The influence of a historically disadvantaged background on reading culture: A case of some primary school language teaching educators in Eastern Cape Province

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**A B S T R A C T**

This article discusses the influence of historically disadvantaged background on the culture of reading in some primary school learners from a school district. Investigation for this article was administrated through a qualitative research approach, assisting in attaining first-hand information directly from the participants, thereby generating nonnumerical data. Embedded in this qualitative investigation was a case study design. As qualitative research concentrates on acquiring a comprehended understanding of how individuals perceive lived experiences, the main purpose of entrenching a case study was to dig deep into the in-depth descriptions coupled with the personal experiences of the subjects. It draws from semi-structured interviews conducted with primary school language teachers. The interview schedule specifically designed for this inquiry contained open-ended question types. During interviews, recordings were made in their natural settings through interacting with each participant. Data coding and analysis were informed by the iterative approach. The main findings of this investigation indicate that (i) teaching reading remains one of the basic skills in learning but was (ii) compromised by the lack of reading material, stemming from the disadvantaged background of the studied schools. Also, though motivation by parents seems to yield good results, there seemed to be (iii) a lack of influence and intervention strategies regarding available resources in the learners’ homes. I argue that family background does correlate (have an impact on learner reading ability) with learners’ reading ability. I conclude and propose that teachers need to employ teaching and learning methods that accommodate various cultural notions learners bring to school, as this is likely to impart positively on their academic performance.

**Introduction**

Al-Hoorie and Vitta (2019) once asked if why do the socially privileged have better academic skills and thus greater academic success. This is a profound question with no simple answer (Lamont & Lareau, 1988), which I also deem fit to be raised. Hence, in this article I explore and discuss the influence of a historically disadvantaged background on the culture of reading in some primary school learners in the Eastern Cape Province. In their article, Bantwini and Feza (2017) asked if democracy has become a beacon of hope to all school types in South Africa (SA). They draw our attention to the preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), which emphasises the recognition of past injustices committed by the apartheid regime that affected a large part of the South African population. The author thus endeavours to continue the debate by reflecting on the past injustices and their continued role when it comes to developing the culture of reading under the new democratic epoch (Swain & Watanabe, 2012).

In Davis’ (2016) view, success, especially among learners in primary schools, depends on cultivating good reading habits. Reading is viewed as a multifaceted process that involves word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation (Leipzig, 2001). In concurrence, Cziko, Greenleaf, Hurwitz and Schoenbach (2000) state that reading is a complex process of problem-solving in which the reader works to make sense of a text, not just from the words and sentences on the page but also from the ideas, memories and...
knowledge evoked by those words and sentences. In Stricevic’s (2008) point of view, a culture of reading is defined as a total of reading habits and interest in reading as well as a process, and not a final achieved condition. This entails continued development and progression from one level to the next as learners continue to read and expand their knowledge. Kalman (2008, cited by Melero, Villacón & Inzquierdo-Magaldi, 2020), proclaims that reading is an important cultural instrument and social practice that allows people to learn throughout their lifetime, and what is more, to do so autonomously. Thus, reading ability, as literature aptly indicates, can have a significant influence on both academic achievement and further personal development of learners (Herbers, Cutuli, Supkoff, Heistad, Chan & Hinz, 2012; Reed, Petscher & Truckenmiller, 2017). A reading culture, as Weller (2010) avers, is at the heart of learning at primary schools and allows learners to capably interpret and draw conclusions from their reading.

According to Kalman (2008), access to literacy is accomplished through interaction with other readers and writers, and the appropriation of discourses. Thus, if learners are encouraged by their society and surrounding family members to read maximally for all the allocated subjects, they can be proficient, fluent and successful scholars who can compete worldwide. It is therefore, as I believe and later argue, not surprising that learner’s home background is an important aspect in learning. In Marton’s (2015) view, for a better understanding of a culture of reading, the community has to take into consideration motivating young children towards culture of reading. Several studies have also shown that personal characteristics, family background and family socioeconomic status are key factors affecting learners’ reading ability and academic achievement (Brozo, 2014; Chiu & Chow, 2015; Cull, 2011; Winter, 2014).

