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Reading Attitudes Across a Broad Age Spectrum

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READING ATTITUDES ACROSS A BROAD AGE SPECTRUM

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BACKGROUND:

Children with parents who demonstrate a highly positive attitude toward reading and who read to their children generally profit from instruction when they begin learning to read and also enjoy considerable success (Durkin, 1966; McCormack, 1977). On the other hand, a review of current research indicates that there is little information available which demonstrates how school-age children as well as adults say they feel about reading. Further, Zirkel and Greene (1976) suggested that "there is a paucity of verbal self-report instruments in the reading attitude assessment area" (p. 107).

Parker (1978) used an objectively scored interview specifically designed to compare attitudes toward reading among students in grades two through six in an elementary school in east Tennessee. Students selected for the study were those classified by their teachers as either among the ten best or the ten weakest readers in their respective classes. Students in Parker's study classified as "poor" readers were predominantly from lower socioeconomic strata while the others were generally of average income. Very few students in the school were classified as being from homes with high incomes. Parker reported that there were no significant differences in attitudes toward reading between groups of "good" (N = 60) and "weak" (N = 60) readers. She concluded from this rather surprising result that children in earlier grades might tend to maintain positive attitudes toward reading despite evident difficulties with learning to read.

Relative to socioeconomic status and self-concept, Soares and Soares (1969) determined that adults (primarily parents and teachers) usually do not expect socioeconomically disadvantaged children to excel in school and, consequently, these children do not usually suffer damage to their self-concepts by not succeeding academically. Likewise, in a study involving high and low socioeconomic status elementary school children, Smith, Zingale, and Coleman (1978) concluded that the low socioeconomic status children did not generally suffer damage to their self-concepts because of academic failure. On the other hand, they reported that children in the high socioeconomic group tended to suffer from lowered self-concepts due to academic failure. Data from the above studies tend to corroborate findings reported by Parker concerning the relatively positive attitudes toward reading demonstrated by low socioeconomic children; i.e., inability to read efficiently probably did

not contribute to lowered self-esteem, consequently, such children did not demonstrate feelings of animosity toward reading.

In light of research cited above this study was undertaken to determine how attitudes toward reading vary among subgroups from within the general population.

PROCEDURES:

Attitudes toward reading were ascertained through administration of Estes' (1971) Attitude Scale. This instrument consists of 20 statements concerning reading for which the respondent selects from a one through five point scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." The highest possible score is 100 while the lowest obtainable score is 20 provided that the subject has responded to all the items. The higher the cumulative score, the more positive is the attitude toward reading reflected by the respondent.

This attitude scale was administered to whole classes at one sitting for Groups 1-4. Due to the composition of Groups 5 and 6, the instrument was individually administered to each subject.

DESCRIPTION OF GROUPS:

Subgroups were selected from among the population residing in the upper region of east Tennessee. There were five groups obtained for the purposes of this study while data concerning one additional group were obtained from an earlier study. There were 200 subjects in each group. A high percentage of the respondents in all of the subgroups were natives of the upper east Tennessee area. The proportion of males and females was approximately the same for all of the groups. A description of each group follows:

Group 1 was comprised of sixth-grade students in randomly selected classes in 1971. These students responded to Estes' (1971) Attitude Scale during that year as a control group in a study conducted by Fowler (1972). These students are currently of the typical age of the 1978 class of college freshmen.

Group 2 was comprised of students in sixth-grade classes in 1978.

Grade 3 consisted of students enrolled in a three-credit-hour elective course entitled "Reading Improvement" at East Tennessee State University (ETSU).

Group 4 consisted of students enrolled in required freshman English classes at ETSU.

Group 5 was comprised of men and women of age 60 or older.

Group 6 consisted of high school graduates, ages 18 through 22, who had never been enrolled in a college.

