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Does Reading Ability Affect Students' Attitude Toward Reading?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this non-experimental study was to determine if the students' reading ability affects their attitude toward reading. The effect of gender on reading attitudes was also explored. Participants were a convenience sample of 91 second-grade students from an elementary school in Arkansas. The participants completed the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey as well as questions about demographic information. Classroom teachers participated by completing two questions that pertained to ethnicity and reading ability. An analysis of the results revealed that the reading ability affected students' attitudes toward reading. The results also revealed that girls were more likely to have a positive attitude toward reading than boys were.

INTRODUCTION

Merriam Webster defines attitude as, “a way of feeling or way of thinking that affects a person’s behavior” (Merriam-Webster online, 2019). In education, attitude is an important indicator of school achievement. Reading attitude was defined by Alexander and Filler (1976) as “a system of feelings related to reading which causes the learner to approach or avoid a reading situation” (p.1). Thus, an enjoyable reading experience tends to produce a positive attitude toward reading, while an unrewarding reading experience will produce a negative attitude toward reading. Students with a positive attitude are more successful at reading and gain experiences through reading (Kiziltas, 2018). Students who do not possess a positive attitude lack a willingness to read even though these students may be proficient readers (McKenna, Kear, & Elsworth, 1995). Seitz (2010) also reported that student attitudes toward reading significantly affect performance. Because a student’s attitude toward reading affects reading comprehension, a positive reading attitude is crucial.

ELEMENTARY READING ATTITUDE SURVEY

In an effort to determine a student's attitude toward reading, McKenna and Kear (1990) developed the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS). The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey is a widely used quantitative survey for teachers that has proven to be an efficient and reliable tool. In a 2005 survey of fourth, fifth and sixth-grade students, Kazelskis, Thames et al. (2005) examined the reliability and stability of the ERAS. This study corroborated the results of McKenna and Kear when comparing the internal consistency of subscale and total scale scores for gender, ethnic group, and grade level. The two types of reading attitudes surveyed using this instrument are academic reading and recreational reading.

ACADEMIC READING

Academic reading refers to purposeful reading of an academic or educational text and requires a more active, probing, and strategic reading (SPARK, n.d.). Academic reading involves asking questions during the reading process, making connections with other readings, reflecting and comparing texts, interpreting meaning, and often redefining the reading. McKenna et al. (1995) found that many students tend to have a negative attitude toward academic reading regardless of their academic ability. Kolic-Vehovec, Zubkovic, and Pahljina-Reinic (2014) identified similar negative reading attitudes. This longitudinal study of 175 Croatian students in grades six to eight documented a significant decline in academic reading attitude among students although the metacognitive comprehension skills of these students improved during the same period. This study also found that females in grades sixth through eight had higher metacognitive strategies and a more positive attitude toward recreational reading than boys.

GENDER

In particular, DiBella (2014) noted that girls had higher recreational reading as well as academic reading scores. McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) also determined that girls have a more positive attitude toward recreational reading than boys and that this attitudinal gap between boys increases with age. Mohd-Asraf and Abdullah (2016) conducted a study on the impact of gender on reading attitude. Results from the ERAS scores of Malaysian primary students revealed that girls scored significantly higher than boys in recreational as well as academic reading when reading English as a second language. To be successful readers, Mohd-Asraf and Abdullah (2016) concluded that boys as well as girls should be encouraged and provided appropriate opportunities for recreational reading.

SOCIOECONOMIC LEVEL

Apart from gender, reading attitude can also be influenced by socioeconomic level. Children from low-income families enter school with limited exposure to literacy. This limited exposure to print and fewer background experiences can result in poor motivation to read. Kiziltas (2018) concluded that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds exhibited a more positive attitude toward reading than those students from middle or lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Netten, Luyten, Droop, and Vanhoeven (2016) concluded that socioeconomic level was a strong predictor of reading literacy achievement in L1 and L2 schools in the Netherlands where a one-third difference between socioeconomic level and reading achievement was documented. Clark (2014) recognized that students receiving a free school meal were less likely to enjoy reading, to read outside of class, to receive a book for a present, and less likely to see a link between reading and achieving a good job. The opportunities afforded a student from a higher socioeconomic background influence reading in a positive manner.

