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# THE NATURE AND MEASUREMENT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD READING

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In recent years attitudinal goals have increasingly become a planned facet of school curricula. As a result teachers have become more involved in assessing students' attitudes toward what is being taught. Reading is certainly one area that receives considerable attention in this respect. Secondary teachers and administrators have come to realize that improving students' attitudes toward reading is every bit as important as improving their reading comprehension, word recognition and word analysis skills. And so should it be. Fader (1968, 1976) has demonstrated how a focus on attitudinal factors is an essential part of helping many students to read better. There are also indications that attitude toward reading is linked to achievement in reading (Groff, 1962; Healey, 1965). Huck (1973) nicely summarizes yet another important reason for placing attitudinal objectives on a par with cognitive goals when she says:

If we teach a child to read, yet develop not the taste for reading, all of our teaching is for naught. We shall have produced a nation of "illiterate literates" — those who know how to read, but do not read (p. 305).

Certainly this increased attention to attitudinal concerns in reading is merited: the creation and maintenance of a positive attitude toward reading is an integral part of education in a literate culture. In this respect it can be seen that all secondary teachers should understand the nature of their students' attitudes toward reading and should know how to assess these attitudes.

## *Assumptions About Students' Attitudes Toward Reading*

Teachers are concerned with various questions which relate to the topic of attitudes toward reading: How does Peg feel about reading? Are Barry's problems with reading linked to poor attitude toward reading? Just what is the relationship between attitude and achievement in reading?

To make any headway in attempting to answer questions such as

these, attitudes toward reading must at some point be measured. An important issue stems from this need for measurement. It is generally agreed (see, for example, Thorndike & Hagen, 1977) that the first step in attempting to measure anything is to identify and define the quality of the attribute that is to be measured. Yet, with respect to the construct attitude toward reading, this crucial step is often glossed over and frequently ignored altogether. This failure to articulate what is meant by attitude toward reading could be considered as quite a curious phenomenon (How could anyone be so careless as not to define satisfactorily what is to be measured?), but upon consideration it is perhaps not so unusual. It seems likely that this lack of definition has occurred because it is generally felt that the nature of the construct is quite obvious and straightforward. As a result it has more or less been taken for granted that an individual has an attitude toward reading and that this attitude can be located at some point on a positive-negative continuum. Thus, a student could be said to have a moderately positive attitude toward reading or a very negative attitude toward reading and so forth. In such a notion attitude toward reading is assumed to be a unidimensional construct measured on a bipolar continuum.

However, conceiving of attitude toward reading as a simple unidimensional construct is, as we hope to show, too facile a notion; and, in many respects, a misleading idea as well. Instead, it is best to conceptualize attitude toward reading as multifaceted, and teachers need to be aware of this notion in their attempts to measure students' reading attitudes. Only by thinking of reading attitude in multidimensional terms will we be able to obtain adequate answers for the questions being posed.

### *The Nature of Attitude Toward Reading*

The reason why attitude toward reading should not be regarded as unidimensional is best illustrated by considering persons like the following two grade twelve students. Katrina plans to go to Stanvard next year to begin a major in microbiology and intends eventually to become an independent, biomedical researcher. She realizes that she must spend considerable time reading in order to gain admission to the program and that, during her university years and years on the job, it will be essential that she read a great deal in order to keep up with new developments in the field. On a self-report measure of attitude toward reading Katrina would indicate that reading was of great value to her. Yet Katrina does not enjoy reading. She seldom reads non-fiction irrelevant to her school work and rarely, if at all, reads fiction. Reading also ranks very low on her list of preferred leisure activities. Katrina's reason for seeing reading in a positive light is that reading is necessary for securing her chosen occupation and for promoting job satisfaction.

Contrast Katrina with Joan. Next year Joan will begin a full-time job which requires virtually no reading (and this job is one with which she is very satisfied). Because reading is unimportant in her chosen career,

Joan does not value reading as a means for succeeding vocationally as does Katrina. However, Joan does enjoy reading and ranks reading as one of her favorite leisure activities.

