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A comparative study of attitudes of first grade students, seventh grade students, and tenth grade students toward school

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ATTITUDES OF FIRST GRADE
STUDENTS, SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS, AND TENTH
GRADE STUDENTS TOWARD SCHOOL

MASTER'S PROJECT

Submitted to the School of Education
University of Dayton, in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Education

by

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Approved by:

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the official advisor.

Official Advisor

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Teresa Baisden

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Justification of the Problem

In 1991 the Children's Defense Fund revealed that one thousand three hundred seventy five students quit school in the United States everyday (Haycock, 1991). This is an alarming statistic that educators need to examine. Not only are the schools failing these students but also the thousands of other students who become truant or who slip through the school system unmotivated and uneducated. Although there are several factors involved in each of these problems, students' attitudes toward school is an important factor to consider.

Although the majority of children entering school seem to have positive feelings toward school, those feelings seem to become more negative as the student advances through school. What causes the change in attitudes as students grow older? At what age level does the change occur? Is there anything that educators and administrators can do to prevent this change from occurring?

The writer believes that a close examination of the answers to these questions will provide educators and administrators the information needed to better the system. The changes would focus not only on providing better educational opportunities for all students but

increasing the students' self-esteem and their attitudes toward school. In turn, the writer believes there would be an improvement in the truancy and drop-out rates as well as in student achievement.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of first grade students, seventh grade students, and tenth grade students toward school.

Hypotheses

1. First grade students will have a positive attitude toward school.
2. Seventh grade students will have a negative attitude toward school.
3. Tenth grade students will have a negative attitude toward school.

Assumptions

The writer assumed that the students responded honestly to the semantic differential questionnaire. Also the questionnaire the writer used was assumed to be valid and reliable.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was the small sample size of each group of students.

Another limitation of the study was the inability to construct the best semantic differential questionnaire in order to make it age appropriate for all three groups of students.

Definition of Terms

Elementary students are those students in the first through sixth grades.

Junior high students are students in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades.

Secondary students are students in the tenth through twelfth grades.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Elementary Students' Attitudes Toward School

Elementary students' positive attitudes toward school lessen as the students become older. As Berliner and Casanova discuss in their 1985 article, students in the first grade are generally excited about school but by the time students reach junior high school a negative change in attitude occurs. The biggest changes happen between fifth and seventh grade during the transition between elementary school to middle or junior high school. The research Berliner and Casanova studied suggested that teachers are important factors which affect students' attitudes toward school. Positive interaction with teachers increase students' self-esteem which in turn increases interest and achievement. The importance of this information is that attitudes as well as ability affect achievement (Berliner & Casanova, 1985).

Schneider et. al. (1989) also found that positive attitudes toward school decrease as the child's age increases. In Schneider's study this was true for both sexes but was more dramatic for girls. In the fifth grade girls liked school better than the boys did, but the girls disliked school more than did the boys by the

tenth grade (Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham, & Crombie, 1989).

One factor that seems to affect attitudes toward school is school size. Elementary students who attend smaller schools have more positive attitudes toward school than do those students attending large schools. Edington and Gardener in their 1984 study in Montana found that there is a negative correlation between attitude scores and school size. They studied attitudes toward school in five areas: student motivation, general school climate, school curriculum, teacher-student relations, and peer relations. For sixth graders, the negative correlation between school size and attitude scores were significant in all five areas. Therefore there seems to be an important relationship between school size and attitude. The area that appears to be affected most negatively is peer relations. Overall students attending smaller schools have better attitudes toward school and toward themselves than do other students (Edington & Gardener, 1984).

In the first section the writer discussed the literature relating to elementary students' attitudes toward school. In the next section a review of the literature concerning junior high school students' attitudes toward school will be given.

Junior High Students' Attitudes Toward School

Low-income junior high students' attitudes toward school are not as negative as could be expected. According to Brantlinger (1990), these students are not treated well by the system yet they do not blame the system for its neglect. Brantlinger interviewed low-income junior high students about their attitudes toward school, about their parents' attitudes toward school, and their friends' attitudes toward school (Brantlinger, 1990).

Of the forty students interviewed, fifteen had somewhat positive attitudes toward school; the same number of students, however, were uncertain about their attitudes toward school ("Sometimes I like school - sometimes I do not"). Ten of those questioned had strong negative attitudes toward school (Brantlinger, 1990).

Brantlinger asked the students during the interview about their friends. She wanted to see if low-income students chose friends with similar achievement in school, feelings about school, and socio-economic background. She also wanted to see if the students would project how they really felt about school on to their friends. This seemed to be the case. Friends were those with the above characteristics in common and they were described as having more negative attitudes toward school than did the respondents. This was

especially true for friends who were not doing well in school (Brantlinger, 1990).

To try to determine if attitudes toward school originated at home, Brantlinger questioned the students about their parents' attitudes toward school. Nearly half (19) of the students believed their parents had the same attitudes they had; ten of the students considered their parents' attitudes as better than their own; and eleven thought their parents' attitudes were more negative. The students who thought their parents' attitudes were more negative criticized this attitude. They felt parents should be encouraging and positive (Brantlinger, 1990).

