The Relationship of MDAB Students' Academic Reading Performance with their Reading Attitudes

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INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Reading

According to Eskey (1988), no one can teach anyone how to read, or even how to read effectively but anyone can learn to read, and to read more effectively. This can only be done if only learners perceive reading as an activity that can contribute to an intellectual profit or pleasure. As such, the content of whatever the learners have chosen to read must be of something useful to them or will assist them in understanding the world better or provide them the special kind of pleasure that comes from the experience of reading the texts. Thus, learners need to realize the importance of reading in their daily lives in order to cope with the new knowledge in the changing world of the technological age. A great awareness of why reading is important is that it does not contribute only to an individual's well-being, self-development and progress but also to the whole nation and the world.

Berardo (2006) also believed that reading is associated with means of communication because it is considered to be an interactive process – a conversation between writer and reader. One of the benefits gathered from reading is when readers are able to associate the activity with the feeling of pleasure. This is clearly stated by Anderson (1999) when he claimed that reading with the feeling of pleasure gives many readers the opportunity to relax and enjoy the world of books.

Malachi (2002) stated that the reading of literature must be a pleasurable experience in order for the students to enjoy reading. The reading of literature should revolve around the learners' lives and experience. It is through reading that students will become independent learners with freedom to think and to live their lives (Thadphoothon, 2006).

Nuttall (1996) as cited in Fauziah (2002) also addressed on this issue that the best way to improve students' knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its community. The next best way is to read extensively in it and this habit has to be inculcated from an early age by parents and the society. The teacher, for instance, is one of the most important element in promoting reading habits as her attitude influences students and their performance. Mahon (1981) stressed to teachers that a few minutes of consultation time should be put aside in every class session to talk to students individually about the books they read, the hours they spent reading and the sources to their reading materials.

Hence, reading is an important skill for every student to master as the ability to read would help in the process of achieving life-long learning. It is not only vital for academic development but also for professional and self-development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysians' Interest and Attitudes towards Reading

Students develop positive attitudes toward reading, increase their motivation to read, become fluent in reading and expand their vocabulary greatly only if they get themselves engaged with the habit extensively. As such, reading is a very important factor in enriching one's knowledge and in widening one's perspective. In fact, some

researchers also claimed that if students read extensively, they not only acquire vocabulary but also increase their reading speed automatically (Blevins, 2005: Iwahori, 2008; Samuels, 2006).

However, reading scenario in Malaysia does not reflect an impressive reading culture as society seems to be greatly ambivalent about reading. Ganakumaran (2004) revealed that many Malaysians are 'struggling readers'. They have minimal confidence in their ability to read and minimal sense of themselves as readers. Meanwhile, struggling readers according to Vacca and Vacca (1999) are those students who are low achievers. They lack cognitive competencies which may include reading comprehension, study skills, word recognition and reading fluency. On the other hand, Wigfield, Eccles and Rodriguez (1998) believed that struggling readers are notably unmotivated. They are especially likely to have low confidence in their reading, which is termed self-efficacy in the research literature. These characteristics are distinctively captured in a group of underprivileged Pre-Diploma students studying at Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak, Malaysia. These groups of struggling readers have very minimal sense of themselves as readers because they are greatly apprehensive towards reading. It is very disheartening to witness this discouraging attitude in the students as the university and the nation as a whole are optimistic of transforming these students into future graduates who are highly-skilled communicators and who possess a high level of oral and written proficiency.

Reading is regarded as important because it provides a lot of benefits to readers in many ways. Reading skills for instance, are essential as they provide an easier path for us to follow as we face new challenges. A great awareness of why reading is important is that it does not contribute only to an individual's well-being, self-development and progress but also to the whole nation and the world. By this, Gordon (1976) believed that the thirst for reading and a wider dissemination of books is a sign of progress in the world.

However, the fact that Sangkaeo (1999) presented on attitudes towards reading seemed to show the opposite. According to him, the number of those who know how to read but do not read enough is also increasing. He reasoned out that there are still some people who cannot get access to reading activities and reading programs at all even though they are able to read. They may neither have much nor lasting interest in books and reading. This is such a sad scenario which is actively happening in the local scene. This lack of reading interest was verified by a study carried out by Atan Long (1984) who found that the habit of reading in Malaysia did not appear to be a prominent feature in the lives of most Malaysians. In his study, he discovered that Malaysians had poor reading habits and did not like reading. His worry was that this situation could create wide rifts in the socioeconomic and intellectual developments of segments of the population.

