Influence of Socioeconomic Status on Parental Involvement: A Study of Online Discourse

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Extended Abstract

The frequency and the types of parental involvement may vary among the parents of different socioeconomic status (SES) (Lee & Bowen, 2006). For example, high-SES parents tend to adopt "concerted cultivation" in their parenting (Lareau, 2002). They tend to be good at managing their children's education, arrange various activities for their children to facilitate their development, and have higher academic expectation for their children (Hartas, 2015). In contrast, low-SES parents tend to allow their children to advance on their own pace. They may also lack the resources to support their children's learning.

The differences in parental involvement between parents of different socioeconomic classes has received consistent support (Hartas, 2015; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Nonetheless, these studies usually used conventional research methods such as survey and interview. Recently, social media such as discussion forums, twitter, and Facebook have become major channels through which their users share their life experiences and exchange opinions with others. It is now common for parents to talk to their friends on social media how they manage their children's education and learning. The spontaneous exchanges on social media platforms provide valuable but relatively under-utilized resources to study parental involvement in education. In the present study, I compared the parental involvement of parents from different SES by extracting discussion topics from data collected from a discussion forum in Hong Kong.

Data and Method

The data were collected from the "Sharing of Secondary School" section of the discussion forum in the "Edu-Kingdom" website (https://www.edu-kingdom.com/), a website that specializes in education. This section targets parents and aims at gathering parents of the students from the same school to share their experiences with and opinions about their schools. Parents of the same school join the one thread. Parents used Cantonese primarily and some English in their discussion. As the API of the "Edu-Kingdom" website was not available, the data from the discussion forum were downloaded by web scrapping. A total of 773 threads with 81591 posts was used in the analysis.

As most users did not reveal their residential and demographic information on the website, the SES of parents was estimated by the school thread they belonged to. Most threads stated clearly in the titles that the name of the associated schools. Thus, when the parents posted their opinion and involved discussion in a particular thread, we would know which school their children were attending. As the placement of secondary schools in Hong Kong is based mostly on the students' residential address, most users in the same school thread should reside in the same district as their school. We used the median income of the district where their school is located as a proxy of the parents' SES.

To compare the differences among SES groups in the likelihood of talking about a certain topic, first, we used Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to extract the topics of all posts. Next, the log odd ratios of talking about each topic among both SES groups were calculated.

A positive log odd ratio for a certain topic indicated that the high SES parents were more likely to talk about the topic. In contrast, negative log odd ratio indicated that low SES parents were more likely to talk about the topic.

Findings

Forty-five topics were extracted. Chi-square test showed that the distribution of dominant topics was significantly different between high-SES and low-SES parents (χ^2 = 1622.50, p < 0.001). The topics posted by the parents residing in high-SES districts were different from those living in low-SES districts.

Figure 1 shows the topics which best differentiated high- and low-SES parents. There were three major types of topics. The first type was related to specific aspects of students' schooling. The themes of these topics were easier to be identified. High-SES parents tended to mention specific topics in their posts. They focused on specific issues and they were more strategic in involving in their students' education. The second type of topics relates to the language used in the forum. High-SES individuals in Hong Kong used English frequently. Thus, it was not surprising that English was found in the posts of schools in high-SES districts. The third type of topics was talked about more in the low-SES group. The low-SES parents used interjection and non-specific verbs more. This type of topics was obscure and difficult to interpret. This shows that low-SES parents were less focused on specific aspects of their children's education and they were less strategic in their parental engagement. Moreover, they liked to share the recent events and daily experiences of their children's schooling. They were involved in their children's education but they focused on the short-term education issues.

Impact of the work

The method used in the present study was exploratory in nature. It examined parents' daily spontaneous discourse. Past quantitative and qualitative studies had collected structured data to test specific hypotheses. The results provided by the current unstructured study gave credence to the educational inequality theory, which posits that parents of different social classes involve in their children's education differently. The present study also uncovered the divergent specific concerns and language use patterns of the parents with different SES, which is a relatively overlooked phenomenon.

The SES differences in parental involvement deserve the attention of the educators and policy makers. The inequality produced by these differences between social classes may sustain or even widen the SES gap in academic achievement. To narrow the gap between students from different SES families, interventions targeting styles of parenting should benefit the low-SES parents.

References

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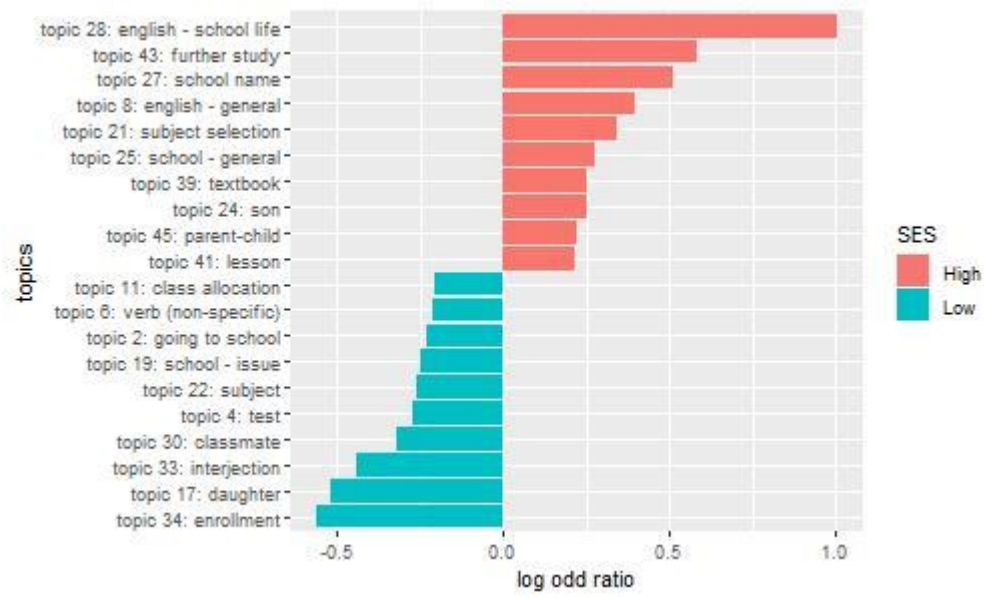
Figure 1. The most discriminant topics of high-SES and low-SES groups.