ABILITY

A motivational gap also exists between students who are low ability or high ability readers. A positive relationship between

reading attitude and ability was documented by McKenna and Kear (1990) as well as by McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995). These studies identified an attitudinal gap that exists between low ability and high ability readers, and this attitudinal gap increases with age. The McKenna model, a term that describes the relationship between attitude and ability, was substantiated in the research of reading attitude in academically talented students. Worrell, Roth, Gabelko (2004) surveyed 575 high achieving students in a university-based summer program and determined that academically talented students did have a more positive attitude toward reading than a more representative elementary population. Clark (2014) determined that students, ages 8-11 years, who enjoy reading are four times as likely to be above grade-level readers. To the contrary, Clark also identified that 8-11 years who do not enjoy reading are ten times more likely to read below grade level. Lazarus and Callahan (2000) contradicted Clark's findings in documenting the reading attitudes of learning-disabled students. Learning-disabled students receiving reading instruction in a special education classroom were found to have reading attitudes that exceeded or equaled their non-disabled peers. DiBella (2014) identified a positive correlation between reading motivation and scores on the FCAT by sixth-grade students. A significant correlation also existed between reading motivation and reading attitude when compared to recreational attitudes. The results also indicated that reading ability influenced motivation in a positive way.

SUMMARY

Reading attitude influences reading success. The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey was developed to determine a student's attitude toward reading. This survey includes the two categories of academic reading and recreational reading. Reading attitude can be influenced by gender, socioeconomic level, and ability. Overall, girls have a more positive attitude toward reading than boys. High ability and a higher socioeconomic level are factors that influence reading attitude in a positive way.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine the influence of reading ability on the reading attitudes of second-grade students. The influence of gender on reading attitudes was also examined. For the purpose of this study, reading attitude was defined as attitude toward the purposeful reading of both academic text recreational text as measured by total scores on the ERAS. Reading ability level is defined in reference to beginning of year Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) level cut-off scores for second grade student on the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Reading (DIBELS) test.

HYPOTHESES

H₁ – It is hypothesized that reading ability level has an effect on the reading attitude scores of second-grade students.
H₂ – It is also hypothesized that girls will have a more positive attitude toward reading than boys.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were 91 second-grade students from an elementary school. The students selected comprise a sample of convenience that included 38 boys and 53 girls. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Students
 Teacher Preparation Program Completer

Characteristic	Male <i>n</i> = 38(%)		Female <i>n</i> = 53(%)	
Race/Ethnicity				
White	27	71%	42	79%
Hispanic	2	5.0%	3	6.0%
African-American	7	18%	6	11%
Other	2	2.0%	2	5.0%
Age				
7 years	20	53%	29	55%
8 years	18	47%	22	42%
9 years	0	0.0%	2	4.0%

INSTRUMENTATION

The main instruments used for this study was a survey that included the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey [ERAS] (McKenna & Kear, 1995) and demographic items. The ERAS is comprised of three domains and 20 questions that use a pictorial Likert scale. For each of the 20 questions, students choose one of four picture options of the Garfield cartoon character on a scale ranging from very happy, slightly happy, slightly unhappy, to very unhappy. Each item was assigned a score ranging from one to four with four representing the most positive self-judgment and one representing the least happy self-judgment. The survey consists of three domains: total score, academic reading (AR), and recreational reading (RR). The domain scores for recreational reading were obtained from a total of the survey questions numbered one to ten and for academic reading from the survey questions numbered 11 to 20. The score of questions 1 to 20 comprised the total score. Cronbach's alpha internal consistency of the ERAS ranged from .74 to .89 (McKenna & Kear, 1990). With only two exceptions, the coefficients were .80 or over (McKenna & Kear, 1990). The construct validity of this survey was measured by a series of tests that were compared to reading ability. The inter-subscale correlation coefficient was .64 (McKenna & Kear, 1990) when the tests were compared. This coefficient indicates a desired outcome that the two subscales reflect different factors of reading. The beginning of year DIBELS - ORF levels for the participants was used as the measure of reading ability. Three distinct ability levels were identified namely: High [51+ words per minute], Medium [35-50 words per minute], and Low 0 - 34 words per minute] [University of Oregon, 2018]. Demographic items regarding gender and age were completed by the students, while items on the instrument about ability and ethnicity were completed by their teachers.

