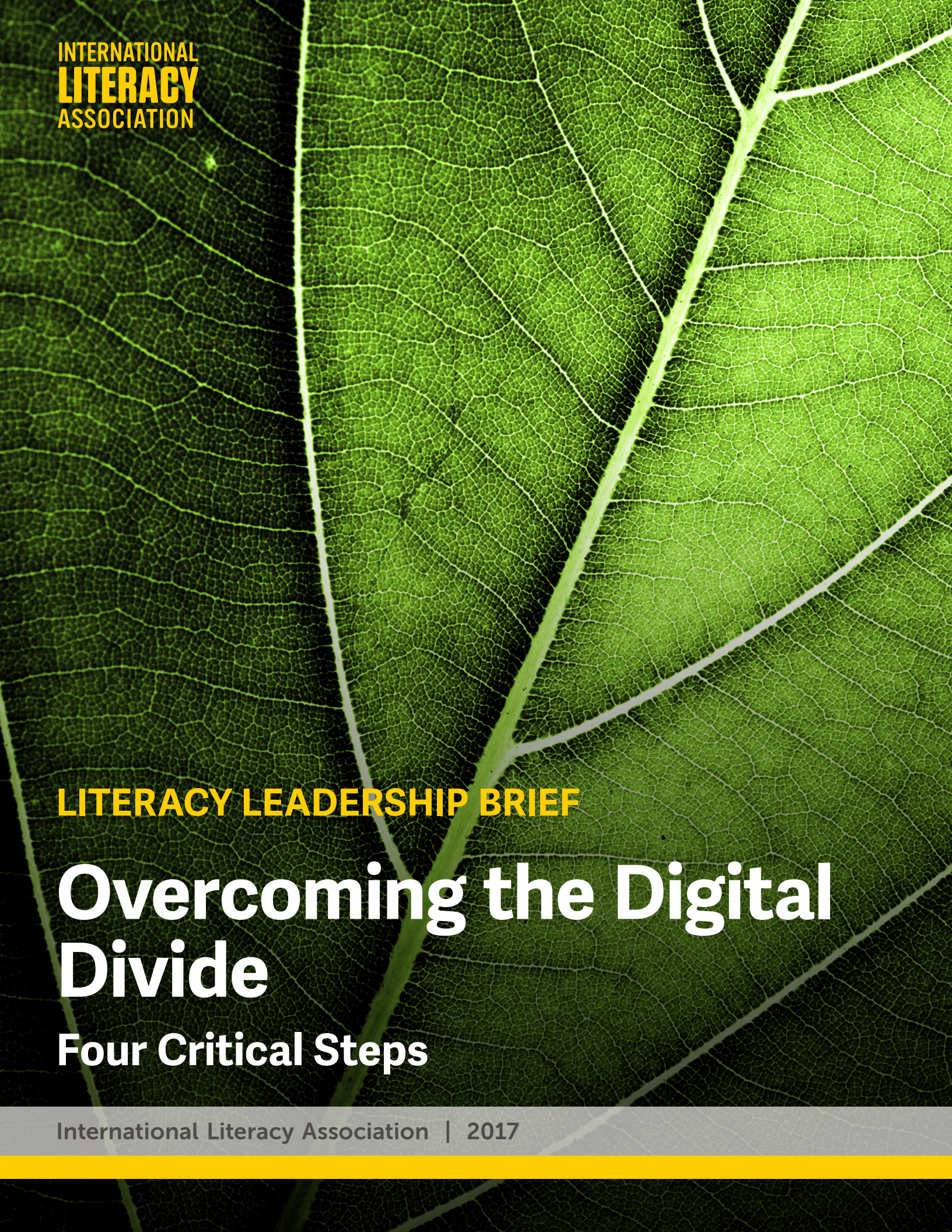

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION

LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Overcoming the Digital Divide

Four Critical Steps

International Literacy Association | 2017

The notion of digital literacies suggests a world where people have constant access to technologies, apps, videos, and social media that allow for exploration, knowledge work, and connections between people. But this assumption is simply not the reality for many, particularly students. Their reality is the gap between the haves and have-nots, the cans and the cannots.

