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# THE EFFECTS OF U.S.S.R. ON STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND ACHIEVEMENT

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Today's educators recognize the importance of positive attitudes toward reading as a major concern of the basic reading program, and much has been written about the need to foster such attitudes. Wilson and Hall (1972) note that a positive attitude is essential for successful mastery of the printed page. Burns and Roe (1980) state that children with positive attitudes toward reading will expend more effort in the reading process than will children with negative attitudes.

Some authorities are convinced that attitudes may not only influence the student's desire and willingness to read, but may also affect reading achievement. Burns and Roe (1980) believe that there is an interrelationship between attitude and achievement; that is, "good attitudes, or feelings, about reading enhance reading achievement and good achievement enhances better feelings about reading." Ransbury's (1973) data support the latter claim. In a study, she found that fifth and sixth grade students attributed their attitudes toward reading mainly to their ability to read; that is, the greater their achievement in reading, the more positive their attitudes became. Bond and Tinker (1973) believe that successful achievers tend to form positive attitudes.

The widespread conviction that the reading program should help to develop positive attitudes toward reading has led many writers to try to determine factors which contribute to the development of such attitudes. A review of the literature suggests that in developing a positive attitude toward reading, the teacher must give attention to the importance of self-concept (Kokovich and Matthews, 1971; Quandt, 1971); teacher attitudes and behaviors (Smith, 1959; Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968; Palardy, 1969; McCracken, 1969; Carver, 1971); selected instructional practices (Grambs, 1959; Healy, 1965; Duffy, 1967; Kemper, 1969; Bullen, 1970; Lamb, 1971; Cathcart, 1973; Alexander and Filler, 1976); and ways of working with parents (Seigler and Gynther, 1960; Hansen, 1969).

Bisset (1969) found a significant increase in the amount of student reading when students had access to a variety of reading materials in the classroom and when they had the opportunity to discuss the materials with the teacher and with each other. Sauls (1971) found a positive relationship between the number of books read and the students' reading comprehension and attitude toward reading.

Sex has sometimes been found to be related to attitudes toward reading, with girls showing more positive attitudes in some studies (Hansen, 1969; Askov, 1970), although little sex difference was noted in another study (Denny and Weintraub, 1966). Socioeconomic level has generally been found to have a negligible relationship with attitude toward reading (Groff, 1962; Heimberger, 1970; Filler, 1973).

Since the factors which appear to have the most noticeable relationship to attitudes toward reading are those which lend themselves to intervention on the part of the teacher, it would seem that classroom techniques for promoting positive attitudes should be given attention. Chambers (1966) has suggested that frequent library trips are helpful in developing positive attitudes toward reading. Duffy (1967) believes that a relaxed time should be provided daily for children to read without pressure, and that a wide variety of books be present. Kemper (1969) believes that teachers can do a number of specific things which would lead to more favorable attitudes: planning reading activities which students like; using materials related to children's interests and needs; providing for recreational reading; and demonstrating a personal value for reading by practicing it orally and/or silently.

Middle graders participating in Roettger's (1980) study made several suggestions concerning their attitudes toward reading. They indicated that they felt children "should have time each day to read 'their own' books, even if they had not completed all their work." They also felt that teachers should help children find books they would enjoy by talking with them, and by telling them about interesting books.

The program called Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading (USSR or SSR) is widely advocated, sometimes under other names (Moore, Jones, and Miller, 1980), as a program which should help foster positive attitudes toward reading as well as help improve reading achievement (Hunt, 1972; Mork, 1972; McCracken, 1971; Noland, 1976). USSR incorporates attributes mentioned by many writers as valuable for the development of favorable attitudes and increased achievement: a specific time set aside for reading at regular intervals; a large quantity and wide variety of reading materials available; provision of a role model in that the teacher and other adults in the school show their value of reading by participating along with the children; encouragement to read by these adults; a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere; lack of pressure to report on what has been read; and the opportunity to share information about books read, if desired. Many authorities believe that these ingredients cannot fail to produce more favorable attitudes toward reading as well as increased reading achievement.

Most statements regarding the relationship of USSR to the development of positive attitudes and increased achievement, however, are based on observation rather than research (Moore, Jones, and Miller, 1980). The present study was undertaken in an effort to measure the effectiveness of USSR in promoting positive student attitudes toward and increasing student achievement in reading in a controlled situation.

## PROCEDURES

The school in which this study was conducted had eleven fifth and sixth grade classes participating in the study, resulting in a population of 250 students. Of these, 60 fifth graders and 71 sixth graders engaged in USSR under the guidance of their homeroom teachers for 30 minutes every day for six months. The remaining five classes comprised the control group of 119 students and did not engage in USSR. The classes were randomly assigned to the six experimental and five control groups; all groups were mixed as to race and sex and were representative of the community as a whole.