Despite its notably significance, reading remains one of the most complex and unique cognitive activities of humans, especially for learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Bornstein and Bradley (2014) state that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds around South Africa have problems in reading and communication skills, while learners from developed countries (suburban advantaged) score significantly higher marks than those from developing countries. The extent of the reading challenge has been cited even by developed countries. As an example, Herbers et al. (2012) indicate that the issue of reading proficiency has always been of concern among Malaysian teachers, academics, and Ministry of Education officials because learners’ lack of proficiency in reading deprived them of the opportunities open to those who were able to read well. Literature has advanced several factors that complicate the reading process (Herbers et al., 2012; Kim, Kim, Wagaman & Fong, 2017; Melero et al., 2020). One of these factors include that some learners do not have books to read when at home and neither do they have access to a wide range of reading material generally (Dixson, Keltner, Worrell & Mello, 2017). Furthermore, underperformance and lack of skills in communicating are some of the factors believed to be the result of learners being unable to read (Dixson et al., 2017). Some of the reviewed literature shows that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have difficulty understanding written texts, and few can express themselves in simple conversation, as reading, writing and speaking are aspects that one cannot separate (Kim, Brown, Kim & Fong, 2018).

Notwithstanding the vast knowledge from other countries regarding reading culture (Hannah, 2021), not much has been documented in South Africa, especially in the province where the reported study regarding the influence of a disadvantaged background on the culture of learner reading in primary schools was conducted (Rajendra, 2019). This paper focused on the home background of learners regarding their reading habits. The objectives were to ascertain some of the key factors that facilitate or impede the culture of reading amongst learners in historically disadvantaged backgrounds. The other objective was to determine the strategies that can be employed to promote an effective culture of reading for learners from historically disadvantaged communities. As the author, I believe that identifying and understanding the factors leading to lower-than-benchmarked standards of reading effectively and proficiently can lead to closer consideration of the varying learner backgrounds when administering the processes of learning and teaching.

In relation to the problems together with the indicated objective as stated above, there was a research question that needed to be answered:

i. How is reading culture influenced by disadvantaged language learning backgrounds?

This article is organized as follows: following the introduction part, a second section presents literature review with theoretical and empirical studies that outline linkage between theory and practice. Thirdly, research and methodology part are presented. After analysis and findings of the study, authors provide discussions and implications. Finally, this article concludes with major points, recommendations, future research directions and limitations.

Literature Review

This is the sector where the author reviews literature to accomplish arguments by other research in the same area of study and concurrently being scholars who undertake investigations in language learning. Additionally, Work (2022) proposes that for grounded research scholars need to underpin their ideas regarding the problem investigated, in collaboration with scholars of the same field.

Theoretical Background

Reading, according to Melero et al. (2020), is influenced not only by personal variables, but also by contextual variables that in turn have an influence on these personal variables. In their view, one of the important contextual variables deserving special attention is family involvement in the school-based process of learning to read (Melero et al., 2020). The ability to read, according to Pretorius
and Machet (2004:45), refers to more than just being able to recognise letters and decode words; it includes the ability to construct meaning from the written word and familiarity with the various forms and functions of written texts. In this paper Lamont and Lareau’s (1988:153) theory of “cultural and social exclusion” has been used to underpin the investigation. These authors derive their ideas from Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural capital. In Bourdieu’s view, cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements, such as skills that one acquires through being part of a particular social class. Nonetheless, Bourdieu’s argument was that cultural capital is a major source of social inequality, as certain forms are valued over others. Though concurrently in many aspects, Lamont and Lareau (1988:153) suggested that the theory be expanded to ‘cultural and social exclusion’ to include other cultures (non-westerns) in the debate. In their view, cultural capital is a widely shared, legitimate culture made up of high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, behaviours and goods) used in direct or indirect social and cultural exclusion.