Kaur and Thiyagarajah (1999) also stated that many Malaysian students only read a maximum of 10 hours a week. They also discovered that students who took up English Language and Literature Studies in Universiti Sains Malaysia did not meet the expectations of their lecturers in their reading habits. They portrayed poor reading habits and in relation to reading newspapers, only about 29% of the respondents claimed that they spent time on reading newspapers.

The same finding was also found in a study carried out by Manveet (2002) who revealed that although Malaysia has a literacy rate of 93%, which is one of the highest in the world, there remain many young Malaysians whose futures are imperiled because they do not read well enough to meet the demands of our competitive technology-driven society. This reflects how trivial reading habit is to Malaysians. Some of the reasons given by the students for not wanting to read were reading is boring and that they are too busy with other work, the texts are rather difficult and as a result, they have a hard time reading them. Hence, this contributes to the slow, difficult process of reading. Besides that, some also felt that reading is not important and not fun especially when they fail to appreciate how reading can be purposeful or relevant to their lives.

Echoing on the same note on students' lack interest in reading, Bright and McGregor (1970) tried to explain that students will not learn much on language when little reading takes place. Nuttall (1996) also seemed to agree with the claim that students do not enjoy reading, especially slow readers, because they do not read much and thus do not have enough practices.

In influencing students to build interests in reading, Day and Bamford (1998) as cited in Normah (2004) also believed that the reading materials should be easy and are chosen by the learners themselves for the purpose of leisure reading. By this, they also added that a wide range of materials be available for the learners to choose. The ability to read successfully can be achieved by allowing the use of a choice of tasks and materials that are personally meaningful to students. Sharing the same note, Simon (2006) also voiced out that the teaching material should be intrinsically interesting and therefore motivating. Its content should reflect 'life', not just language, and be stimulating and informative. As a result the students will find the material not only interesting but also credible to read.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

ESL reading is taught in almost every English course offered in Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak Campus Malaysia. However, not many students seem to do well or are interested in the subject based on their performance in the final exam and also poor class participation during reading sessions. This seems to be largely due to their poor reading habits. This is very worrying especially with regards to a special group of underprivileged Pre-Diploma students who had been accepted to join an academic program which started in July 2010. This programme which was designed to spare a fighting chance for students from deprived backgrounds to advance their destiny in life by providing them places in the University in pre-diploma and diploma courses, has begun in a discontent manner. For instance, the BEL011-Introductory English results released recently have shown dismal performance with quite a number of students failing the subject despite having 12 hours of intensive English weekly. One of the contributors to their failures was their poor performance in the reading tasks. According to the lecturers teaching the programme, students tend to be very 'passive' during the reading class and failed to contribute their ideas on the issues discussed, as they had not done much reading.

In addition, these students who are 'struggling readers' also have a negative perception on reading which they associate with the feeling of unpleasantness. These students do not enjoy reading because they feel reading is burdensome. They feel that

when they read, it takes a lot of their time especially when they have some other matters to attend to. This scenario happens largely among the underprivileged students because they not only come with very low level of proficiency in the English Language, but also they were not exposed to reading from young. For instance, the parents might have failed in inculcating reading habits in the children at an early stage and show no habit of reading themselves, which indirectly influence the children not to be fond of reading. Hence, it is a challenge for English lecturers to help these students to love reading if the students themselves barely see the importance of reading.

Lack of reading has not only affected the reading performance but also other components like writing and speaking. One major obstacle faced by the students is the poor grasp of vocabulary which inhibits both their oral and writing ability due to the lack of reading. Vocabulary is of great importance to language learners as it is fundamental to any language. Lack of vocabulary makes it difficult for students to express themselves in English or for them to guess the meanings of words in context when given reading tasks.

Due to these shortcomings, there is a need to conduct this study as it will shed invaluable insights to educators and stakeholders to search for an effective reading program and teaching strategies for these students to create interest towards reading which will indirectly assist them in mastering the language.

