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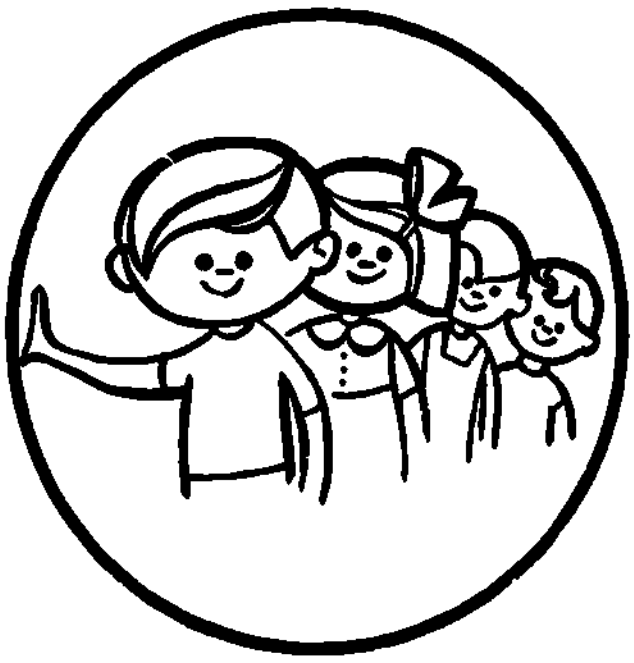
ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the state of the art in attitude assessment of young children toward school and school-related activities. The focus is on preschool children, aged four, through second grade children. Various problems of attitude assessment are presented and techniques of attitude measurement such as (1) teacher ratings, (2) rating children under simulated conditions, (3) pupil's self-report and (4) non-reactive unobtrusive measures are discussed. (CK)



HEAD START

TEST COLLECTION REPORT

ASSESSING THE ATTITUDES

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YOUNG CHILDREN TOWARD SCHOOL

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Samuel Ball

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most important questions to be asked of a new educational curriculum, or indeed of any educational intervention, is whether the learners' attitudes toward school and school-related activities have been changed. If, for example, a new curriculum in beginning reading improves the child's word attack skills but concurrently causes the child to become unhappy in school and hostile to the reading teacher, one would be loath to endorse the new curriculum. If, on the other hand, a new child-oriented activity program were introduced in a nursery school or kindergarten and had no discernible effects other than to cause the children in the new program to enjoy school more and to look forward eagerly to each day's activities, then there would be considerable cause to argue for a more widespread use of the program.

Attitudes toward school and school-related activities are clearly a potent criterion in judging the effectiveness of an educational program. Unfortunately, the assessment of these attitudes is a difficult task and especially so if the child whose attitudes are being assessed is young--that is, in a preschool program or in kindergarten, first, or second grade. This paper will present an overview of the state of the art in attitude assessment with particular focus on the attitudes of young children from four-year-olds through second graders toward school and school-related activities.

ATTITUDE DEFINED

The way we define the term "attitude" has important ramifications for the ways we measure it. There are many technical definitions of attitudes,

but most of them have certain features in common. By compiling these common features, we find that an attitude is an implicit cue and drive producing response to socially salient characteristics and that it possesses evaluative properties. Each aspect of this definition needs further explanation.

The term "implicit" indicates that an attitude is within the individual. It cannot be seen, felt, touched, or observed in any direct fashion. It is something whose presence we can infer on the basis of certain sorts of behavior but it must always remain an inference by the observer or, on the other side of the same coin, something implied by the behavior we observe.

The phrase "cue and drive producing" means that an attitude held by a person will tend to cause that person to notice things and to do things selectively. If he has a positive attitude toward teachers he might notice how kind teachers are and he might decide to stay behind at recess and help his teacher tidy the room. If he has a negative attitude toward teachers, he might notice how often teachers get angry and he might decide one day to exaggerate a slight cold so he can stay home from school. By observing what cues a person notices and what things he does, we can presumably begin to infer his attitudes.

The notion that an attitude is a response suggests that behavior permitting a person's attitudes to be inferred can be elicited by providing appropriate stimuli. These stimuli could be verbal (as in a paper and pencil test) or nonverbal (as in the case of observing behavior under simulated conditions). In either case, the test maker does something to provoke an attitudinal response.

The definition of an attitude also indicates that school and school-related activities are appropriate areas for assessment because they are

socially salient in the life of the young child. It is exceedingly rare to find children who have not developed attitudes toward school by the middle of their first year's experience in a school or preschool classroom.

Finally, the definition reminds us that an attitude is, in a sense, a personal evaluation. It contains either a positive (liking, wanting to be near) attribute or a negative (disliking, wanting to escape) attribute.

