Measuring Attitude Toward Reading: A New Tool for Teachers

Michael C. McKenna and Dennis J. Kear

In 1762, the philosopher Rousseau speculated that any method of teaching reading would suffice given adequate motivation on the part of the learner. While present-day educators might resist such a sweeping pronouncement, the importance of attitude is nevertheless widely recognized. The Commission on Reading in its summary of research (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) concluded that “becoming a skilled reader requires...learning that written material can be interesting” (p. 18). Smith (1988) observed that “the emotional response to reading...is the primary reason most readers read, and probably the primary reason most nonreaders do not read” (p. 177). Wixson and Lipson (in press) acknowledge that “the student’s attitude toward reading is a central factor affecting reading performance.” These conclusions are based on a long history of research in which attitude and achievement have been consistently linked (e.g., Purves & Beach, 1972; Walberg & Tsai, 1985).

The recent emphasis on enhanced reading proficiency has often ignored the important role played by children’s attitudes in the process of becoming literate. Athey (1985) suggested that one reason for this tendency is that the affective aspects of reading tend to be ill-defined and to involve “shadowy variables” (p. 527) difficult to conceptualize, measure, and address instructionally.

The focus of recent research and development in assessment has been comprehension rather than attitude. Some progress has been made in the development of individually administered, qualitative instruments, but quantitative group surveys, which form a natural complement to qualitative approaches, are often poorly documented in terms of desirable psychometric attributes, such as normative frames of reference and evidence of reliability and validity. Our purpose was to produce a public-domain instrument that would remedy these shortcomings and enable teachers to estimate attitude levels efficiently and reliably. This article presents that instrument along with a discussion of its development and suggestions for its use.

Development of the Scale

Several important criteria were established to guide the development of the instrument. The

authors agreed that the survey must (a) have a large-scale normative frame of reference; (b) comprise a set of items selected on the basis of desirable psychometric properties; (c) have empirically documented reliability and validity; (d) be applicable to all elementary students, Grades 1 through 6; (e) possess a meaningful, attention-getting, student-friendly response format; (f) be suitable for brief group administration; and (g) comprise separate subscales for recreational and academic reading. We knew of no instrument that possessed all of these characteristics.

A pictorial format was elected because of its natural appeal for children and because of its comprehensibility by the very young. An informal survey of more than 30 elementary teachers indicated that the comic strip character Garfield was more apt to be recognized by children in Grades 1 through 6 than any other. Jim Davis, who is the creator of Garfield, and United Features, his publisher, agreed to supply four black-line, camera-ready poses of Garfield, ranging from very happy to very upset, and to permit the resulting instrument to be copied and used by educators. (See the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey and scoring sheet prior to the Appendix at the end of this article.)

An even number of scale points avoids a neutral, central category which respondents often select in order to avoid committing themselves even when clear opinions exist (Nunnally, 1967). The use of four points was based on a substantial body of research suggesting that young children typically can discriminate among no more than five discrete bits of information simultaneously (e.g., Case & Khanna, 1981; Chi, 1978; Chi & Klahr, 1975; Niko, 1983).

Several earlier surveys were used as models in the creation of an item pool from which the final set of items would be constructed (e.g., Estes, 1971; Heathington, 1979; Right to Read, 1976; Robinson & Good, 1987). A total of 39 items were developed, each related to one of two aspects of attitude: (a) attitude toward recreational reading (24 items) or (b) attitude toward academic reading (15 items). To establish a consistent, appropriate expectation on the part of the students, each item was worded with a uniform beginning: "How do you feel...."

This prototype instrument was then administered to 499 elementary students in a middle-sized midwestern U.S. school district. For each of the two item sets (recreational and academic), final sets of 10 items each were selected on the basis of inter-item correlation coefficients. The revised instrument was then administered at midyear to a national sample of over 18,000 children in Grades 1–6. Estimates of reliability, as well as evidence of validity, were based on this national sample. A complete description of the technical aspects of the survey appears in the Appendix.

Administering and Scoring the Survey

The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS) can be given to an entire class in a matter of minutes, but, as with any normed instrument, it is important that the administration reflect as closely as possible the procedure used with the norming group. The administration procedures are presented in the "Directions for Use" information that accompanies the instrument itself. This process involves first familiarizing students with the instrument and with the purposes for giving it. The teacher next reads the items aloud twice as the students mark their responses.