Furthermore, in this paper the recognition of the theory of social justice with the inclusion of ‘context’ as a key component in social justice endeavours (Subreenduth, 2013; Tikly, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). The continuing demand for redress and equity for the majority black population, as Subreenduth (2013) argues, prompts theorising about South Africa’s social justice efforts as a means of contextualising and making meaning of South Africa’s current political and institutional ideology, policies, and practices, especially against its racialized apartheid legacy and, more importantly, within an era of neoliberalism (Stapleton & Shao, 2018). White and Cooper (2012) view social justice as relating to the creation of a society based on equity, of understanding and valuing human rights, and recognizes the dignity of every individual. Hence, Bantwini and Letseka (2016) caution that education is a complex system comprising parts that are interdependent on various elements within a particular context. These authors argue that this complexity has implications for change that rely on every fibre of that system to succeed. In Fraser’s (2008) view, justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction (VanPatten, 2007).

Hence, the need for a deeper examination of the influence of historically disadvantaged background on the culture of reading.

Empirical Review

Social interaction is an essential element when learning to read. Interaction with others (both adults and peers) in a wide variety of settings, is an essential part of learners’ language and literacy learning (Ren & Xin, 2013). Clark, Kirschnier and Sweller (2012) are of the view that a reading culture within primary schools would enable learners to read, write, and think more critically. In fact, some studies indicate that the amount and breadth of learners’ reading is strongly related to social interaction as well as strategic teaching (Kim et al., 2017).

Social context refers to variables that, while not usually the direct target of policy, are crucial for understanding the context within which social policy is developed (OECD, 2007). Thus, to implement reading activities effectively, teachers need to be fully aware of the social context, nature and impact of the diversity among their learners and seek strategies to cater for this diversity (Wen, Liang & Liu, 2016). When discussing texts, teachers have to be aware that learners from diverse backgrounds may not necessarily respond to questions in ways that teachers expect, not because they have limited language skills or lack concentration (Larsen-Freeman, 2018), but because their experiences to date have not yet enabled them to develop the particular forms of expertise and ways of responding that teachers tend to expect (Runge, Lang, Chasiotis & Hofer, 2018). A significant feature of schools in many countries is the diversity of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of pupils. This diversity is increasing, and it is an important factor in teaching language and in considering consequences for unlocking their reading, spelling, pronunciation and speaking in classrooms (Chiu & Chow, 2015).

Accordingly, UNESCO (2009) argues that the goal of education for all also involves the development of literate societies in the developing world and cannot be attained solely by providing quality learning materials to schools. However, in many underdeveloped countries of the world there is a lack of reading materials, and so a lack of a reading culture persists. Chow, Ho, Wong, Waye and Zheng (2017) are of the view that if people are to maintain their level of literacy, they must have access to a wide variety of written materials and continue the habit of reading in their adult lives. This statement concurs with Bantwini and Moorosi (2018), who contend that however, in South Africa, it is arguable that contextual factors in some districts can work against the best leadership efforts in the schooling system. These contextual factors include the lack of resource materials and infrastructure.

Several obstacles that impede the creation of a reading culture among learners abound. Studies show that many learners dislike reading because they find no pleasure in this practice either at their home or in school environments during their literacy journey (Berkowitz, Moore & Benbenishty, 2017). Thus, it is incumbent upon parents to cultivate a lifetime habit of reading in children. Learners should be encouraged by the people around them to read magazines instead of reading textbooks all the time (Zare, 2012). Research shows that parents who like to read would also want their children to love reading (Baleeta, 2005). However, this ideal in many African societies is marred by home and school challenges such as parents’ illiteracy. Poverty, lack of school libraries, the high cost of books, and so on, contribute to the lack of reading culture among learners (Onyango, Indoshi & Ayere, 2015).

Additionally, parents serve as motivators for library use by being personal examples of encouragement for their children. Palani (2012), in a Canadian study, found that reading more stories to children contributed to the level of success at school in reading and oral skills. Palani (2012) also found that there were similarities between the acquisition of both reading and spoken language and that the active engagement in the construction of meaning is an essential aspect that is present in both modes of language development.
Dynamic and stimulating literate environments at home, in the classroom, in the workplace and in the community are essential to literacy acquisition, development and lifelong use.

