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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses change and development of student attitudes, especially in reading, and several alternative methods which are available for measurement and observation of change in attitudes. Important considerations for the reading teacher who is interested in developing student attitudes include establishing a positive environment which makes reading a pleasant experience, setting purposes for reading which avoid negative consequences, and projecting a positive attitude toward learning and the students. Suggestions for measuring attitude include using a Likert method, using stimulus situations which differ only in the presence or absence of reading or books, and using a scale for judging plausibility of arguments. (WR)

ATTITUDE TOWARD READING: ALTERNATIVES IN ASSESSMENT

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by

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Attitude toward Reading Thomas H. Estes

The affective, as compared to the cognitive and psychomotor, has received least emphasis of the three domains of educational concern. Overwhelmingly, it is the cognitive domain with which education is virtually synonymous, and this may, in the long run, be regretful. With an overbalance toward the intellectual dimension of learning, schools may easily sacrifice for the present what they hope for in the future.

Almost everyone can probably recall having been told on more than one occasion by a teacher, "I don't care if you like it or not; I know it will be good for you to learn this and some day you'll thank me." There's no way to know, of course, but one might wonder how often the appreciation has been expressed. In any case, the idea that learning in school need be painful is at best anachronistic and at worst damaging to the future learning experiences of students. The affective feeling rather than the cognitive product of learning will more often than not determine those experiences.

Name a subject and any specialist in the discipline can name a dozen achievement tests for it immediately, can name hundreds if given time to check some reference. Buros published a rather lengthy compendium of reading tests and reviews in 1968, and the list grows every year. But how many people can name

even one test to measure students' attitudes toward what they study? The test market does provide an accurate barometer of educational concern, at least to the degree that any commercial market is responsive to the demands of consumers. Knowledge and skill reign paramount in schools.

I would maintain, however, that knowledge is tenuous and ephemeral by comparison to attitudes. Before a student graduates from high school, a great measure of what he has learned in the form of facts and concepts is either false, out of date, or in some degree useless to him. Attitudes, by contrast, are immutable, or nearly so. And by their nature they tend to act as determinants of subsequent behavior and learning. Stated in more specific terms, the necessary and sufficient conditions for reading to become a lifelong habit include both that he know how to read and that he like to read.

My contention is that students' attitudes toward what they learn are more important than what they learn. Stemming from this admittedly radical proposition, I want to address myself to two points. First, I want to make a few remarks about change and development of attitudes in school, especially regarding reading. Second, I want to discuss the several alternative methods which are available for measurement and observation of change in attitudes.

To this point, I have not tried to define attitude. Not surprisingly, it is a difficult concept to pin down in a few words. In most general terms, an attitude is both a feeling and

and a disposition toward a class of tangible or intangible objects to which the attitude is related. The feeling can range from absolutely positive to absolutely negative. The disposition can range from complete avoidance to obsessive seeking. Intertwined with these two components, feeling and disposition, is a third, cognitive state, reflected in a person's ability to verbalize his feelings.

Perhaps it could be said that for the reading teacher, attitude toward reading is whatever leads a person to read in the face of alternative activities related to a similar goal. For example, reading a book instead of watching television for entertainment is a choice many people face. The decision is at least partially related to the relative feeling for reading and television as objects of entertainment.

This understanding of attitude is important to a consideration of change and development of attitude. The most basic truism about attitude toward reading is that if learning to read is pleasant and successful for students, then their attitudes toward reading are likely to be positive. Positive attitudes toward reading depend on both success and pleasure with learning and using reading. If learning to read, successful or not, is not a pleasant experience, the reader may learn to avoid the act as quickly as he learns to perform it.

The child learning to read, therefore, must come to associate positive conditions with reading. The environment in which one learns anything affects his attitude toward it. A pleasant

classroom filled with reading material that is pleasing to students is vital to positive attitude development.

Equally critical as positive conditions are positive consequences to attitude development. The learner who has repeated experiences with negative consequences of reading will likely develop a negative attitude toward reading. Take for examples the following common consequences: children are required to answer endless lists of questions following everything they read. Children are forced to read orally in front of others to their mutual embarrassment. Reading tests seem to come every other week and for the very one it hurts the most, the troubled reader, the consequence of reading is repeated failure. In upper grades, at least, it must often seem to students that the only reason to read is to pass a test. And pass it or not, as a purpose for reading, taking a test is a poor consequence. Even when the test is not there later, the negative feeling, like a bad habit, can persist. I don't want to dwell on a lengthy list of negative conditions which can lead to negative attitudes, but the result of such conditions is that in the most literate nation in history, people today read shockingly little.

The last point I want to make about development of attitudes relates to the teacher's direct role. There is no more potent force in the classroom than the teacher. If that person is able to sincerely project a positive attitude toward learning, toward reading, toward students, the chances of positive attitude development are literally multiplied. On the other hand, if someone

is teaching something he doesn't like, whether a skill called reading or a learner called Johnny, he probably is doing more harm than good.