USSR took place during the homeroom period when the children were heterogeneously grouped rather than during the homogeneously grouped language arts period; thus, all students continued to receive their usual reading instruction in the basal reading program throughout the duration of the study. The system in which the school is located emphasizes a well-coordinated basal program throughout all grades as the primary approach to the teaching of reading, with the same series being used in all classes. During the period when the experimental groups were engaged in USSR, the other groups were involved in varied activities focusing on units in health, manners, and grooming.

Four instruments were used to gather data prior to and at the completion of this study. The Heathington Intermediate Scale for Measuring Attitudes (1975) and the Estes Attitude Scale (1971) measured changes in attitudes toward reading as indicated by the students. A Scale of Reading Attitude Based on Behavior, by Rowell (1972), marked by all the teachers for the students in their language arts groups, measured observable behavior patterns reflecting student attitudes toward reading. The Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT, 1963) gave a reading grade score and measured achievement in reading.

The SORT tests were administered individually to the children by the principal researcher; the children responded to the two attitude surveys in their language arts classroom groups. The teachers responded individually to Rowell's A Scale of Reading Attitude Based on Behavior. These were marked by the teachers for those children who were in their language arts classes in an effort to prevent spurious gains caused by the teachers being aware of which children were in the experimental classes.

Teachers participating in the study attended an informal conference held by the principal researcher during which guidelines for USSR as set forth by McCracken and McCracken (1972) were discussed. A printed copy of the guidelines was also furnished to each teacher to insure uniformity of participation.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Attitudes. Table 1 presents the results of the analysis of data gathered by administering the three attitude surveys—Heathington Intermediate Attitude Scale, the Estes Attitude Scale, and Rowell's A Scale of Reading Attitudes Based on Behavior. Mean scores were obtained for pretest and posttest administrations,

and differences between these means were analyzed by use of the t-test to determine significance. Differences between pretest and posttest mean scores on the Heathington and the Estes were not significant; however, the difference between the pretest and posttest means for the Rowell were significant ( $p < .001$ ).

Table 1  
Effect of USSR on  
Attitude Toward Reading

Instrument	Group	Mean Difference	t value
Heathington	USSR	-0.2061	1.42
	Contr.	-2.5546	
Estes	USSR	-1.7252	0.27
	Contr.	-2.1176	
Rowell	USSR	3.3206	7.14*
	Contr.	-2.2101	

USSR = N 131  
Contr. = N 119

\*  $p < .001$

These findings indicate that attitudes toward reading, as measured by the Heathington and the Estes, of students who participated in this study did not change significantly from pretest to posttest; and that attitudes of students who had participated in USSR did not differ significantly from attitudes of students who had not participated in USSR. However, teachers who observed these students believed that the USSR students finished their six-months of involvement with improved attitudes, as opposed to those who had no USSR. These beliefs are reflected in the scores on the Rowell which are significantly in favor of the USSR group.

It should be noted that the Heathington and the Estes are instruments that require the students to report their own feelings, whereas the Rowell is completed by teachers based on their observations of the students. It is possible that the students were unsure of the way to respond to this self-report instrument; such an instrument may be an inadequate method of obtaining data from elementary age children. It is also possible that the children were not particularly impressed with the USSR program, and their scores on the instruments showed these feelings.

Data obtained by the Rowell may also be open to question, in that the teachers in the language arts classes may have known which children were involved in the USSR groups and marked their tests for these children more favorably.

In view of the conflicting data gained in this study, it is impossible to draw any conclusions about the relationship of USSR to reading attitudes. Much more research needs to be done in this area before broad claims can be made.

Achievement. Table 2 presents the results of the analysis

of data gathered by administering the Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT). As with the attitude surveys, mean scores were obtained for pretest and posttest administrations, and the difference scores between these means were analyzed by use of the *t* test to determine significance of the difference in these mean scores. The difference between the pretest and the posttest means of the SORT was significant ( $p < .001$ ).

Table 2  
Effect of USSR on Reading Achievement

Instrument	Group	Mean Difference	t value
SORT	USSR	0.6969	7.94*
	Control	0.4765	

USSR = N 131  
Contr. = N 119

\*  $p < .001$

These findings indicate that the increase in reading test scores of children participating in USSR was significantly greater than the increase in reading test scores of children who did not participate in USSR.

#### IN CONCLUSION

Results obtained in this study indicate that regular participation by groups of fifth and sixth graders in a program of USSR was accompanied by improved performance on a measure of reading achievement over groups of fifth and sixth graders who did not participate in USSR. However, it is unclear whether the involvement in USSR had any effect on the children's attitudes toward reading. It is possible that continuing the study over a longer period of time may have yielded more positive results. Moore, Jones, and Miller (1980) feel that it is possible that no changes can be measured in just a few months' time.

While this study does not indicate that the improvement in reading test scores was a result of more positive attitudes toward reading, the reading score gain may have been related to an improvement in general vocabulary--an expected result concomitant with the wide reading done by the children in the USSR program.

This premise could well be the basis for further research into the relationship of USSR to improved reading test scores. The significant gain in reading test scores found in this study should be a persuasive argument in favor of using some form of USSR in every classroom on a regular basis.

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