a 100 percent if she studies the 1 unknown word and 90 percent if she does nothing. The girl who can't read will be faced with 10 new words, an almost overwhelming task of memorization. If she really struggles, she'll earn a C-. In school, that is how the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. They'll imagine that if they had just studied a little harder or worked a little longer they would have done better. "And like the victims of child abuse, they blame themselves."⁵ I'd heard the lecture . . . more than once. School is a test . . . to see who already knows the most and to see whose parents can do the best job. Now I was witnessing the demonstration.

From One Generation to the Next

After 30 or 45 minutes of guesswork, Mitzi ran out to play, knowing that her faithful mother would be waiting to help her with another hour and a half of homework when she came in.⁶ She couldn't know that the production of sentences is a test, a call for *output* that shows what the reader already knows; output is simply anything the learner can say or write. Sentence production was not *input* designed to give the new or nonreader information.⁷ Based on what is understandable and relevant to the learner, input becomes acquired without learner effort. Nor could Mitzi's mom know that this assignment was difficult because it employed a bottom-up strategy. It required that the

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- Motivation*: wanting to do it.
- Effort*: being willing to work hard.
- Responsibility*: doing what's right.
- Initiative*: moving into action.
- Perseverance*: completing what you start.
- Caring*: showing concern for others.
- Teamwork*: working with others.
- Common sense*: using good judgment.
- Problem solving*: putting what you know and what you can do into action.

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