Each item is then assigned 1, 2, 3, or 4 points, a "4" indicating the happiest (leftmost) Garfield. The scoring sheet that follows the instrument can be used to organize this process and record recreational, academic, and total scores, along with the percentile rank of each. The results are then ready for use.

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Using the Survey

Collecting data about students is an empty exercise unless the information is used to plan instruction. Scores on the ERAS can be helpful in this process, but it is important to understand what they can and cannot do as well as how they relate to other sources of information.

Strengths and limitations. This survey provides quantitative estimates of two important aspects of children's attitudes toward reading. Like global measures of achievement, however, they can do little in themselves to identify the causes of poor attitude or to suggest instructional techniques likely to improve it. On the other hand, the instrument can be used to (a) make possible initial conjecture about the attitudes of specific students, (b) provide a convenient group profile of a class (or a larger unit), or (c) serve as a means of monitoring the attitudinal impact of instructional programs.

A classroom plan. A teacher might begin by administering the ERAS during the first few weeks of the school year. Class averages for recreational and academic reading attitude will enable the teacher to characterize the class generally on these two dimensions. Scores for individual students may suggest the need to further explore the nature, strength, and origins of their values and beliefs. This goal could be pursued through the use of individually conducted strategies such as structured interviews, open-ended sentence instruments, or interest inventories. Reed (1979) suggested using nonreactive measures as well, such as recorded teacher observations following reading instruction and reading-related activities. The combination of these techniques provides a variety of useful information that can be collected in portfolio fashion for individual students.

Survey results can be very useful in deciding what sorts of additional information to pursue. Four general response patterns are especially notable, and we will depict each of them with hypothetical students who are, in fact, composites of many with whom we have worked.

Two profiles involve sizable differences (5 points or more) between recreational and academic scores. Jimmy, a third grader, has a recreational score of 29 and an academic score of 21. The difference suggests a stronger attitude toward reading for fun than for academic purposes. To an extent, this pattern is typical of third graders (compare the means in Table 2 in the Appendix), but not to the degree exhibited in Jimmy’s case. Had both scores been higher, Jimmy’s teacher might have been justified in disregarding the difference, but a score of 21 is low both in the criterial sense (it is close to the slightly frowning Garfield) and in a normative one (18th percentile rank). Examining the last 10 items of the survey one-by-one might prove helpful in forming hypotheses about which aspects are troublesome. These can then be tested by carefully observing Jimmy during reading instruction.

For Katy, a fifth grader, assume that the two scores are reversed. By virtue of her stronger attitude toward academic reading, Katy is somewhat atypical. Her academic score of 29 is quite strong in both a criterial sense (it is near the slightly smiling Garfield) and a normative sense (71st percentile rank). Her score of 21 in recreational reading attitude is cause for concern (13th percentile rank), but the strong academic score suggests that her disdain is not total and may be traceable to causes subject to intervention. Because items 1–10 are somewhat global in nature, it is unlikely that scrutinizing her responses will be very helpful. A nonthreatening chat about reading habits may be much more productive in helping her teacher identify Katy's areas of interest and even suggest a book or two. Katy may not have been exposed to a variety of interesting trade books.

Two other profiles involve differences between attitude and ability. These are very real possibilities that require careful attention.

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Consider Patrick, a second grader whose academic attitude score is 28 and who has been placed in a low-ability group by his teacher. Patrick’s relatively positive score (near the smiling Garfield) may encourage his teacher, for it is apt to be higher than others in his reading group. However, more than half of his second-grade peers across the country have stronger attitudes toward reading in school. Data from this study document a widening attitudinal gap between low- and high-ability children as they move through school. Patrick’s teacher should be concerned about the likely effects of another frustrating year on his attitude toward instruction. Teaching methods and instructional materials should be scrutinized.