OBJECTIVES

1. To identify a group of underprivileged Pre-Diploma students' attitudes towards reading in general.
2. To determine whether the students' academic reading performance is significantly affected by their reading attitudes and reading materials.

METHODOLOGY

This study involved 107 Pre-Diploma students who had joined an academic program in Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak, Malaysia. These were a group of underprivileged students who were enrolled in BEL011, an Introductory English Course offered by the university for beginners. The course covers major aspects of Grammar, Writing, Reading and Speaking. It runs for approximately one-semester or 14 weeks. The main objectives of the course are to remedy students' weaknesses in the use of English and raise their proficiency level. The reading component specifically exposes students to the necessary college reading skills such as skimming and scanning, identifying main ideas, identifying topic sentences, transferring information from linear to non linear text and etc.

The sample subjects were students of elementary language proficiency level. Their average age was 18 years old and 68 of the students were females and 39 were males. The data for this study were collected via two research instruments: the Questionnaire and the Semi-structured Interview.

The questionnaire used in this study was aimed to seek feedback from students on their general attitudes towards reading. It was also designed to elicit information on

the relationship between the students' academic reading performance and their reading attitudes. There were altogether 43 items in the questionnaire. The items were adapted from Yamashita (2004) and some were constructed based on the authors' own experience dealing with the students' attitudes. Each item in the questionnaire tried to address a particular issue in reading. They were divided into three major categories namely the reading attitudes, reading environment and reading materials. To ensure the reliability of the items and variables, the Cronbach Alpha has been analyzed using the SPSS software and the validity of the three dimensions has also been measured. A pilot test was conducted on 28 Universiti Teknologi MARA students to check for errors or unclear questions that may hinder comprehension and accurate interpretation. The pilot test also gave valuable feedback that assisted the researchers in making corrections before the questionnaire was administered to the actual research subjects.

A semi-structured interview was carried out with a few randomly selected students after they had responded to the questionnaire. The interview aimed to seek clarification concerning the responses given by the students in the questionnaire. It was also carried out with the purpose of eliciting further information on their responses that the researchers might have overlooked. In addition, the semi-structured nature of the interview allowed subjects the freedom to raise issues and express their view concerning reading as the interview was in progress. Hence, the students were individually interviewed and their responses were tape-recorded and transcribed.

The raw data gathered from the questionnaire, and the semi-structured interview with the students were recorded, analysed and triangulated based on the questionnaire (refer to APPENDIX 1). Students' responses to the items in the questionnaire items were analysed using descriptive statistics and quantitative data analysis through frequency count, correlation and regression and presented in tabular forms.

FINDINGS

The Pre-Diploma Students' Attitude towards Reading
The research objectives are to identify the Pre-Diploma students' attitudes towards reading in general and to determine whether the students' academic reading performance is significantly affected by their reading attitudes. In terms of the first objective, findings from the data revealed that most of the students gave positive response towards reading with the average mean value of 3.5 and 3.5 and above. The table below displays the means score analysis for attitude towards reading with the highest mean score for B4 and lowest for B9.

Items	Question	Mean
B9	Reading does not broaden my view.	3.06
B6	I read for pleasure.	3.23
B2	I read as a hobby.	3.29
B5	I like reading English materials.	3.42
B3	I do not think reading is fun.	3.43
B1	I enjoy reading a lot.	3.66
B8	I read for self-development.	3.76
B7	I read for examination purposes.	3.78
B4	Reading makes me a knowledgeable person.	4.30

Table 1: Mean Scores Analysis for Attitude

Table 2 depicts that the highest mean score is 4.03 in which respondents found it easy to read when using the dictionary and the lowest mean score is 3.34 in which they did not believe that their lack interest in reading was due to poor selection of reading materials from their teacher. Hence, it can be implied that the students still resort to dictionaries when they fail to guess the meaning of some words. However, the technicality of the reading texts if not given due attention, could also indirectly contribute to the feeling of boredom and reluctance to continue reading among the students. Hence, it can be gathered from C7 with a mean score of 3.94 that many would prefer and enjoy reading if they were given the freedom to choose their own reading materials. Students are able to get 'hooked' to reading when they know what materials will be of interest to them. This is explained by Day and Bamford (1998 : 78) who suggested that students be allowed to read texts that they are interested in although many teachers may not be pleased with the quality of texts that they read. They believed that the main concern should be to get students to read and enjoy reading because once they enjoy reading, they will develop the reading habit.