Katrina and Joan are individuals who fittingly illustrate the existence of different facets of the construct of attitude toward reading, facets which need to be taken into account by those seeking to understand and to measure the construct.

One way of approaching the problem of adequately characterizing attitude toward reading is by drawing upon the insights provided by social psychologists working in the field of attitude formation. Researchers in this area have for some time distinguished among the cognitive, affective, and conative components of attitude (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960; Insko & Schopler, 1967; Triandis, 1971; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

When applied to reading, this tripartite model would describe attitude toward reading as having the following components:

- (i) a *cognitive component*, that is, one's beliefs or opinions about reading (e.g., "Reading is essential for getting along efficiently in this society"),
- (ii) an *affective component*, that is, one's feelings about or evaluations of reading (e.g., "I enjoy reading"),
- (iii) a *conative component*, (often treated as two separate components) that is, (a) one's intention(s) to read and (b) one's actual reading behavior(s).

The potential for representing the nature of attitudes toward reading which these constructs from social psychology afford deserves much more attention than it has received. Mikulecky (1976) has taken account of all three components in his instrument in an indirect way. We would like to adopt an even stronger position and make these components central to our explanation of the different "facets" noted above in the examples of Katrina and Joan.

Diagrammatically the relationships among the components of attitude toward reading can be expressed as in Figure 1.

From the model it can be seen that there may be different beliefs about reading ( , , . . . ) and different feelings about reading (A, B, C . . . ). Remember that Katrina believed that reading was important for securing her chosen occupation and promoting job satisfaction, and Joan did not. Thus, Katrina's belief(s) give rise to the feeling (affect) that reading is valuable whereas Joan does not feel it is valuable in this sense. Furthermore, the model shows that another feeling about reading (such as Enjoyable-Not Enjoyable) could also be held. This explanation demonstrates how each girl could feel positively about reading in one sense and negatively about it in another. In these and other ways the model accounts for various important facets of attitude toward reading.

We shall not enter any further into a discussion of the particulars of

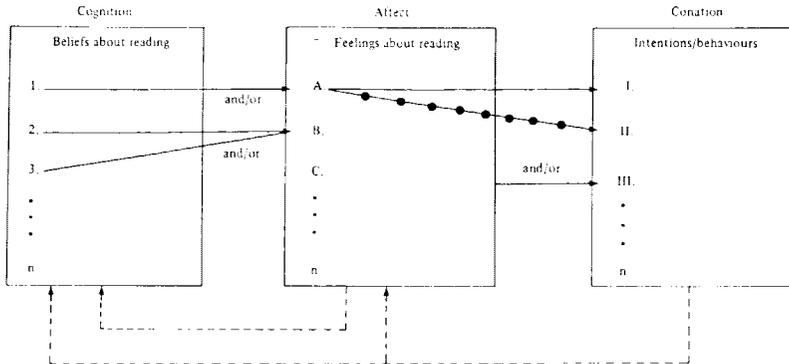
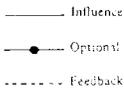


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the components of attitude toward reading.



this theoretical framework. That topic has been treated in detail elsewhere (Teale & Lewis, 1979). Instead, the focus here will be placed upon the implications of this model for teachers who are attempting to conceptualize students' attitudes toward reading. The initial task in this endeavor is to translate the theoretical notions of beliefs and feelings about reading into terms applicable to the reality of the school/home/society situation. To accomplish this end a survey of reading educators, teachers, elementary and secondary students, and instruments designed to measure attitude toward reading was conducted. The survey showed that, within the larger idea of beliefs and feelings about reading, three constructs which had application to the everyday world could be identified.

The first construct is exemplified by statements like "The more I read, the more I learn about myself" and "Reading helps me understand other people better." This construct is related to the cognitive component of reading attitude; it concerns the belief that reading is a means of gaining insight into self, others, and/or life in general. This first construct is termed Individual Development because it seems to relate one's intrinsic development through insight into self/others/life.

The second construct is similar to the first that it too relates to the cognitive component of reading attitude. However, the belief in this case is that reading is related to success in school or vocational development. This construct, called Utilitarian, is reflected in statements such as "Reading helps people to get along much more efficiently in this society" and "Being able to read well can help a person get a permanent job."