RESULTS:

Mean scores relative to positive attitudes toward reading ranged from a low of 70.23 for the non-college group of age 18-22 years to a high of 80.00 for the group in the classification of age 60 or older. The

mean score of 70.23 was substantially lower than that of any other group. Mean scores and standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	77.685	13.342
2	77.940	11.729
3	78.100	10.139
4	76.510	10.850
5	79.995	13.250
6	70.510	16.231

Analysis of variance yielded differences greater than .001 between the 18-22 year old non-college group and all of the other subgroups. As mentioned above, the older group demonstrated the most positive attitudes toward reading. This group produced a mean substantially higher than that of the non-college young adults but also significantly higher (.004) than that for students in the freshman English classes.

Comparison of mean scores between the 60 and older group yielded a less substantial but nonetheless notable difference (.083) in favor of the older group when compared with the 1961 sample of sixth graders.

Overall, mean differences ranged from greater than .001 through .884. The least difference occurred in responses of 1978 sixth graders when compared with students in the Reading Improvement classes. Table 2 presents probability levels determined through analysis of variance when all the subgroups were compared.

TABLE 2

Probability Levels Determined Through Analysis of Variance

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Group 2	0.839	—	—	—	—
Group 3	0.726	0.884	—	—	—
Group 4	0.335	0.206	0.131	—	—
Group 5	0.083	0.101	0.109	0.004	—
Group 6	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001

As can be seen from the tables above, the most substantial differences were found between the non-college group of young adults and the other subgroups. The older group demonstrated the most positive attitudes toward reading and books.

DISCUSSION:

Both of the sixth-grade groups demonstrated highly positive attitudes toward reading even though there were substantial numbers of students in these groups from lower socioeconomic strata. Therefore, it appears that many of the sixth graders who are relatively poor achievers demonstrated positive attitudes toward reading. This conclusion is consistent with Parker's data reported earlier. Such findings suggest that it is not justifiable to suggest that negative attitudes toward reading are prevalent among elementary school children nor that such attitudes evolve primarily because of socioeconomic status and/or failure in learning to read competently. Further, if failure in learning to read substantially contributed to lowered self-concept among lower socioeconomic sixth graders, than it would be expected that negative attitudes toward reading would have resulted.

Apparently, changes in attitudes toward reading in the non-college young adults evolved primarily as the result of factors occurring after grade six. The question naturally arises, "What were those factors which contributed to the less positive attitudes toward reading demonstrated by the non-college young adults?"

Perhaps reading attitudes became less positive because of the heavier demands placed on them as secondary school students to gain information from reading material which was too difficult for them. Further, since formal developmental reading instruction often ends when students leave elementary schools, it can be assumed that many of the non-college young adults did not have the opportunity to engage in the type of intensive program necessary for them to become more competent readers. If the non-college young adults had been involved in such reading programs beyond grade six they probably would have more adequately mastered reading skills with accompanying positive attitudes. These contentions lend to the conclusion that intensive remediation of low achievers should not only be undertaken in elementary schools but should be continued through grade twelve if necessary.

The results, relative to positive attitudes among the sixth graders, provide for cautious optimism concerning the prospects of low achievers for making substantial gains in reading achievement in the years beyond grade six. Since positive attitudes evidently exist among most low achieving sixth graders, it appears likely that many would respond positively to intensive remedial instruction provided that such efforts did not result in further frustration. It appears likely that the further beyond grade six such remediation were attempted, the less probable would be prospects for success. Perhaps low achievers upon leaving elementary schools should be guided into special reading/language programs until levels of mastery suggest that they are likely to experience success when placed in grade level academic classes.

The highly positive attitudes toward reading demonstrated by older citizens indicate that there is a potentially large and productive population which could more adequately be served by secondary schools and

colleges. Given various amounts of guidance, older citizens could comfortably participate in course work along with younger students in regular academic and continuing education courses. Watkins (1979), citing a report released by the National Council on the Aging, indicated that approximately half of the current population of adults between the ages of 50 and 64 years desire to continue working after reaching the age of 65. It is evident that desire to change occupational roles would frequently be accompanied by a need for further formal education which would involve considerable reading. Further, Watkins reported that there are currently four million Americans over the age of 65 who want to be gainfully employed while another two million express interest in various types of volunteer work. The intent of older citizens to be meaningfully occupied, along with evidently positive attitudes toward reading, suggests that schools and colleges would be well advised to more widely open their doors to older citizens through community relations and counseling programs.

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