Items	Question	Mean
C6	I do not build an interest in reading because I do not get a variety of selected reading materials from my teacher.	3.34
C4	I enjoy reading even if the reading material is not my choice.	3.44
C11	I only enjoy reading when the reading materials serve some purposes.	3.47
C3	I lose interest in reading when I do not know any of the words in the selected reading texts.	3.61
C2	I stop reading when I find the material is above my level of understanding.	3.63
C12	I tend to get deeply engaged when I read English material.	3.76
C1	I get motivated to read when I can choose the reading materials.	3.87
C8	Difficult reading texts do not make me lose interest in reading.	3.87
C9	I believe teachers should select reading materials that are interesting.	3.93
C7	I enjoy reading because I have freedom to choose my own reading materials.	3.94
C10	I enjoy reading other materials apart from academic ones.	3.97
C5	I find it easy to read a text if I use a dictionary.	4.03

Table 2: Mean Scores for Reading Materials

Table 3 presents that 51.4% agreed that reading makes them a knowledgeable person and not a single student responded the opposite. This suggests that most respondents agreed that reading can be a very beneficial activity especially in imparting knowledge. However, a very interesting finding was also gathered from the respondents when asked whether they read for pleasure. The majority of the respondents were undecided and only 30.8% responded positively. On the other hand, 67.3% of the respondents were discovered to read for examination purpose, 33% was undecided and none responded negatively. This implies that the respondents might view reading as a beneficial activity because they associated reading with knowledge that they required for exam purposes.

Item	Attitude					Total
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	
B1:I enjoy reading a lot	0	6 (5.6%)	33 (30.8%)	**59 (55.1%)**	9 (8.4%)	107
B2:I read as a hobby	0	13 (12.1%)	**54 (50.5%)**	36 (33.7%)	4 (3.7%)	107
B3:I do not think reading is fun	0	2 (1.9%)	**63 (59%)**	36 (33.7%)	6 (5.6%)	107
B4:Reading makes me a knowledgeable person	0	0	10 (9.3%)	**55 (51.4%)**	42 (39.3%)	107
B5:I like reading English materials	0	6 (5.6%)	**54 (50.5%)**	43 (40.2%)	4 (3.7%)	107
B6:I read for pleasure	1 (0.9%)	10 (9.3%)	**63 (59%)**	29 (27.1%)	4 (3.7%)	107
B7:I read for examination purposes	0	0	35 (33%)	**61 (57%)**	11 (10.3%)	107
B8:I read for self-development	0	2 (1.9%)	31 (29%)	**65 (60.7%)**	9 (8.4%)	107
B9:Reading does not broaden my view	1 (0.9%)	18 (16.8%)	**63 (59%)**	24 (22.4%)	1 (0.9%)	107

Table 3: Attitude Variable Analyses

The positive response on the value of reading is also reflected in the students' feedback during the interview. When asked whether they actually enjoy reading and the reason why, they responded :

 (R1): Yes I read a lot book because I think with reading; I can improve my pronunciation and knowledge.
(R2) : I think I read because get a lot of information that I can add, I want to 'change'(improve) my language.
(R1) : Yes because I like reading. I learn something new. If I don't know the meaning of words, I will guess myself in the meaning of that word.
(R2) : Yes because it can release my tension, then I could not waste time to do something that is important to me.
(R3) : Yes because from reading novels or comics, we have fun.
(R4) : Yes, I enjoy reading because when I'm reading, I don't feel boring, do not waste my time, I can get information on the knowledge.
(R5) : If I like to the book, yes!
The findings support recent research in the area of reading attitude which suggests that motivated readers carry positive beliefs about themselves as readers (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997).