The third construct is affective in nature. It is represented by statements like "I enjoy reading" or "Reading is a fun way to spend spare time." This construct is labelled *Enjoyment*, a name which seems self-explanatory.

For the past two years studies have been conducted (Teale & Lewis, 1978; Lewis & Teale, 1979) in which these three "practical instantiations" of the cognitive and affective components were subjected to empirical analyses with grade 8 and grade 12 students. The purpose of the studies was to determine (1) if each of the three constructs had conceptual reality for students and (2) if the three constructs were sufficiently distinct to warrant measuring each one separately.

A self-report scale was designed to measure each of the factors, and the resulting *Individual Development*, *Utilitarian*, and *Enjoyment* scales were administered to samples of 118 Grade 8 and 97 Grade 12 students in 1978 and 238 Grade 8 and 153 Grade 12 students in 1979. Findings from the studies indicated that each of the three constructs had conceptual reality for students, thereby supporting the distinction drawn between the cognitive and affective components of attitude toward reading outlined in the model presented in Figure 1.

Furthermore, it was found that, although the relationships between the three factors were, as would be expected, statistically significant, the correlations were sufficiently low to indicate that the *Individual Development*, *Utilitarian*, and *Enjoyment* constructs were different enough to warrant being measured separately. The low correlations were due not only to differences in students' scores on the respective scales but also to significant numbers of students who responded positively on one of the constructs and negatively on another (where the scores were separated by at least one standard deviation). For example, between 10% and 32% of students in the samples valued reading because they felt it related highly to success in school/job while they simultaneously maintained negative feelings about the value of reading for gained insight into self/others/life. Many individuals also responded positively on the *Utilitarian* factor and negatively on *Enjoyment*. These findings indicate that secondary students' attitudes toward reading are multidimensional in nature and lend support to the theoretical model outlined above. (For a detailed report of all findings see Lewis & Teale, 1979.)

The studies briefly described here have led to the following conclusions:

- (1) People do have different beliefs about reading (e.g., "Reading is important for getting high grades in school," "Reading helps me sort out the meaning of life," and "Reading won't get you far in our society"), and these beliefs are important bases for affective feelings about reading.
- (2) There also appear to be different aspects to the affective component of attitude toward reading. Clearly *Enjoyment* is one dimension of this component. However, it seems that an affect which

might be termed Valuing also exists. One's valuing of reading would be based upon beliefs about the perceived relationships between reading and success in school, reading and vocational success, and reading and insight into self/others/life. Figure 2 expresses this notion diagrammatically.

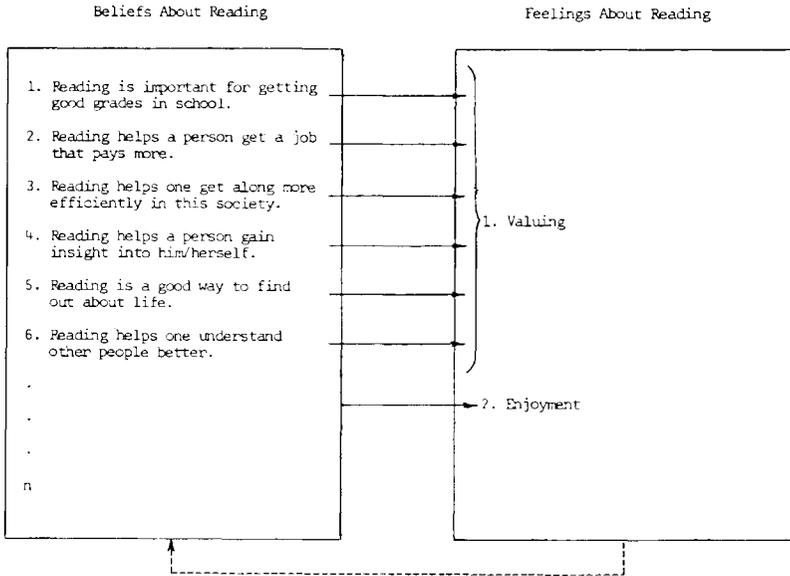


Figure 2. Relationships between the cognitive and affective components of reading attitude.

