Attitudes towards reading and writing

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Abstract

The goal of this study was the exploration of the attitudes of students towards reading and writing. 353 students attending 2nd through 6th grade in 3 elementary schools participated in the study. The attitudes of the students were evaluated through a Likert scale of 16 sentences. The analysis of the data revealed that the students have more positive attitudes towards reading than towards writing, and that girls hold significantly more positive attitudes than boys. Students' attitude differs depending on the area they come from, but appears to become generally less positive as they grow up.

Keywords: reading, writing, written language, attitude, students, elementary school

1. Introduction

"It is not necessary to burn books in order to kill our civilization. All we have to do is leave them unread for a generation". This is a comment made by R. M. Hutchins to stress the character of modern civilization, which supports — and is supported by — the written language. Reading and writing enrich both the individual and society intellectually, emotionally and materially. The written language is so widely used in contemporary society that an illiterate person is considered a dropout, a person outside the mainstream of society who cannot enjoy reading, a person who is culturally deprived.

Concerning the relationship between reading ability and attitude towards reading, findings are not conclusive. There are studies in which minor correlations have been recorded and do not allow any determination of the relationship between the two behaviors as one of cause and effect (Kush and Watknis 1996). On the other hand, there are other studies informing us that competent users of written language have a more positive attitude towards reading in comparison to those who
have shown problems in its use (Wigfield and Asher 1984). The basic hypothesis, regardless of the specific findings through, is that by securing a positive attitude towards reading and writing, it becomes more likely that a person will develop independent reading skills. These skills will be used to obtain information, food for thought and pleasure, and significantly reinforce the cultivation of automaticity and the practice of all skills supporting reading (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson 1994). Thus, in the field of education, the cultivation of a positive attitude towards reading and writing is particularly important in order to successfully teach written language (Cunningham and Allington 1999, Pressley, 1998).

The term attitude refers to a multi-dimensional concept, as various definitions have stressed evaluation, action or emotion. Beck (1983) stresses evaluation in defining attitude as “a positive or negative evaluation of some people, object or thing” (302). Ajzen (1988) (previously Fishbein and Ajzen 1975, and most contemporary social psychologists), although stressing the importance of evaluation in attitude, defines as “a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution or event” (4). Emphasizing feeling, Petty and Cacioppo (1981) defined attitude as “a general and enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, object or issue” (7). Concerning the attitude towards reading and writing, it has been defined as “a state of mind, accompanied by feelings and emotions, that make reading more or less likely” (Smith 1990: 215).

According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), attitudes do not directly influence behavior; what intervenes is the intention to act. This means that the attitude towards reading leads to an intention to read, which will finally lead to the action of reading. Intentions, however, are influenced by external factors as well as by the inner, emotional state of an individual. Attitude towards reading involves assessment of pleasure and intention, feelings related to involvement in a certain genre of reading and readiness for action (Mathewson 1994).

By adopting the view mentioned above, the aim of this study was to record the inner emotional state of elementary age students, which influences their intention towards reading and writing. This recording concerns their attitudes towards reading and writing at their own initiative, outside the curriculum and school obligations, such as: selecting and reading books, magazines or newspapers, writing letters, a book or keeping a diary. This distinction between reading directed and set by the school and realized at the child’s own initiative—for recreation purposes or for seeking information or food for thought—has been recorded and expressed on the basis of weighted criteria for recording children’s attitudes (Kush and Watkins 1996, McKenna and Kear 1990, McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth 1995, Pumfrey 1997).

Within the framework of the study, other factors were also examined that dif-
ferentiate intention as this is shaped by the motional state. Such factors included a) school grade, b) sex, and c) residential area. Both sex and social background have been presented as factors affecting school performance (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis and Ecob 1988), while age is associated with the understanding of the world and the rules and regulations imposed. Therefore, as a child grows older, it is possible that his/her motivation for reading may change.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Three hundred and fifty three (353) children from the 2nd to the 6th grade of three elementary schools in Athens participated in the study. One of the schools is located in the Municipality of Ano Liossia and the other two in the Municipality of Zographou. The two areas were selected because of their differences.

Ano Liossia is located at the northwest of the Attiki basin, while Zographou is located in the opposite direction. The economy of the first is based upon the rubbish dump of the basin, which dominates the area. The population at Ano Liossia mainly consists of manual workers and tradesmen. Two large portions of this population are gypsies and immigrants. On the other hand, Zographou can be characterized as an urban area. Clerks, civil servants, professionals and a small number of manual workers live there. Students also live in the area because a University of Athens campus is also located there. Another qualitative difference concerns the cultural life of the two areas. As Zographou is located near the historic center of Athens, where cultural activities unfold, the cultural life of the community is greatly enhanced. On the contrary, due to the fact that Ano Liossia is located in the outer limits of Athens, its cultural life solely depends on the initiatives of the municipal authorities.