Ironically, the same conclusion might be reached for Deborah, a sixth-grade student of extraordinary ability. Her academic attitude score, however, is only 17, which is quite negative, whether one looks to its position among the pictures or notes that it represents a percentile rank of 11. If Deborah’s recreational score were substantially higher, her teacher would be correct in wondering whether the instruction she is receiving is adequately engaging. As with Jimmy, an inspection of her responses to items 11–20 could be helpful, followed by a nonintrusive reading interview and tactful observation. On the other hand, suppose that Deborah’s recreational score were also 17. This would place her total score (34) at the 5th percentile rank and suggest a strong disinclination to read despite the ability to do so. This would warrant action on the part of an insightful teacher who is willing to make instructional and leisure reading attractive.

Examples of this nature illustrate how the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey can enter into the process of instructional planning, especially near the beginning of a school year. As the year draws to a close, the survey can again be given, this time to monitor any attitudinal changes of the class as a whole. By comparing class averages from the beginning and end of the year, a teacher can gauge the movement of a class relative both to its own earlier position and to a national midyear average. Estimating yearlong changes for individual students is a less reliable process and should only be attempted with regard to the standard error of measurement for a given subscale and grade level (see Table 2 in the Appendix). We recommend using twice the standard error to construct an adequate confidence interval. In other words, the pre/post difference would, in general, need to be 5 points or more on either the academic or recreational subscale before any real change could be assumed. On the total score, the pre/post change would need to be 7 or 8 points.

Conclusion
The instrument presented here builds on the strengths of its predecessors and, it is hoped, remedies some of their psychometric shortcomings. Its placement into the public domain by means of this article provides teachers with a tool that can be used with relative confidence to estimate the attitude levels of their students and initiate informal assessment efforts into the role attitude plays in students’ development as readers.

Authors’ Note
The authors wish to express their sincere thanks to Jim Davis for his Garfield illustrations and for his concern for children’s literacy abilities.

References
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Elementary Reading Attitude Survey
Directions for use

The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey provides a quick indication of student attitudes toward reading. It consists of 20 items and can be administered to an entire classroom in about 10 minutes. Each item presents a brief, simply worded statement about reading, followed by four pictures of Garfield. Each pose is designed to depict a different emotional state, ranging from very positive to very negative.

Administration
Begin by telling students that you wish to find out how they feel about reading. Emphasize that this is not a test and that there are no "right" answers. Encourage sincerity.

Distribute the survey forms and, if you wish to monitor the attitudes of specific students, ask them to write their names in the space at the top. Hold up a copy of the survey so that the students can see the first page. Point to the picture of Garfield at the far left of the first item. Ask the students to look at this same picture on their own survey form. Discuss with them the mood Garfield seems to be in (very happy). Then move to the next picture and again discuss Garfield's mood (this time, a little happy). In the same way, move to the third and fourth pictures and talk about Garfield's moods—a little upset and very upset. It is helpful to point out the position of Garfield's mouth, especially in the middle two figures.

Explain that together you will read some statements about reading and that the students should think about how they feel about each statement. They should then circle the picture of Garfield that is closest to their own feelings. (Emphasize that the students should respond according to their own feelings, not as Garfield might respond!) Read each item aloud slowly and distinctly; then read it a second time while students are thinking. Be sure to read the item number and to remind students of page numbers when new pages are reached.

Scoring
To score the survey, count four points for each leftmost (happiest) Garfield circled, three for each slightly smiling Garfield, two for each mildly upset Garfield, and one point for each very upset (rightmost) Garfield. Three scores for each student can be obtained: the total for the first 10 items, the total for the second 10, and a composite total. The first half of the survey relates to attitude toward recreational reading; the second half relates to attitude toward academic aspects of reading.

Interpretation
You can interpret scores in two ways. One is to note informally where the score falls in regard to the four nodes of the scale. A total score of 50, for example, would fall about midway on the scale, between the slightly happy and slightly upset figures, therefore indicating a relatively indifferent overall attitude toward reading. The other approach is more formal. It involves converting the raw scores into percentile ranks by means of Table 1. Be sure to use the norms for the right grade level and to note the column headings (Rec = recreational reading, Aca = academic reading, Tot = total score). If you wish to determine the average percentile rank for your class, average the raw scores first; then use the table to locate the percentile rank corresponding to the raw score mean. Percentile ranks cannot be averaged directly.