- (3) Thus, an individual may value reading because of one or more beliefs he/she holds about reading, yet not enjoy reading. Conversely, it is possible for the reasons given above, to enjoy reading but not value it.
- (4) The cognitive component of attitude toward reading (intentions to read/actual reading behavior) can be better understood in terms of the underlying cognitive and affective structures. That is to say, Jane may read *Great Expectations* out of enjoyment but Nancy may read it because she wants to do well on next week's exam. Also, a person likely reads different selections based upon different beliefs/feelings about reading. For instance, it may be that Tom reads textbooks mainly because he believes that such behavior will result in academic success whereas he reads newspapers and novels because he enjoys them.

#### *Implications for Measuring Secondary School Students' Attitudes Toward Reading*

Curriculum evaluation and diagnosis appear to be the two main

reasons why teachers assess students' attitudes toward reading. In either case the different dimensions of reading attitude should be taken into account.

That is, information as to students' feelings about the value of reading for Utilitarian ends and for Individual Development as well as information about their Enjoyment of reading should be gathered. In this way both the cognitive and affective components of attitude toward reading will be measured.

Students' reading behavior should also be examined in order to gain insight into attitudes. Such observations may then be interpreted in terms of the three cognitive/affective components. This interpretive step is an important one because it provides information valuable for curriculum evaluation and diagnosis, information which would likely be obscured should a unidimensional relationship between reading behavior and reading attitude be assumed.

In general, then, we support Summers' (1977) recommendation that a "multi-measure approach emphasizing complementary, not duplicative, sources of data" be used (p. 151). Summers proposes that, among other things, observer report instruments, book counts, and self-report reading attitude scales be employed. Certainly the multi-measure approach can help bring to light the different aspects of reading attitude. However, we would add to Summers' recommendation the caveat that the means of assessment selected be employed and interpreted in terms of a multi-dimensional model of reading attitude. Otherwise, an incomplete and/or misleading picture of an individual's attitude toward reading may result.

Typically one of the goals of any school curriculum has been fostering in each student a positive attitude toward reading. Now it is time for teachers to think about the degree of emphasis that the curriculum should place on beliefs like those listed in Figure 2. In addition teachers might consider the degree to which students should value reading (affect) and the degree to which students should enjoy reading (affect). It may also prove useful to think about the in-school and out-of-school reading behaviors which would flow from these attitudes and about the possible effects of these attitudes on post-school reading behavior.

This same issue can be viewed from another angle as well: the types of attitudes which the curriculum is currently promoting could also be examined. The question of which attitudes a school/faculty wants to emphasize must ultimately be decided upon at the community or individual school level. However, when considering the attitudinal areas of the curriculum, attention to the different aspects of reading attitude rather than a focus on the idea of *an* attitude toward reading would enable teachers to evaluate more precisely the effect the curriculum has in this area.

So, too, with diagnosis might additional insight into a student's reading be gained by interpreting the findings according to the model proposed here. Two students may both have negative feelings about

reading; however, one student may neither value nor enjoy reading while the other may value it but not enjoy it. Such diagnostic information could help a teacher plan the appropriate “way in” for helping improve these students’ attitudes and achievement in reading.

Thus, teachers, curriculum evaluators, and reading specialists should find it helpful to keep in mind certain notions about attitude toward reading when employing techniques or instruments for measuring reading attitude. Identification and definition of the quality to be measured should be given first priority. A multi-dimensional conception of attitude toward reading has been called for in this paper. Furthermore, a practical application of that model has been put forth with the suggestion that the Individual Development, Utilitarian, and Enjoyment constructs are useful ones for interpreting students’ attitudes toward reading. Such a conception of reading attitudes indicates that instruments should be used to measure each of the three constructs separately and that measures of the conative component observational techniques, book counts, activity preferences, etc. should be interpreted in terms of the three constructs.

In this manner we believe that teachers can gain clearer insight into what students believe about reading and how they feel about reading. Such information can be most valuable for interpreting student reading behavior and for determining the effects which instructional procedures and curricula have on attitudes toward reading.

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