Research and Methodology

This is the section where a variety of research methodologies and methods underpinning a particular study are outlined, acknowledged and debated, pending the type of approach selected (Creswell, 2014). Justification of the methodologies used is a vital starting point in this part of research. For the purposes of this study, a qualitative approach was used as it helps at describing personal life experiences. Further than that, researchers in this approach are at liberty to explore the depthness and richness of the underlying circumstances as perceived by participants, this being achieved through shared interpretations and observations.

Research design

The reported case study is part of a larger qualitative study that was conducted in a district in the Eastern Cape Province. A case study, in Flick’s (2015) view, provides tools to study complex phenomena within their contexts. A case study, as Creswell (2014) argues, is a preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context, and hence the author’s choice. Furthermore, the case study approach, as Denscombe (2007) mentions, works best when the researcher wants to investigate an issue in depth and provide an explanation that can cope with the complexity and subtlety of real-life situations.

Sampling techniques

The participants in the study were 20 primary school teachers offering English as a prescribed curriculum subject in the South African schools. These teachers were from twenty primary rural based schools, also classified as quintile one schools and were all in the same school district. A purposive sampling approach was employed to identify the participants (Yin (2003). The selection criteria were based on their willingness to participate in the study, that they were teaching grades 4-9 and that they were teaching English as a language. All the participants had between ten to twenty years of experience and had specialised in languages (English and IsiXhosa).

Data collection instrument

Data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Hargreaves (2005) asserts that interviews offer access to personal experiences, allow some flexibility in interviewees’ responses, provide an opportunity to probe people’s accounts of their personal experiences, and provide an opportunity to identify patterns of similarity and experience. Each participant was interviewed twice as initially planned, with each session lasting between 45-90 minutes. None of the interviews were recorded as the participant did not grant permission, due to some cited reasons including that they were uncomfortable with recording of their views or did not trust where the recording may end up. In that case we had to respect their reasons and thus detailed notes were taken by the researchers.

Data analysis

Data coding and analysis followed the iterative approach as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The iterative approach, as Miles and Huberman state, includes reading and affixing codes to the transcript notes while noting reflections or other remarks in the margins; sorting and sifting through these materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, distinct differences between subgroups and common sequences; isolating these patterns and processes, commonalities and differences, while gradually elaborating a small set of generalizations that cover the consistencies (Maree, 2008). During this process, the research questions were informed by the emerging themes and issues that are discussed below.

Ethical considerations

As opined by Flick’s (2015), when undertaking the study, all the ethical considerations were adhered to including getting permission from all the relevant authorities, discussing with participants issues concerning voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, non-maleficence as well as the benefits of the research to the participants.

Findings and Discussions

Findings

In this section, this is where discussion of the emerging findings from the interviews is presented, following the research questions that guided the investigation.

Description of learners’ home background

To understand the learners’ contextual background, all the interviewed teachers were asked to describe the background of their learners regarding reading. Common from their responses was that most of their learners were from historically disadvantaged homes and communities. The teachers viewed their learners’ home background as clouded and creating a myriad of challenges that were regarded as possessing negative effects in learning to read. Teachers were of the view that, although many parents from historically disadvantaged backgrounds send their children to school, their mindset and behaviour was different from people who really wish their children to excel, particularly in reading. In providing more clarity on the matter, one of the teachers mentioned that:
... their (referring to parents and guardians) mindset of educating their children or grandchildren was that it is the job of the teachers. They hardly saw it as their responsibility as parents. This shows that they as parents required some training and knowledge as parents ...

Teachers also described their learners’ background as completely rural with many communities still subscribing to the ways of living in ‘the olden days,’ and have not advanced yet into the democratic era. Explaining the situation, one teacher noted that:

... As I normally observe most parents when they go shopping, they never even attempt to have a closer look at the department with reading resources, instead the greatest percentage of the parents are interested in buying toys like dolls and cars to make their children enjoy playing with such ...

Lack of home foundational reading skills

During the interviews teachers were asked recall and talk about some of the factors that they perceived as facilitating or impeding the development of a stronger culture of reading amongst their learners. In response, most of the teachers argued the fundamental challenge was that their learners possessed a limited vocabulary, which made it difficult for them to read given texts and even to guess the meanings of words in context. They stated that their learners could not engage with some reading material in class. Perpetrating this challenge was the lack of basic home support in reading:

... in the deep rural area where I teach, most learners first encounter books and reading materials once they start primary school, displaying no knowledge of even a single letter of the alphabet ... .