With increasing attention to digital literacies—either celebrating or vilifying them—a tacit assumption that most people have liberal use of digital technologies and access to digital worlds has developed. But the hard truth is that people living in poverty do not have the same technological affordances as their middle class peers and often do not have access to and ownership of the technologies themselves. The possibilities for digitally driven futures become remote when students face challenges like no Wi-Fi, no technology or screen use and, in short, no way to keep up with other students in the class.

The hard truth is that people living in poverty do not have the same technological affordances as their middle class peers.

Misreading the Data

We are apt to focus on positive statistics such as the following:

- Three quarters of students have access to mobile devices at home.
- The number of students who have used mobile devices has nearly doubled since 2011.
- The average daily use of mobile devices has tripled from five to 15 minutes a day.

In doing so, we too easily forget how many people are not captured by these demographics. They are the silent populations who struggle to find ways, often intermittent, to keep up with their middle class peers. Indeed, the concept of a digital divide can itself be identified through a series of connected issues which include the following:

- Equitable access to hardware, software, the Internet, and technology support within schools
- Frequency of student technology use within the classroom and the purposes driving that usage
- Student capacity to use digital technology for personal empowerment

The following sections highlight several key factors that contribute to a digital divide across grade and age levels.

Low Socioeconomic Status

Teachers who have students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often assume that these students have no access to the Internet, so they avoid it in their pedagogy. When such students try to comprehend technology on the same level as their classmates, they fall twice as far behind because they have no access at home and no experience in class.

Students from rural, low-income households tend to have less access to digital technologies, causing lower comprehension and less skill development. This gap can be detrimental to their future careers as they try to compete in a technologically advanced society. It may also lead to lower levels of social advancement and poor academic achievement.

Productive Use and Effective Instruction

Although most research on the digital divide focuses on the relationship between low socioeconomic status and a lack of access to the Internet and technology, other, more complicated, issues exist, such as using technology productively and mobilizing digital, multimodal texts online effectively for academic performance.

In this context, academic performance represents the types of literacy practices that students learn in school that deal with working across different genres of text (formal, narrative, informational, and informal) and that involve different types of writing. The more exposure and practice students have with these multiple genres and different kinds of register, the more opportunities and mobility they will have in the future.

Schools can be device and access rich but still present serious digital divide issues because of weak or ineffective digital pedagogy.

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Race and Gender

Race and gender sometimes play a role in the nature of students' technology use, and sociodemographic statistics can

predict such discrepancies. The intensity, accessibility, and performance in the use of technologies have been found to impact academic performance.

Geography

Geography plays a role as well in fostering the digital divide. In parts of the world, there is inequitable access to more expensive technologies like smartphones and tablets, and more basic mobile phones are used for literacy practices. Less research on digital literacies in countries separated by the divide might suggest the absence of such practices—an assumption that bears critique, especially given the invisibility of many countries in the world that do not house their own presses.

Types of Devices

Careful attention must also be paid to the types of digital devices under consideration. Curiously enough, ownership of mobile devices by older teens does not vary significantly by racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic lines. However, most school assignments (e.g., essays, longer narratives, science lab reports) cannot be easily completed on a smartphone, and desktop computers and laptops are less accessible for students living in poverty.

The responsibility for overcoming the gap driven by the digital divide falls squarely on governments responsible for education policy.

Overcoming the Digital Divide

The responsibility for overcoming the gap driven by the digital divide falls squarely on governments responsible for education policy to provide the necessary professional development and infrastructure to support what teachers and schools need. Advance equity for all students across the world with these four immediately actionable steps:

1. Increase education funding to ensure that all students enjoy a parity of devices and online access
2. Critically frame what 21st-century literacy skills are and how pedagogy can change to incorporate more multimodal, digital ways of knowing
3. Provide resources for additional teacher training coupled with more expansive pedagogies for digital learning
4. Encourage literacy advocates to press these points to governmental entities and education policymakers with urgency and ceaseless effort

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International Literacy Association: Literacy Research Panel 2016–2017

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 75 countries. With 60 years of experience in the field, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* and *Reading Research Quarterly,* which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.

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