The distribution of the sample per residential area, sex and grade is presented in Table 1.

| Table 1. Sample Distribution per Area, Sex and Grade |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Grades          | Boys            | Girls           | Boys            | Girls           |
|                 | Liossia         |                 | Zographou       |                 |
| 2nd             | 25              | 26              | 18              | 40.9            |
| 3rd             | 20              | 24              | 22              | 47.8            |
| 4th             | 17              | 24              | 9               | 47.4            |
| 5th             | 20              | 8               | 8               | 50.0            |
| 6th             | 27              | 10              | 58.8            |                 |
2.2 Questionnaire

The process proposed by Janda (1998) was used to prepare the questionnaire, which includes sixteen statements. Every statement presents a brief, simply expressed comment concerning reading or writing which is followed by three faces: a smiling one (😊) to express agreement, a face that is neither smiling nor sad (😐) to express a neutral attitude and a sad face (😢) to express disagreement with the statement. Pumfrey (1997) has suggested this model for recording attitudes of young children.

Statements are divided concerning their topic and character. In other words, half of them concern reading and the other half writing. Within each topic, half of them are positive and half of them are negative. Positive and negative statements alternate. Statements express positive and negative feelings aroused from reading and writing as well as the intention of the individual to be involved in them (Table 2).

2.3 Process

Children completed the recording sheet in the classroom in the presence of the researcher and the class teacher. Instructions started with the description of the sheet: “The sheet in front of you in made up of sixteen sentences concerning reading, writing and books and aims at recording what you think and feel about these. Next to each sentence there are three little faces. The first one is smiling, the second one is serious and the third one is sad. You will read each sentence. If you agree with it you will mark the smiling face, if you disagree, you will mark the sad face and if you can’t decide, you will mark the serious face. You will mark only one little face for each sentence”. The following points were then stressed: “a) These sentences do not concern the reading and writing you do here at school with your teacher, but the reading and writing you do on your own for your own reasons. It does not concern schoolbooks, either, but books you have bought at a bookshop or any other place (supermarket, kiosk, etc.) or you have borrowed from the library or someone you know. b) The questionnaire is anonymous. You will not write your name anywhere. Just put an ‘X’ next to the grade you are attending and your sex. c) There are no right and wrong answers. You will not get any marks for filling in this questionnaire. d) Answer every question truthfully without thinking which answer your teacher or parent would like you to give”. After these clarifications and explanations, two examples — one about a positive and one about a negative sentence — were given, so as to familiarize the children with the questionnaire. Data were collected between October and November 1999.
3. Results

3.1 General attitude-emotional factors

Considering attitude as a continuum that can fluctuate over a range of positive, neutral and negative attitudes with an equal distance between the three choices, children’s answers were translated into a three point scale: 1 represented disagreement, 2 neutrality, and 3 agreement. In half of the statements the scale was reversed so that the higher points reflected a more positive attitude. As one can see from the mean score of children’s choice presented in Table 2, children’s attitude could be characterized as positive. The closer to 3 a child’s attitude is, the more positive it is. The closer to 1 it is, the more negative it is.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for each sentence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I like reading</td>
<td>2.796</td>
<td>0.499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I prefer TV to reading a book *</td>
<td>2.289</td>
<td>0.773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I like writing texts</td>
<td>2.394</td>
<td>0.752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. My worst time is writing *</td>
<td>2.411</td>
<td>0.813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I enjoy reciting poems</td>
<td>2.475</td>
<td>0.759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I have never enjoyed reading *</td>
<td>2.480</td>
<td>0.779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am excited at the idea of writing my own book</td>
<td>2.461</td>
<td>0.758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I prefer doing anything else but writing *</td>
<td>2.343</td>
<td>0.830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. It feels good to read</td>
<td>2.704</td>
<td>0.608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. A book is my worst enemy *</td>
<td>2.576</td>
<td>0.758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. When I write I feel good</td>
<td>2.595</td>
<td>0.668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I don’t want to write anything *</td>
<td>2.454</td>
<td>0.815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Books are good friends</td>
<td>2.755</td>
<td>0.589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I am bored with reading *</td>
<td>2.540</td>
<td>0.748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I like writing</td>
<td>2.726</td>
<td>0.571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I am bored with writing *</td>
<td>2.531</td>
<td>0.754</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(* sentences for which the scores were reversed)

Children’s more positive attitude concerns statements 1, 13, 15 and 9 (means exceed 2.7), while the most negative attitude concerns the choice of watching TV instead of reading (M=2.29)

3.2 Writing and reading

When statements were grouped into those concerning reading (1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14) and those concerning writing (3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16), attitudes were found to be more positive towards reading than towards writing (Reading
mean = 20.77; Writing mean = 19.99). The difference between reading and writing scores proved to be statistically significant \((t = 2.960; p = 0.003)\).