PROCEDURE

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher visited second-grade classrooms and explained the purpose of the survey as well as the Garfield response choices. The researcher administered the survey as a whole class assessment by reading each question for students to choose their answers. Once administration was complete, the researcher organized the survey results for scoring. To analyze the data, a One Way ANOVA was calculated to determine the effect of reading ability on attitudes toward reading and an independent samples *t*-test was used to determine the effect of gender on students' reading attitude. Each hypothesis was tested at an alpha level of 0.05.

RESULTS

A One-Way ANOVA was calculated to compare the attitude of second-grade students by their level of reading ability. Results of the analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in reading attitude between the groups $F(2, 88) = 4.35, p = .002$. A Tukey HSD post hoc analysis of the results revealed that students in the high ability group ($m = 66.41, sd = 11.36$) had reading attitudes that were significantly different that those in the medium ability ($m = 57.57, sd = 10.93$) reading groups and those in the low ability ($m = 56.84, sd = 12.40$) reading groups. However, the differences reading attitudes for students in the medium and low ability groups were not significantly different (see Figure 1).

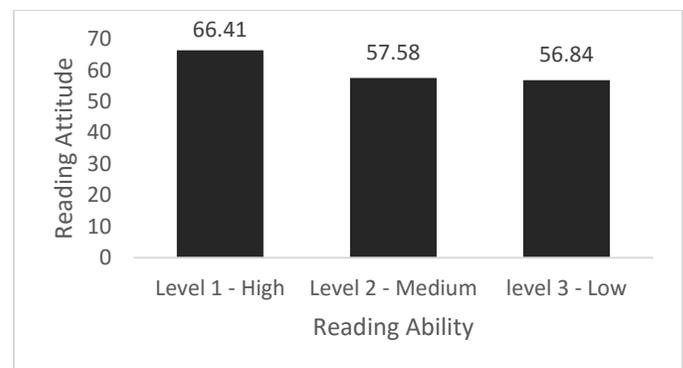


Figure 1. Reading ability and reading attitude.

To test the second hypothesis, an independent *t*-test was calculated comparing the reading attitude scores of girls to the reading attitude scores of boys $t(89) = 1.95, p < .05$ (one-tailed). The mean reading attitude for girls ($m = 60.94, sd = 10.62$) was significantly higher than the mean reading attitude score for boys ($m = 55.97, sd = 13.56$). The null hypothesis was therefore reject and the alternative hypothesis was support (see Figure 2).

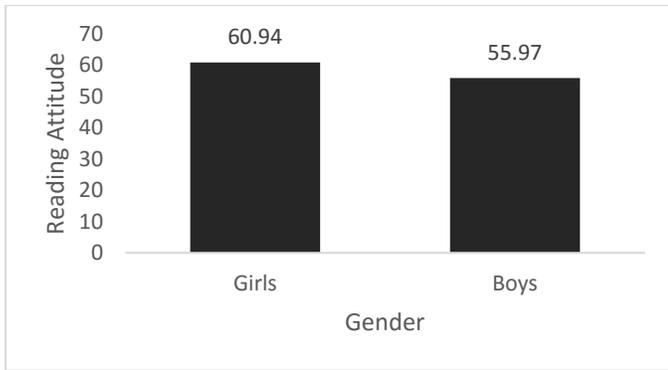


Figure 1. Gender and reading attitude.

