Reading Achievement in Eastern Kentucky

Sky Marietta

Appalachian Heritage, Volume 37, Number 2, Spring 2009, pp. 56-60 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.0.0136*

READING ACHIEVEMENT IN EASTERN KENTUCKY

Sky Marietta

In September of 2008, the *Lexington Herald Leader* published the results of all Kentucky schools on the annual state assessment, including ranking the top ten schools in the state. No particular attention was paid to the three top-scoring public elementary schools, even though all were located in Appalachian counties: Floyd, Johnson, and Magoffin, in order of scores. In fact, across Eastern Kentucky a trend has emerged in test scores that would be the envy of the urban districts that get the attention serving high-poverty students. From Bell County to Wolfe, in small schools and large, in elementary schools through high schools, reading achievement is normal in Eastern Kentucky, despite high proportions of children living in poverty.

Until 2006, the battery of state assessments in Kentucky included the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), an achievement test that allowed students in Kentucky to be directly compared to other students of the same grade level across the nation. The average for all Eastern Kentucky districts on reading performance in the 2005–2006 school year was within the average range for the nation. More recently, the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that, for the subgroup of elementary students taking the test who could be identified as poor, no state scored significantly higher in reading than Kentucky, a trend likely driven by the 190,000 children currently enrolled in Eastern Kentucky's public schools.

This achievement is remarkable, if largely unnoticed. From crowded tenement homes on city streets to rickety shacks set next to cotton fields, poor children enter school already behind. They are less likely to know their letters or colors in kindergarten, or that they should sit quietly in their seats, or how to answer the teachers' questions. Of all the academic and behavior challenges these children face, one of the greatest obstacles is learning to read with the fluency and background knowledge necessary to learn from high school textbooks, which is, in turn, necessary to make it to college. Low reading achievement is one of

the most pernicious problems for those who see education as the path to social equality. Certainly Appalachia, a region long associated (fairly or not) with anti-intellectualism and illiteracy would not be expected to buck this trend.

My own teaching experience, which began in a tiny school located within a remote section of the Navajo Nation, showed how mightily children living in poverty can struggle with reading. My students were certainly bright and cared for by loving families, but reading and books were not a central part of their lives, nor particularly necessary to maintain the types of jobs or lifestyle available locally. I was often struck by the landscape of the picture books I read to my first graders, which were extraordinarily removed from their lives. And these difficulties predictably manifested in their test scores, which were discouragingly, persistently, dismal.

As tough as it is to teach young children how to crack the code of English orthography, the real challenge for reading emerges in late elementary school. It turns out that children living in poverty are exposed to far fewer words than their middle-class peers, who hear a great variety and depth of language as their parents' discuss their day over dinner or read them books at night. These types of incidental language exposures lead to a reservoir of academic words that can be pulled from to understand more complicated texts. Poor children have no such reservoir and so struggle comprehending the textbooks and trade books that are central to academic success by fourth grade.

It can be hard to help a child sound out words correctly, particularly when there is a disability, but it pales compared to the challenge of imparting the thousands and thousands of words that separate the vocabularies of the rich and the poor in kindergarten. If children in Eastern Kentucky are learning to read as well as middle-class peers, there must be some way they are getting exposure to rich language. And this exposure was undocumented in educational research on the lives of children living in poverty.

Last summer, I set off to understand what was going right in Eastern Kentucky homes, schools, and communities to promote reading growth. I spent several weeks in communities that are typical of Central Appalachia. These were rural, remote, and coal-producing communities, tucked into the blue folds of mountains. While there, I participated

in community life along with everyone else, attending basketball tournaments and church, following along on trips to the grocery store and talking with children. I interviewed teachers and parents. All along the way I was trying to solve the puzzle of normal reading achievement through interacting with the communities and writing my impressions and daily interactions up at night as field notes.

After going through my notes and interviews, consulting the research literature, and a few "reality checks" with my favorite Eastern Kentuckians, some trends emerged that were markedly different from the current research literature on the lives of children living in poverty. These differences were present across home, school, and the community.

First, the children I observed in Eastern Kentucky were getting exposure to a great deal of talk. From the time they are born, children in Eastern Kentucky become part of large family and social networks wherein they play a central role. They are not shielded or separated from adult conversations, but integrated within the stories, gossip, and news of mountain life. Children are just as likely to spend time with a grandparent as a peer. And while the density or types of words in these interactions may not be the same as in a middle-class setting, they add up to a lot of words across the day. This type of exposure to language stands in contrast to a child in an inner-city, who may sit alone in front of the television in a small apartment while his mother works the night shift.