### 3.3 Sex-Age-Area

Another statistically significant difference was found when comparing the mean scores for sex and grade. Concerning sex, girls show a more positive attitude than boys to both reading \((t = -2.601; p = 0.009)\) and writing \((t = -2.846; p = 0.005)\) as well as the overall attitude \((t = -2.728; p = 0.006)\).

Concerning the grade they attended, participants also showed statistically significant differences concerning reading \((F = 2.785; p = 0.026)\), writing \((F = 3.084; p = 0.016)\) and overall attitude \((F = 2.934; p = 0.021)\). Tukey analysis showed statistically significant differences between 3rd and 6th grade children’s attitudes towards reading \((p = 0.033)\), between 2nd and 3rd grade children’s attitudes towards writing \((p = 0.009)\) and 2nd and 3rd grade children’s in the overall attitudes \((p = 0.025)\).

The most positive attitude, both overall (Mean = 42.82) and towards reading (Mean = 21.60) and writing (Mean = 20.89) was expressed by 3rd grade children. The lowest overall attitude was in 2nd grade children (Mean = 39.86), mainly due to an extremely low attitude — the lowest of all grades — towards writing (Mean = 19.11). Finally, the lowest attitude towards reading was expressed by 6th grade children (Mean = 20.09).

Concerning differences on the basis of the area, there were statistically significant differences both in attitudes towards reading \((t = -2.345; p = 0.02)\) as well as in attitudes towards writing \((t = -2.312; p = 0.022)\) and overall attitude \((t = -2.222; p = 0.027)\). The most positive attitude towards writing was expressed by children residing in Zographou Municipality (Mean = 41.98) as compared to those of Ano Liossia (Mean = 40.40).

### 4. Discussion-Conclusions

The aim of this study was to record elementary school children’s attitudes towards reading and writing taking place at the child’s own initiative for information, food for thought or recreation; these attitudes were correlated to factors such as age, sex and the children’s social environment. Although the prevailing view in the field of education mainly concerns the cognitive dimension of literacy, contemporary instructional models take into particular consideration the aspect of cultivating a positive attitude and they focus on this direction (Cunningham and Allington 1999, Pressley 1998). It has also been proved that the development of one’s positive attitude towards reading relates to a person’s
reading habits throughout his/her life (Cullinan 1987).

A person’s attitudes may change through experience and persuasion, but they are mainly considered timeless and stable; they do not change easily; attitudes shaped relatively early on in our lives stay with us for the rest of it (Γεώργιος 1984). Therefore, we should secure the most pleasant conditions for teaching children how to cope with written language, while they are learning to read and write at a very young age.

As it is related by the results of this study, elementary school children’s attitude towards reading and writing is positive. Children claim that they want to read and write, provided they themselves choose to do so or that they find it pleasant to read and writing. This attitude, however, can be proven very fragile, as it is not consistent. The terms of shaping it can be found in the family and the atmosphere existing within it towards reading, (Nicholson 1997), in the teacher, the general cultural activity of the school and the community (Cunningham and Allington 1999), the existence of lending libraries (Spink 1990) and reading behavior models (Adams 1990).

On the other hand, this positive attitude towards written language is not equally distributed between its two expressions, i.e. reading and writing. Differences recorded between them are statistically significant and could possibly be related to the frequency of the two activities, as reading is far more common. According to observational research data, it was discovered that children devote only 10% of their overall classroom time to writing. On the contrary, they spend much longer reading, and reading is also involved in answering questions (23% of total time), while writing as composition, is not synonymous to answering exercises (Παντελίδου 2000).

This less positive attitude towards writing might also be attributed to the fact that a lot of emphasis is placed on rules rather than communication, when teaching written language. Spelling, red pencil marks, syntactical mistakes, overall alertness, following the correctness of the concepts in the written text in combination with the correctness of the code itself, are all part of this emphasis.

The instruction of reading and writing is part of the curriculum for all boys and girls. The results of this research, however, show that children’s attitudes towards reading and writing are different according to their sex; girls show a definitely more positive attitude than boys (Downing and Leong 1982, Kush and Watkins 1996, Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis and Ecob 1988). In the study by Kush and Watkins (1996), where a distinction is made between the attitude towards reading for school and towards reading at one’s own initiative, girls showed a significantly more positive attitude than boys only towards reading at
their own initiative. As far as reading for school was concerned, there is no difference between them. Do girls like reading more? Is the nature of the reading activity such that suits girls’ nature more? Is it a field where they feel they can earn praise from so they are more systematically involved in it? These questions inevitably lead to social behavior patterns children adopt or reject with their behavior.