It can be gathered from C3 in Table 4 that 56% of the respondents would lose interest in reading when they do not know the words in the reading texts and only 3.75% disagreed with the idea. A similar finding is also discovered in C2 in which 53.3%

agreed that they would stop reading when they find the text is above their level of understanding. This feedback suggests that the respondents would not want to take the challenge of guessing the meanings of words and get 'turned off' when given difficult reading texts. It has been suggested by research that interest is far more significant than readability when it comes to the types of materials students read. Students can transcend their reading level when they have great interest in what they read.

Item	Material					Total
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	
C1:I get motivated to read when I can choose the reading materials	0	1 (0.9%)	26 (24.3%)	**66 (61.7%)**	14 (13.1%)	107
C2:I stop reading when I find the material is above my level of understanding	0	1 (0.9%)	**49 (46%)**	46 (43%)	11 (10.3%)	107
C3:I lose interest in reading when I do not know any of the words in the selected reading texts	0	4 (3.7%)	43 (40.2%)	**51 47.6%)**	9 (8.4%)	107
C4:I enjoy reading even if the reading material is not my choice	0	0	**62 (57.9%)**	43 (40.2%)	2 (1.9%)	107
C5:I find it easy to read a text if I use a dictionary	0	3 (2.8%)	19 (17.8%)	**57 (53.3%)**	28 (26.2%)	107
C6:I do not build an interest in reading because I do not get a variety of selected reading materials from my teacher	0	0	**72 (67.3%)**	34 (32%)	1 (0.9%)	107
C7:I enjoy reading because I have freedom to choose my own reading materials	0	0	29 (27.1%)	**55 (51.4%)**	23 (21.5%)	107
C8:Difficult reading texts do not make me lose	0	0	29 (27.1%)	**63 (59%)**	15 (14%)	107

interest in reading					
C9:I believe teachers should select reading materials that are interesting	0	3 (2.8%)	23 (21.5%)	**60 (56%)**	21 (19.6%)	107
C10:I enjoy reading other materials apart from academic ones	0	1 (0.9%)	22 (21%)	**63 (59%)**	21 (19.6%)	107
C11:I only enjoy reading when the reading materials serve some purposes	0	3 (2.8%)	**57 (53.3%)**	41 (38.3%)	6 (5.6%)	107
C12:I tend to get deeply engaged when I read English material	0	0	31 (29%)	**71 (66.4%)**	5 (4.7%)	107

Table 4: Reading Material Variable Analyses

However, the responses provided by most of the respondents interviewed featured differently from the feedback given in the questionnaire when they were asked whether they would give up easily when reading difficult passages.

> (R1) : No. I will try to understand those passages.
> (R3) : No because I can try to guess such as I ask my friend. There are certain words I can find in the dictionary.
> (R4) : No. I will try to understand the passage. Refer to the dictionary or contextual clues.
> (R5) : The truth kah? Yes. If it's susah to understand I give up. If there are pictures to explain then maybe lah…I try harder.

The responses given revealed that majority of the respondents (R1, R3 and R4) would still take the challenge to continue reading even though they found the text difficult, except for R5 who responded that she would give up reading if the text was too difficult unless there were pictures to help make it simpler to understand the text. The responses supported statements by Kaur and Thiyagarajah as cited in Ganakumaran (2004) that many Malaysian readers lacked the ability to deal with higher level reading texts that required critical and analytical reading skills and would prefer light and casual reading instead.

Thus, students who do not enjoy typical school texts often fail to engage in reading, and may develop a lifelong aversion to reading. Even if they are not initially struggling readers, "reluctant readers tend to gradually lose some academic ground, because wide reading is related to increases in general knowledge and reading comprehension" (Williamson & Williamson, 1988).

The Pre-Diploma Students' Reading Performance

The question of whether the students' academic reading performance is significantly affected by their reading attitudes is discussed below. Table 5 shows the overall performance of the students in their final examination reading comprehension test. The total score for the test is 20 percent. It consists of a passage of about 500 words. Based on the table, out of 20%, 1.9% of the students failed by scoring 5% - 8 %., 30.8% scored 9%-12%, about 47.7% of the students scored between 13-16% and 19.6% scored 17-20%. This indicates that the students performed well in their reading comprehension test with some students scoring full marks.

