

# Monopolizing Reading

## An Analysis of Scholastic Book Clubs' Place in American Education and Commerce

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### Introduction

Scholastic Book Clubs are a pervasive presence in elementary education, and now reach 80% of all American schoolchildren. These Clubs use schools and teachers as a venue to directly sell books to children and families. Every month, teachers voluntarily distribute order forms for books to their students. The students take the forms home, have their parents enclose checks for the books the students want, and return them to their teachers. After teachers mail in the forms, they'll receive a box of books for their students in a few weeks.

Despite the near-ubiquity of these Clubs throughout much of the U.S., they are nonetheless functioning as a private enterprise in a public school system, and therefore merit close examination to see what effects they really have on children. This thesis thoroughly explores the impacts of Scholastic Book Clubs, and what they have come to mean in today's classrooms and education economy.

### Methods

This thesis draws from a combination of secondary and primary sources to paint as full a picture of Scholastic Book Clubs as possible. My secondary research draws on educational theory, historical analysis, and market analysis to put the roles of the Clubs into a larger context.

To ground these discussions in the real experiences people have with Scholastic Book Clubs, I conducted a "Survey on Teachers and Scholastic Book Clubs." I collected responses from 98 K-12 teachers, drawn from elementary schools in Providence RI, Wellesley MA, and the alumni network of Brown Masters-in-Teaching graduates. This selection strategy ensured socioeconomic diversity in the classrooms sampled, an essential consideration given the financial issues the Book Clubs raise.

The body of this survey assessed what factors motivated teachers in their decisions about distributing Scholastic Book Clubs, both in favor of and against the Clubs. Teachers would first be asked to mark which motivations influenced them; teachers then would rank each of them on a scale of 1 to 5 of importance. Teachers also had space to indicate demographic data and leave open comments on their experiences with the Clubs.

### The Case for Scholastic Book Clubs

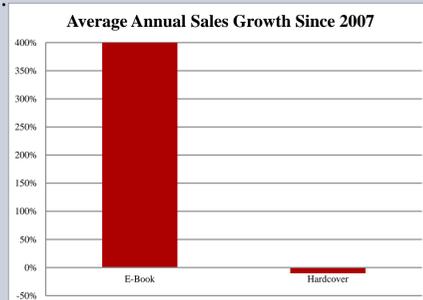
Scholastic Book Clubs enable students to choose books that interest them at low costs, and boost the perception of books as desirable products. These benefits in turn drive students to read more books, an essential component of most literacy programs. The Book Clubs also financially benefit classrooms through their "points" system.

Why do you distribute Scholastic Book Clubs to your students?	%
To give my students access to more books	91%
To boost student interest in reading	84%
To earn "points" from Scholastic for my own classroom purchases	82%
To support student literacy	77%
To give my students access to cheaper books	74%
Because I remember that I enjoyed ordering from Scholastic when I was a student	59%
Because someone in my school gives these forms to all teachers	10%
Because someone in my school advises that we distribute these forms	1%

Teachers overwhelmingly acknowledged and assigned importance to these positive impacts of Scholastic Book Clubs.

### The Book Club Market in the Modern Context

By buying out other book club competitors, Scholastic Book Clubs have achieved a near monopoly: though they do not control all children's book sales, they do have complete control over book sales in schools, amplifying negative effects of racial underrepresentation and increasingly commercialization with the Clubs.

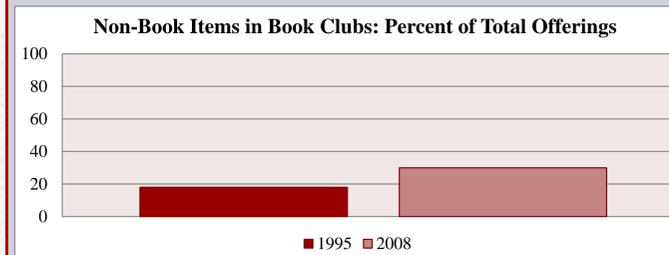


E-Books create a new distribution channel that can be more convenient for families than the Book Clubs, and offers similar low prices.

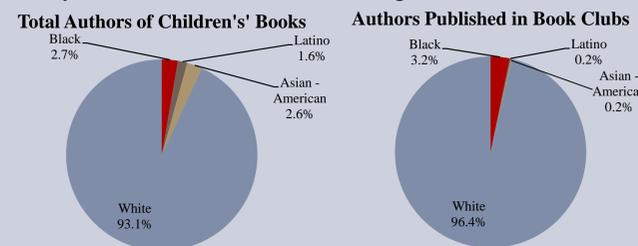


Several new "E-Book Clubs" have recently emerged, and may adapt successful aspects of Scholastic Book Clubs to these digital platforms. Many of these allow book sharing within a classroom and data tracking of student reading progress, which may overturn Scholastic's long-term dominance in the in-school book sale market.

### Arguments Against Scholastic Book Clubs



The methods of selling products through the Clubs fit into a trend of increasing commercialization of the classroom. In particular, the Clubs have increasingly sought to develop and sell profitable multimedia brands rather than just books, such as Harry Potter, Clifford, and the Hunger Games series.



The book selections of the Clubs underrepresent minority authors and characters, negatively impacting all students, especially those who cannot find people like themselves in the stories they read. As this country continues to grow more diverse, this issue of representation will affect more and more of our schoolchildren.

Reasons Against Distributing the Clubs	%
I think my students wouldn't be able to afford books from these forms	55%
I think my students wouldn't be interested in books from these forms	31%
I think materials sold in these forms have content that is inappropriate for my students	25%
I think the materials sold in these forms are not relevant for my students because of their age	22%
Collecting the forms is not a good use of classroom time	22%
I dislike the advertising and product placement in Scholastic Book Order forms	20%
I think the selection of materials in these forms reflects racial/cultural biases	18%
Schools should not be a place where students are sold things	9%

Teachers responded less actively to these concerns in the Survey on Teachers and Scholastic than they had to positive impacts of the Clubs. Many of them did indicate surprise at allegations of racial underrepresentation within the Book Clubs; those who did acknowledge this negative influence did later give it high significance scores.

### Conclusion

Though Scholastic Book Clubs have become ubiquitous in today's elementary schools on the basis of the literacy benefits, they still create an unintentional set of problematic impacts.

Going forward, the issues raised against Scholastic Book Clubs on the grounds of commercialization and racial underrepresentation are still all-too-real, and should be further addressed. Educators and parents should explore ways to supplement the offerings of the Book Clubs with more diverse literature selections to work around these issues of representation. Campaigns against commercial influences in Scholastic Book Clubs have proved successful so far; further campaigning on issues of commercialization as well as the selection of books for the Clubs could also help push the company to offer students a better Book Club.

Looking towards the future, the emergence of E-Book-clubs within the last year, offered both through schools and directly to families, could dramatically change the ways children access books. These models should be followed closely in upcoming years to see which, if any of them, take hold and begin to exert influence on the approach Scholastic Book Clubs take to their marketing and distribution, or fundamentally alter reading for children.

### Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I'd love to thank my advisor, Laura Snyder., who helped me drive this project to be all it could be. Similarly, thank you to my reader, Richard Meckel for driving my work towards excellence.

To my two academic advisors throughout this process, Malgorzata Rymysz-Pawlowska and Beverly Haviland, thank you for encouraging me to take on this challenging but rewarding mission, and to push myself to really explore all that the discipline of American Studies has to offer.