... learners have a very limited ability in reading exercises, more so they encounter reading activities only when at school. Such limited ability makes learners in my class to deter from learning how to read .... .

Resources and infrastructural challenges

Limited access to a variety of reading material contributes to limited vocabulary. This challenge was not only from their homes but even at their schools. One of the teachers revealed that:

... Insufficient reading materials and resources to acquire reading matter constitute another obstacle to developing a culture of reading ...

... Lack of appropriate reading materials and a lack of libraries throughout the country is generally the most important obstacle to the culture of reading in the entire district ...

Explaining the compounding factors related to reading resource materials, another teacher revealed that:

... only a few schools are well-equipped with children’s storybooks, and while others are poorly equipped, with many learners sharing books. This saddens me as parents seem not to take any initiative to develop love of reading while children are still at a very young age ...

... The library corner itself is small and all the books are not on the shelves. You find a book in the catalogue, but it is not on the shelf. It is discouraging for learners who want to read. Books are few compared to learners in need of them. The primary school infrastructure cannot support the actual learner population ...

The teachers believed that their learners were also disadvantaged by the schools as they also had limited resources to help them learn. This raises a concern regarding the proclaimed inclusive education, as it appears here that the historically disadvantaged learners continue being disadvantaged even in basic resources that are supposed to enhance their learning. This goes against social justice theories, as some proclaim that social justice is “equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs... in which distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (Bell, 2007:1). Suffice it to ask, with the lack of resources for communities that have had historical challenges for decades, where is social justice?

Findings also show that some of the teachers felt hopeless and thought that the situation cannot be better, despite their willingness to change things. Reflecting, one of the concerned teachers mentioned that:

... At times I would love to take my learners to the library located in town, but my problem is that the school where I teach is approximately fifty kilometres away from town. The rampant poverty and illiteracy exacerbate the reading situation ...

High illiteracy and poverty rate

Exacerbating the situation, as many teachers mentioned, was the high illiteracy rate of parents or guardians of their learners. As one teacher mentioned: “… prevalence of low levels of literacy in most families also makes it hard to encourage a culture of reading.”

Most of these learners lived with their grandparents who could not assist them in their schoolwork in general. Bantwini and Feza (2017) believe that parents are supposed to play a key role in developing the foundational level of learning in their children. To elaborate further, one of the teachers stated that:
Most of the parents or guardians are not employed and their level of education is very low that they cannot help their children or grandchildren.

Many people are in search for satisfying their basic needs. They would rather buy food, clothing etc. Very few people go to bookshops to buy books compared to people frequenting supermarkets and shops for other commodities. When you look at the price tags on shelves in bookshops, many parents can hardly think of buying a book for only reading instead of buying beans or rice for their children, for example.

**Strategies to promote effective culture of reading for historically disadvantaged learners**

All the interviewed teachers agreed that homes and communities have a great influence on their learners. Hence, I am of the view that one-sided learning (at school only) leaves much room for failure. Based on the data analysis, teachers believed that home- and community-based support can play a catalytic role in the process of developing reading knowledge, skills, and attitudes and habits. One of the teachers mentioned even when learners are asked to bring some newspapers in class for reading, they would not bring any; “Learners do not readily submit newspapers when required for use in class. This is an indication that many parents do not buy newspapers, or newspapers are not readily available at their homes.” As much as they have their role to play, most of the teachers admitted that homes and communities need to assist them.

**Discussion**

From the above insight, it seems that some parents and guardians continue to pass the responsibility of teaching/assisting their children, whether with learning to read or learning the other school subjects. Arguably, such a practice hardly assists schools in their quest to inculcate the culture of reading amongst learners, particularly from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Brozo (2014), Cull (2011), and Winter (2014) argue that societies at large, especially parents, need to change their mindset and be more proactive in guiding and cultivating reading habits among children from a young age. Individuals, as Igwe (2011) argues, who are culturally closest to learners and who are therefore most influential, are parents and peers. Hence, homes and communities are the ideal platforms to develop the culture of reading especially in young children. From the above teacher observation, it seems that some parents, even though they send their children to school, still lacked knowledge to realise that to cultivate the culture of reading they need to assist schools and teachers by purchasing books and helping children practice reading even at home. According to Metz, Preciado, Sabbaghan, Pinchbeck, Aljarrah and Davis (2016), conditioning the child with positive reading habits must be inculcated at this young age to provide a strong pillar and platform for them to create a passion for reading.