Marks/20 (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1% - 4%	-	-
5% - 8%	2	1.9
9% - 12%	33	30.8
13% - 16%	51	47.7
17%- 20%	21	19.6
Total	107	100.0

Table 5: The Overall Performance of the Pre-Diploma Students

Table 6 shows that students with better performance displayed positive responses towards reading attitude with those who scored 9-12% in the test displaying the percentage of 25% who agreed and 10% who disagreed. Those who scored between 13-16% displayed 49% who agreed and 40% strongly agreed, while those who scored 17-20% displayed the percentage of 25 % who agreed and 50% who strongly agreed. This shows that students with high performance had good attitudes towards reading. Thus, it is apparent that there is a significant relationship between performance and attitude.

		Attitude					Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Performance	5% - 8%	0	0	2	0	0	2
	9% - 12%	0	3	17	12 (25%)	1 (10%)	33
	13% - 16%	0	0	24	23 (49%)	4 (40%)	51
	17%- 20%	0	0	4	12 (25%)	5 (50%)	21
Total		0	3	47	47	10	107

Table 6: Attitude and Performance Analysis

Table 7 shows that in general, most of the students gave positive responses towards reading materials as their performance increases.

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	
Performance	5% - 8%	0	0	0	2 (2.7%)	0	2
	9% - 12%	0	0	11	22 (30%)	0	33
	13% -16%	0	0	8	37 (50%)	6 (50%)	51
	17%-20%	0	0	2	13 (17.5%)	6 (50%)	21
Total		0	0	21	74	12	107

Table 7: Material and Performance Analysis

Correlation Analysis

From Table 8, the Pearson correlation value is averagely less than 0.5 which shows that the two independent variables namely attitude (0.297) and material (0.246) have a weak to moderate relationship with the dependent variable, the academic performance.

DIMENSION		Attitude	Material	Environment	Performance
Attitude	Pearson Correlation	1.000			
Material	Pearson Correlation	0.337[**]	1.000		
Performance	Pearson Correlation	0.297[**]	0.246[**]	0.446[**]	1.000

Table 8: Correlation Coefficient

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Firstly, the study was confined only to MDAB students taking Pre-Commerce program in May to October 2011 semester. Hence, the results of the findings were only restricted and relevant to the students being studied and generalization of the findings cannot be applied to reflect all students in UiTM Sarawak.

Secondly, the respondents' race and gender were not taken as a major part of this study as the questionnaires were not equally distributed. Due to that, information gathered from Section A was featured only as a way of filtering the respondents according to some demographic categories.

Thirdly, the feedback given might not represent the actual feelings of the respondents with regards to the area of study. This is because some of the respondents were not being serious and inconsistent when giving their feedback in the questionnaires. This may also due to fear of revealing their weaknesses and wanting to please the interviewers. Some of them were inconsistent in giving their feedback. It was also discovered that some of the feedback gathered from the interview did not actually complement the findings from the questionnaires.

CONCLUSION

The overall results from the findings revealed a very encouraging outcome. In terms of students' general attitudes towards reading, it was discovered that most respondents possessed positive and encouraging attitudes towards reading. They agreed that reading was important not only because it prepared them for the examination, but it also helped them acquire knowledge and broaden their views. Apart from that, most respondents have also affirmed that they engaged themselves in reading for self-development. This has indirectly implied that the young generations were able to value reading from a different perspective instead of just committing themselves to the activity for the purpose of academic achievement.

It is also hoped that the findings can create awareness to the university and Ministry of Education in providing suitable and supportive reading materials and environment for these students. These bodies should be active in finding proactive ways of forging good reading habits among students. Perhaps, an intensive and effective reading program that will tackle the students' lack of interest in reading be given consideration. Apart from that, the data from the findings should be able to assist the lecturers in applying a variety of effective reading teaching methods that will enhance the students' academic performance and proficiency in mastering the language.

There is also a need to adopt an instructional approach that is sensitive to learners' needs which ultimately encourages them to generate a love for reading. In fact, the findings of the study will be a useful point of reference for further discussions on ways to establish relevant designs, planning, remedial and preventive measures in language learning. In addition, the findings will also help guide the university in its noble aspiration to change the destiny of these students, to consider the factors that may contribute to the failure of achieving the objectives of creating a specific academic program for these underprivileged students.

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