In summary, these results suggest that second grade students with high reading ability (50+ words per minute) have a more positive reading attitude than students with medium reading ability (35 – 50 words per minute), or students with low reading ability (0 – 34 words per minute). The results also indicate that on average second grade girls have a more positive reading attitude than boys do.

DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

This study revealed a strong relationship between the reading abilities of students and their reading attitudes. McKenna and Kear (1990) as well as McKenna, Kear, and Elsworth (1995) have also documented similar positive relationships between reading ability and reading attitude. It is possible that high ability readers are positively motivated to read more and thereby demonstrating positive attitudes towards reading. As Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) noted, behavior is activated by motivation. Students who are successful readers may in turn be highly motivated to read (Purvis & Beach, 1972; Walberg & Tsai, 1985). These findings also support the hypothesis that girls have a more positive attitude toward reading than boys. As with reading ability, it is possible that motivation has an important role in this difference. For instance, DiBella (2014) found boys less motivated to read than girls. Gurian and Hurley (2001) showed that 70% to 80% of students who demonstrated a low desire for reading were boys. Most importantly, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) identified some of the reasons why boys lack reading motivation. Boys, more often than girls described themselves as nonreaders, spent less time reading than girls did, and reported lower levels of confidence when reading. The disparity in reading attitude between second grade boys and girls is therefore not surprising.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study. One limitation is the small convenience sample of 91 second grade students. Additionally, the demographic characteristics of sample may not necessarily match those of other second grader in Arkansas. Both of these limitations pose a threat to the external validity of the study and may limit generalization of the findings. Another limitation to this study has to do with age of the items on the

ERAS and the appropriateness of some of the items on the survey. The ERAS was first published in 1990. Permission was granted by the copyright owner to use the instrument for this study only in its original form. Because of this some items that could be confusing for contemporary second grade students such as Question 19 “How do you feel about using a dictionary?” were not be modified. At the time of this study, all second-grade students at the study site use individual Chromebooks and with online dictionaries to obtain definitions. It is possible that many of them are unfamiliar with a hardcopy dictionary or can make the connection between looking up words of the internet and the idea of a dictionary.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this study suggest that it is important for educators and parents to help students strengthen their reading ability as this could have important implications for their attitude toward reading. Parents and teachers need to work together for this purpose. Given that early literacy experiences influence children’s motivation to read, parents need to realize the importance of literacy in the home and provide appropriate developmental opportunities. At school, learning experiences should be built around opportunities to read and interact with other learners. Teachers can model reading through read-alouds, becoming knowledgeable of children’s literature, and by serving as reading mentors for students who need support or extrinsic motivation.

Teachers should also give extra attention to boys as beginning readers to make sure they do not fall through the cracks and develop negative attitudes toward reading. To encourage boys to spend more time reading, it is important that they are allowed to select books they enjoy to read in addition to books recommended by the teacher. One way of promoting such behavior is for teacher in the lower elementary grades to make sure they have a diverse selection of books in their classroom library. These positive reading opportunities would increase reading practice time for boys and thus increase reading performance. As mastery of reading skills improves through increased reading practice, boys would have a more positive attitude toward reading and ultimately become motivated to read.

FUTURE RESEARCH

These findings indicate a need for additional research in the area of reading attitude particularly as it intersects with reading ability and gender. Future research should identify strategies that may help motivate elementary age boys to read. Additional studies should also focus on way to incorporate such strategies into existing literacy curriculum maximize such benefits. Furthermore, because early literacy experiences have a significant impact on lifelong literacy skills, studies that focus on best practices for promoting parental involvement to encourage reading would help provide clarity on this issue.

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Beth Buterbaugh is from Knoxville, Tennessee, and has 25 years of experience teaching in public school classrooms. She graduated from Peabody College of Vanderbilt University with a bachelor's degree in elementary education and earned a master's degree in reading from Harding University. Currently she serves as an elementary reading interventionist.