With regards to limited learning resources, it seems that with these learners, learning to read was only a school function that was not supported in their homes. Cautioning about this one-sided reliance, Houck and Ross (2012) believe that there is a need for a delicate shift in the balance of instruction from finite skills, i.e., those that can be mastered within a prescribed period of time, to the lifelong development of comprehension. This, therefore, challenges households and communities to also be involved in ensuring that learning from schools continues. Clearly emerging from the above insight was that there was a combination of factors that were impeding the development of reading culture amongst learners. This included the lack of school libraries and the limited access to libraries that are in towns. This revelation is aligned with White and Cooper’s (2012) views, that marginalized individuals are frequently excluded through enactment of prejudice in either, or both, of two broad categories – physical attributes or social attributes – that disallow them from engaging with and participating in privileges granted to societal “haves.” White and Cooper believe that because of this, those who are marginalized tend to become ever more marginalized, extending from individuals to entire societies. On top of that, based on these comments from teachers, poverty is a reality that has made some parents prioritise basic needs over the future of their children. Reading, as Houck and Ross (2012) assert, is a crucial skill that we employ daily to obtain knowledge, understand information, and communicate ideas. They further state that in society, literacy is access.

Clearly emerging from the data is that many teachers were also despondent because of the lack of adequate learning resources in their schools. However, none of the interviewed teachers mentioned that they had written and asked for book donations or grants to purchase the books. Houck and Ross (2012) argue that it is the responsibility of teachers to foster and develop reading, both in learning to read and applying that knowledge in reading to learn, for all students. Teachers need to exhaust every corner to help their students. It is crucial to remember, as Bantwini (2018) cautions, that the provision of basic quality education for all learners means upholding learners’ constitutional rights and ensuring that justice is done (Bantwini, 2018). The OECD (2012) states that the highest performing education systems are those that combine equity and quality. The author perceives that the teachers saw a correlation between the language in which most literature was written and the promotion of a reading culture. This indeed makes sense if we look at the sociolinguistic situation of the country, where only a minority of people are conversant in either English or Xhosa. Only a few parents engage in purchasing reading material for their children. A vast number of learners from all the schools hardly read anything when at home. The mainly uneducated parents for majority of learners from the disadvantaged backgrounds were unemployed or farmers. Learners encountered reading material mostly in their language classes (Tomasello, 2003).

**Conclusions**

Distinctly emerging from the reported study is that the disadvantaged learners’ background was one of the key factors that affects the culture of reading. The learners’ home backgrounds determined the effect that lack of exposure to reading texts has on the culture.
of reading. Also coming out clearly from the study was, as Bantwini (2018) asserts, that the attainment of quality basic education can never be achieved by focusing on a single factor in isolation of the myriad of factors that collectively guarantee success. Thus, there is a need to make social justice as reality in our societies and employ various thinking modalities that carefully consider each learner’s background. In the view, White and Cooper (2012) state that social justice is considered to relate to the creation of a society based on principles of equity and equality, of understanding and valuing human rights, and recognizes the dignity of every individual. Undeniably, this will not automatically occur but, will require intentional and deliberate efforts to realise social justice in any community.

It is indisputable that the prevalence of low levels of literacy in most families also makes it hard to encourage a culture of reading. The study indicates the need for parents to encourage their children to develop the habit of reading from infancy so that when they grow up, it will be ingrained. Also important for teachers is to ensure that they treat all learners the same in terms of having high expectations for each, for them all to strive at reaching their full potential. Given the findings of this study, the author can conclude that family background does have a correlation with students’ reading ability. The higher the parents’ education level and occupational prestige are, the higher the children’s reading ability, and vice versa.

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