PROBLEMS IN ATTITUDE MEASUREMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN

A major problem in measuring the attitudes of young children is that there is little stability in their attitudes. Lacking a large experimental background, they are more likely to be swayed by specific, momentary considerations than older children or adults. For example, a four-year-old who has just fallen and skinned his knee in his Head Start center may confidently tell you he hates school and may show every behavioral indication that he means it. However, ten minutes earlier he might have expressed an entirely different attitudinal response toward school; the same may be true a half hour later when his knee stops hurting. While this inconsistency over time reduces the reliability of attitude assessment in young children, and so reduces our confidence in the accuracy of a particular assessment of one particular child, there is less trouble associated with comparing assessments of one group over the assessments of another group. This is because individual errors tend to be random and the mean score for a group will be more stable and presumably more accurate than the score for any one child. If the question is whether open classroom techniques improve kindergarten children's attitudes toward school, it can be answered readily enough,

for example, by comparing the attitude assessments of forty children in open classrooms with those of forty comparable children in more conventional classrooms. Similarly, despite the lack of confidence in the accuracy of the attitude assessment of one child on one occasion, our confidence can be greatly enhanced by assessment of that same child over a number of occasions.

A second major problem in the assessment of attitudes in young children is that they lack the skills usually expected in test-taking situations. That is, they are unable to read or write (or they cannot do these very well), and they find it difficult to follow instructions, even when orally presented without helpful supervision. Thus, a number of techniques for assessing attitudes in older children and adults do not work satisfactorily with young children. Certainly every attitude test should be individually administered to preschool and first grade children though it may be administered to small groups when second grade children are being assessed.

A third problem in assessing young children's attitudes toward school is that young children are exceedingly eager to please adults, including, of ccurse, adults who are administering attitude tests. They will tend to say what they think the adult wants them to say. Allied to this problem is that young children, when confronted with situations that puzzle them, will tend to perserverate on a set response, usually "yes" but sometimes "no". For an extreme example,

"Do you like ice cream?"

"Yes."

"Do you like listening to stories?"

"Yes."

"Do you like falling over?"

"Yes."

When this sort of response set occurs, all responses are suspect. Maybe he meant yes to all the questions, but perhaps he did not. A skillful tester will often know if the child is answering in terms of social desirability or response set. A well-constructed test will try to overcome the problem by disguising the intent of the question and varying the procedures, but the problem cannot be eliminated. One should always, on looking at data on young children's attitudes, ask questions about how the data was collected, by whom, using what techniques. Then, if the answers appear satisfactory, the results can be interpreted with proper caution.

TECHNIQUES OF ATTITUDE ASSESSMENT

A. Teacher Ratings. If we want to know whether a child has a positive attitude to school or whether, for example, he enjoys pre-reading activities, a useful technique is to get his teacher to rate the child on these dimensions. The rationale for this is that the teacher has had sufficient experience of the child's behavior to be able to make correct inferences about his attitudes.

A reasonable method is to give the teacher a five-point scale with each of the five points carefully worded. Here is an example of a descriptive-graphic rating scale.

Example

Directions: Make your ratings on each of the following attitudes by placing an X anywhere along the line. If you have insufficient knowledge of the child, put a check mark in the margin and go on to the next rating.

1. Attitude toward reading.

1	2	3	4	5
Acts bored, slow to take out materials, strongly prefers other activities.		Seems about as eager as other class members in reading lessons.		Asks teacher for reading activities, becomes happy and excited when reading lessons begin. Often is seen reading.

2. Attitude toward teacher.

(etc.)

People using the teacher rating technique to assess the attitudes of children should be aware of certain problems that persistently occur:

... Some teachers tend to use only one position on a scale to rate all the children in their classes. They may be overly severe, overly cautious, or overly generous. Whatever the reason for using only one section of the scale, the result is that each child has about the same score. Thus, it is usually impossible to use the assessments for their intended purpose -- for example, to find the children who need special help, or to see what programs create most positive impact. Therefore, a teacher should be encouraged to use all of the scale unless her class is really unusual in that all her children hold the same attitudes.

... Most teachers tend to be influenced in their ratings by the overall "quality" of the child. If the teacher likes a child she tends to rate the child highly across all the attitudes being assessed. This "halo effect" obscures the strengths and weaknesses of a child's attitude structure. It can be mitigated, though probably not eliminated, by warning teachers about the tendency.

... Sometimes a teacher's ratings are suspect because the teacher may know what the ratings are being used for, and is influenced by this knowledge. To avoid this problem an independent observer might be introduced into the classroom to rate the children's attitudes. This procedure does involve a large commitment of time on the rater's part if all children in the class are to be rated. As a partial answer to this problem, a second technique of attitude assessment might be used.

B. Rating Children Under Simulated Conditions. It is time consuming to follow a child around in a classroom for a long enough period to allow an independent observer to be able to infer his attitudes toward school and school-related activities. An observer with some training in clinical techniques could set up a room or corner of a room to simulate a school environment. By playing games with the child in this simulated situation, directing conversations, and observing his reactions, the observer can short-cut the time required to make usefully accurate ratings of the child's attitudes. It is not a recommended means of assessing attitudes unless a skilled clinician is available.