The difference in schools was even stronger. As anyone who has attended a writer's workshop or literary festival in Appalachia has probably already observed, teachers in Eastern Kentucky are an impressive lot. In the places I visited, around eighty-five percent of teachers held at least a master's degree; of that number, more than half had completed 30 credit hours beyond a master's. Teaching is a competitive job in rural communities, and turnover is low. Unlike many poor communities, children in Eastern Kentucky can go to a school where the teacher not only looks and sounds like a family member, but also knows the family and the child personally. These teachers do not see their students as being high risk, but as normal kids. Teacher expectations are a potent force in shaping student outcomes, and many were nonplussed that I thought reading performance was good. One teacher explained to me rather patiently, "the thing that

Kentucky focuses on is having all students proficient or advanced, not average." Indeed, one teacher described reading Moby Dick to her mixed classroom of elementary-aged children.

Finally, the churches of Eastern Kentucky surfaced as the unsung heroes of literacy. At church, children hear and interact with sophisticated stories and memorize Bible verses. They hear words in sermons and hymns that would stretch the vocabularies of many in middle America. Perhaps even more importantly, they begin to see that the language of books is different from spoken language, but holds its own mystery and power.

There are advocates of learning and literacy beyond the walls of churches in Eastern Kentucky. The James Still Learning Center at Hindman Settlement School, in particular, has been a champion of students with dyslexic characteristics. Paying whatever they can, children in and around Knott County can rely on the Hindman Settlement School to provide approaches that fit their learning styles. Over the years, this privately-funded organization has touched the lives of hundreds of children, giving them the tools they need to read.

Of course, rural Eastern Kentucky has not solved the problems associated with poverty. Despite the impressive reading scores, the region has the lowest percentage of children graduating from high school in the country (about sixty-two percent of students in Eastern Kentucky complete high school, compared to eighty percent in the United States). In any given county in the coalfields, around ten percent of adults have a college degree, compared with a national average of nearly a quarter. Reading scores stand in stark contrast to life outcomes.

The parents I met cared deeply for their children's education in elementary school, but the relevance of education did not always last when the time came to apply for college. As one teacher pointed out, "people brag about making more money selling drugs, or making more money cutting timber, or making more money in the coal mines than the teachers do, and they didn't even graduate high school." More community colleges and college extension offices are available in Eastern Kentucky than ever before, but the pace of expansion of higher education has not been matched by employment opportunities.

Perhaps the most exceptional quality of Eastern Kentucky schooling is that the teachers I spoke with were able to identify the difficulty of the situation. In the communities I visited, there is a demanding curriculum that teachers work hard to meet every year. The current accountability system has placed an emphasis on skills over engaging deeply with material. Teachers lamented the loss of time in the school day to explore and create, to instill a love of learning, to use writing and reading to impact the lives of the children.

When I was still in college, I first seriously considered becoming a teacher after meeting Judy Hensley at the Appalachian Writer's Workshop in Hindman. She is a teacher in Harlan County, and the kind of teacher whose students save mountain peaks from strip mining and virgin forest from chainsaws. She mentored me as I started out on my own teaching career. When I was teaching *My Side of the Mountain* to my desert-dwelling fourth-graders in New Mexico, Judy sent me a big box of leaves that her students in Harlan County collected. I will always remember when we first opened the box of leaves, and all my Navajo students leaned in to breathe the rich smell of a warm and moist forest floor, rich with decaying leaves. That moment likely inspired more children to want to explore beyond their current lives than any skills-based lesson I could have taught. Books became a way of experiencing the world, not just fulfilling an assignment.

Appalachia holds several valuable lessons for the field of education. Even though they come from a poor region, Appalachian students are cultivated to become teachers, and these teachers are rooted in the community in a manner that bridges the differences between home and school. Families are able to support language development without partaking in the middle-class activities that are often pushed on poor families. Perhaps the most central lesson is that poor children can very well learn the skills needed to succeed in life.

The challenge the region faces is how to transform education so that it not only accomplishes this but also inspires creativity and civic engagement. Knowing how to read is not the same as being prepared to use writing skills to improve a community. Creating active learners is a different process, and the next step in improving the quality of life in Eastern Kentucky.