With some understanding of the nature of attitudes and how they are formed, teachers can modify instructional practices and environments to maximize positive attitude development. The question remains, however, of how to measure attitude, to observe its change and growth.

The history of attitude measurement in schools is meager. Few scales exist for measurement of attitude toward reading. Two of my colleagues and I have recently published a scale to measure attitudes toward English, math, reading, science, and social studies (Estes, Johnstone, & Richards, 1975). Harry Sartain has authored a reading attitudes inventory, data on which were presented at the 1970 Pennsylvania Educational Research Association Convention (Heimberger, 1970). The San Diego County Department of Education developed a reading attitude scale some years ago (San Diego County Department of Education, 1961). But the sum of available scales is relatively small.

It seems to me that one of the reasons for so little growth in this critical area of evaluation is that even those who would wish to do so do not really believe attitudes can be measured. One might say that blithe, almost indiscriminate acceptance of intellectual measures has arrested their growth and development. Reading tests, as a case in point, are hardly different, in the main, from what they were fifty years ago. The Gray Oral lives on, for better or worse. Conversely, reluctant acceptance of affect

as either a major objective or quantifiable outcome of education has to date aborted attitude measurement and research in the embryonic stage.

I, obviously as co-author of one of the few attitude scales available for use in schools, do believe that attitude not only can but should be measured as an outcome of educational experiences. Because of that, I want to explore with you a few of the ways in which I think attitude measurement is possible.

Basically, there are two ways of measuring attitudes. All attitude scales are roughly classifiable as either direct or indirect measurement, though in some cases the classification depends on subjective judgment.

Direct methods are distinguished by the fact that respondents to the scale know what is being measured. For example, the Likert method presents the respondent with a series of statements related to reading and asks for a rating of agreement or disagreement with those statements. Items such as this appear: "Books are boring"; "Books make good presents." Summing response values across many such items provides a quantitative value for the respondent's attitude toward reading. Another rather direct method asks students to make choices between reading and alternative activities. Items such as this appear: _____ read . . . . _____ watch T.V.; _____take a nap . . . . . _____ read. Summing the number of times across many such hypothetical choices a person says he would rather read provides a quantification of attitude toward reading, though such a scale lacks the variance provided by the Likert method.

The major problem with such scales as these is that they may be easily dissimulated, or faked. People may choose to lie on such scales for fear of admitting dislike for a socially and academically acceptable behavior.

Indirect methods, on the other hand, are distinguished by the fact that respondents do not know what is being measured, or at least it is not readily apparent. Kenneth Dulin and Robert Chester of the University of Wisconsin have recently developed several such scales in their research (Dulin and Chester, 1974b; Dulin and Chester, 1974c). For example, one scale presents stimulus situations which differ only in the presence or absence of reading or books. Take the following: "A suitcase is opened for inspection at an airport and you notice its contents. (The contents are described, in some cases including reading material, in others not.) What kind of a person is this traveller? (A semantic differential is provided through which the question may be answered.) Those who react more positively to situations in which reading is a part of the picture are inferred to have a more positive attitude toward reading. A second example of indirect measurement of attitude toward reading is the plausibility judgment scale. Respondents are asked to rate their judgment of the effectiveness of such arguments as: "Reading is bad because people who read are less social than those who don't." A person's judgment of the potency of such an argument, aside from whether he thought it was valid, would be swayed by his attitude toward reading (Waley & Cook, 1965). Responses across a great number of such arguments, positive and negative, can be taken as an index of attitude toward reading.

The major problem with indirect measurement of attitudes, however, is that one can never be sure that the affect inferred from any behavior or judgment is justified. Many variables might be reflected in the scores of indirect scales and the validity of purely inferential or projective assessment is open to serious question.

The next decade or two, I believe, will witness extensive research in development and measurement of attitudes toward reading and other school subjects and activities. The choice between direct and indirect methods of measurement for researchers and teachers will come down to this: Which kind of scale provides the most accurate picture of attitudes? At present the research evidence (Johnstone, 1973; Dulin and Chester, 1974a) heavily favors the direct, Likert-type scale. Certainly, both methods are imperfect. Can we know that students won't lie to a direct scale? Can we be sure of inferences drawn from an indirect measure? Neither question can be answered unequivocally, but the evidence to date suggests at least two possibilities. Either children don't lie nearly as much as adults might think (which I personally believe) or the present state of development of inferential measurement is too crude to be sensitive to the construct of attitude (this is probably also true).

Over the long haul, I think, we will develop attitude measurement devices of various kinds for various purposes, better than any presently available. Even now, however, we are approaching the ability to answer both of the reading teacher's two most crucial questions. I leave it to you to judge their relative importance. Can Johnny read? Will Johnny read?

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