C. Pupil's Self-Report. A convenient method for finding out a child's attitudes is to ask him using some way intelligible to him. Let him tell you what he thinks about school, about reading, about school rules, or whatever. A method intelligible to children in the upper grades of elementary school is a series of questions or true-false (yes-no) items that might be used, depending on the focus of the assessment. For example,

School is a very interesting place.

I like to do school work at home in the evenings.

I like to stay home from school.

My teacher is mean.

Each morning I look forward to coming to school.

My teacher is often too busy when I need help.

It might be objected that items such as these are transparent -- that is, the child will know what it is the teacher is trying to find out and will react according to this knowledge. Most studies seem to show that second and third graders will be non-defensive in an attitude area like this and that this technique allows the valid and reliable assessment of their attitudes.

A preferable technique, and one which can be extended down to four-year-olds, though individual and not group testing is essential, involves the use of pictures rather than words on the child's answer sheet. For example, one item out of a group of items to assess a child's attitude toward books and reading might have the tester show a child four pictures and then have the tester tell the child, "Here's a boy reading a book, here's a boy watching TV, here's a boy sitting in the park and here's a boy going for a walk. Which do you like to do best? Point to, (show me), the picture."

There are many other possible variations on this self-report theme. For children aged four and five, a useful variation of the self-report is to use pictures involving a happy face and a sad face. First, establish that the child can tell the difference between happy and sad by presenting some simple sample items, for example, "Here is a picture of you. This is (child's name - Sally(?)). Sally is eating ice cream. Are you happy (tester points to a picture of a happy-faced child) or are you sad (tester points to a picture of a sad-faced child) when you eat ice cream? If little Sally is able to respond appropriately to, say, six out of eight such questions the tester can then proceed to the important part of the test. Items here could ask Sally if she is happy or sad in a classroom, in the school playground, talking to a teacher, or reading a book.

If there is a danger that the child might be too defensive to respond truthfully to these kinds of self-report items, a more projective approach can be used. That is, instead of asking such questions as "Do you like school?" or in the case of the younger child "Are you happy?" (pointing to a picture of a child in school), the question can be about some third person. For example, "This is a story about a boy called Bill. Bill is six and he's in first grade. Does Bill like going to school?" Presumably the child is freer to respond since it is about someone else and presumably he projects his own attitudes on to Bill. Notice the double use of the word "presumably" in the previous sentence. The more projective the test, the more presumptions underlie inferences of attitudes based on the test.

Of the general problems that beset the self-report technique, one of the most worrisome is that the tester necessarily intrudes and affects to some degree the response a child makes even when a projective approach is used. There is no way of knowing how much this occurs for any given child. Another technique, the use of non-reactive and unobtrusive measures, will be discussed next.

D. Non-reactive, unobtrusive measures. Ideally, what a measure tells us about children's attitudes should not be a function of the presence of the tester or observer. A clever technique is to use records which are a normal part of a school routine and simple pieces of physical evidence to assess what children do -- and then make inferences about attitudes accordingly. For example, in general, second grade children who like reading are more likely to read books than children who do not like reading. Therefore one might go to the school library and examine the records of the second graders whose attitudes toward reading are being assessed.

The same approach can be used to assess children's attitudes toward school. One could obtain from school records the attendance levels of various children, perhaps comparing the absenteeism of children in open classrooms with those in conventional classrooms.

The number of possibilities is very large indeed. How worn out are the linoleum tiles around the reference books section compared with those around the fairy stories section? How dirty does the glass get in front of the fish tank versus the glass in front of the chicken incubator? The advantages of non-reactive, unobtrusive measures are purchased at the expense of some precision. Records may not be well-kept. Besides, a number of alternate hypotheses can be generated to explain any noted differences. Thus a greater rate of book borrowing might be contaminated by a lower reading difficulty level. Some children who read very few books may have read longer books. Or again, the poorer attendance level of children in the conventional classroom could be due to a child with a contagious disease having spent too long there.

Non-reactive, unobtrusive measures of attitudes can be worth getting. In general they could be used as a supplement to other measures, or perhaps, as a relatively quick means of obtaining some indication of attitudes.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has pointed out the difficulties of measuring attitudes in young children. These difficulties in part stem from the nature of the young child and in part from the fact that attitudes of any age group can only be assessed through inferences based on observed behavior -- and that is, at best, an indirect and inexact process.

Given these dual problems measuring attitudes in young children, there are nonetheless some techniques that can be usefully employed as discussed above. No technique can be used with much confidence if the goal is to assess the attitudes of a particular child. Too much error is likely to creep into individual assessments and thereby mask the true score. But, if the measurements are carefully made, groups of children can be more confidently assessed. For example, we can show with some assurance that a particular program creates more positive attitudes to school than some other program. It is recommended that more than one measurement technique be used if the evaluator wishes to establish strongly his attitude assessments.

Attitudes are often ignored in evaluations because of the problems of assessment. But we have seen that these problems can be, at least partly, overcome. Especially in young children, attitudes are extremely important. They determine the spirit in which the child approaches his future school experiences. Thus, there is both a rationale and a set of techniques for their assessment.

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