On the other hand, if performance is what defines attitude (Quinn and Jadav 1987), we know that boys’ reading performance is lower than that of girls’ (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis and Elob 1988); boys often present more reading difficulties (Tittle 1986) and, therefore, because of their failing, they may show a more negative attitude towards reading.

Children’s attitudes also differed according to their age. Although there is no clear picture for each grade, there is a downward trend, with the lowest scores appearing in grade sixth. Possibly the children’s heavy schedule does not allow them the time and opportunity for choosing something to read and write of their own accord. There are cases where deviating from a child’s timetable for more than a few minutes is impossible. Obviously, with such a tight schedule there is no place for relaxed reading done at the child’s leisure.

Still, this difference may reflect the way written language is taught at school. Written language is taught on the basis of a curriculum and books using texts and poems by various authors and poets and lessons usually focus on a specific grammatical phenomenon. In other words, the text is followed by a series of activities to further illustrate the phenomenon and to help children master it. Reading and writing for information, food for thought or pleasure do not exist and are not cultivated.

In the first grade, when the code is taught, the children encounter numerous drill exercises, whose meaning is often incomprehensible to them, so that they can learn the letters and the reading and writing of isolated words. After the first grade, the text serves the teaching of a grammatical phenomenon, stripping reading from the magical meanings that characterize it. Thus, instruction of reading wrongfully ignores the emotional content of the activity, even when such young children - with a wealth of emotions - are involved (Bettelheim and Zelan 1981, Emde 1995).

Concerning the more positive attitude 3rd graders have towards reading, it should be noted that here reading is for the first time used for gaining information; the children are considered competent enough in reading to be taught history and religion from books. It is, therefore, possible, that the children’s positive attitude reflects the fulfillment of their expectations in regards to the use of
reading. The dwindling of this positive attitude towards reading and writing, as children grow older is confirmed by both international (Smith 1990, Swanson 1985) and Greek literature. The latter indicates that the number of children who come into contact with extra-curricular books is reduced as they move to the higher school grades (Εθνικό Κέντρο Βιβλίου 1996).

According to the results of the study, attitude towards writing and reading carried out at the children’s own initiative for information, food for thought and recreation, differs according to the area where the children reside. As already pointed out, Ano Liosia is a culturally deprived, lower working class and immigrant neighbourhood in the periphery of Athens, while Zographou is comfortably middle class and culturally sophisticated as closer to the city center.

The features of the two areas, both economic and cultural, may be related to the attitudes towards reading and writing. In any case, it has already been indicated by other researchers that after the 3rd grade, children’s attitude towards reading is lower when their parents are manual workers (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis and Ecob 1988), which is far more common in the case of Ano Liosia.

5. Epilogue

Children come to elementary school where they learn to read and write. This emphasis is more than obvious, as the written language is taught for at least nine periods a week, without including written activities and reading in the framework of other subjects, besides those of teaching reading and writing per se (ΥΠ.Ε.Π.Θ. 1987). However, the materialization of this emphasis on the cognitive acquisition of the written language is achieved through pressure, without securing the child’s contribution to the learning process.

But, in order to cultivate a positive attitude towards written language, the child must comprehend the reasons for which s/he is involved in the learning process. Reading should be done for some distinct reason and must be acceptable by those directly involved, i.e. the children (Brady and Moats 1997, Weaver 1998). Otherwise, their contact with the written language starts and finishes with texts shaped so as to lead to exercises concerning the handling of the code and which do not allow the development of expectations or the search for magical meanings. Only when we learn to read and write by reading and writing in order to satisfy certain fundamental needs of expression and communication do we also learn to love and enjoy the written language for the rest of our lives.

The new curriculum for teaching reading and writing in elementary school (ΥΠ.Ε.Π.Θ. 1999) introduces activities to cultivate the love of reading. How-
ever, their opportunistic character and the time devoted to “free reading”, as well as the lack of modern lending libraries at school, do not guarantee the creation of future readers. On the other hand, there is no reason why these periods should be missing from the curriculum of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades. Using classroom time to help children learn to enjoy books with beautiful illustrations and suitable content support the achievement of the objectives of learning to read and creating readers (Κοτούλας και Σύφαντος 1999). Finally, teachers’ attitudes should favor the creation of conscious readers. After all, children have the right to see their teachers engrossed in the reading of a book or the writing of a text, and not exclusively engaged in marking students’ notebooks.

**References**


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