Although the students admitted that their grades affected their self-esteem, they still considered the system to be fair. A mere six students said their grades had a positive impact while eighteen confessed that grades made them feel bad; fourteen were ambivalent; and two pretended to be indifferent (Brantlinger, 1990).

From Brantlinger's study it appears that low-income students appreciate school slightly as a place to socialize and as a place to learn the 3 R's to keep from being considered stupid or uneducated. They believe that school is connected to success in life (Brantlinger, 1990).

As Brantlinger states, low-income students become

accustomed to and come to encompass others' beliefs about them. They blame themselves for their failures judging themselves as not as competent or deserving as others. They tolerate the injustice that they often receive (Brantlinger, 1990).

Junior high students who have negative self-concepts tend to have negative attitudes toward school. Ford (1985) studied the connection between self-concepts and attitudes toward school. Results indicate that students who score high in self-acceptance think of school and teachers in a positive way. Those scoring low in self-acceptance do not think of school as a positive experience (Ford, 1985).

While most students in Ford's study, in general, scored high in self-concept, there still are many students with a negative self-concept. Ford remarked that since the research has shown that negative self-concepts often lead to negative attitudes toward school which, in turn, lead to low achievement in school, there needs to be a combined effort to change the negative self-images (Ford, 1985).

In the next section the writer will discuss the literature reviewed about secondary students' attitudes toward school.

Secondary School Students' Attitudes Toward School

In Chase's 1992 study he found that compared to teachers' attitudes and parents' attitudes toward school, secondary students have the most negative attitudes toward school. An eight item Likert questionnaire was used to compare the attitudes of these three groups (Chase, 1992).

While students had the most overall negative responses of the three groups, they also had the largest spread of responses. This seems to indicate that although some students have negative feelings toward school, others think of school positively. All three groups were generally happier with schools than unhappy. On all but two of the eight items on the questionnaire, the students had a mean score of three or above. Students scored lowest on the item pertaining to relevance to their everyday lives (Chase, 1992).

A decade earlier Chase (1982) examined students' attitudes toward school. This study revealed that although secondary students reported having more positive than negative attitudes toward school, many students were not happy with all aspects of school. In this study, the items that received more negative than positive responses were the ones that dealt with participation: student, counselor, administrator, and teacher (Chase, 1982).

The students indicated that they want to be more active in the school's administration. One point that Chase stated in his conclusions from this study is that while students want to become more involved in planning school events, they sometimes are too unsure of themselves to handle this responsibility without emotional support (Chase, 1982).

Another negative response was about the participation and personal attention students receive from counselors, administrators, and teachers. They hoped for more personal, individual guidance from these three groups in areas such as personal problems and vocational guidance as well as more personal encouragement. Overall though, students responded more positively toward school twice as often as they did negatively (Chase, 1982).

Like Chase, Clark (1987) found in his study that students' attitudes toward school are quite different than the media portrays. Clark's study revealed that secondary students have negative attitudes toward the public school system, in general, but they tend to have positive attitudes toward their own schools. Seventy-five percent of those high school seniors surveyed gave their own school an A or B. Fewer than 1 out of 20 scored their own schools a D or F (Clark, 1987).

Students attending nonpublic schools rated public schools more harshly than did those students who were attending public schools. Twenty percent of nonpublic students believed schools to be below average while only ten percent of public school students rated schools that low. The public school students responded positively toward their own schools; they were a little more negative toward other schools in their community and even more negative about schools outside their community. Nonpublic students, on the other hand, were harsher on public schools in their community than they were on public schools outside their community. Nonpublic school students also rated their own schools higher than the public school students did (Clark, 1987).

Another factor which seems to influence students' attitudes toward school is their grade point averages. Those students with better overall grades in school like their schools considerably better than those students that have lower grade point averages. One important finding in this study is that liking school is apparently linked to success in school (Clark, 1987).

With this information, a look at how to improve student attitudes toward school should be taken.

Ways of Improving Students' Attitudes Toward School

One way to improve elementary students' attitudes toward school is by using classroom guidance. Gerler and Anderson (1986) studied the effect of classroom guidance on elementary school students' attitudes toward school. Counselors in the participating schools randomly chose a treatment group and a control group. Each group was pre-tested on their attitudes toward school. Over a five week period, the treatment group received a 10-session unit in "Succeeding in School". Gerler and Anderson divided the unit into the following lessons: 1) Success in School; 2) Being Comfortable in School; 3) Being Responsible in School; 4) Listening in School; 5) Asking for Help in School; 6) How to Improve at School; 7) Cooperating with Peers at School; 8) Cooperating with Teachers; 9) The Bright Side of School; 10) The Bright Side of Me. These lessons had students involved in games, role playing, practicing skills, and discussions (Gerler & Anderson, 1986).

After the classroom guidance unit was completed, each group was given a post-test to measure their attitudes toward school. A comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores showed that the treatment groups' attitudes toward school improved while the control groups' attitudes toward school worsened. If this is an indication of the positive effect classroom guidance has on students' attitudes, it may be used to decrease

truancy and school drop-out (Gerler & Anderson, 1986).

Another way to improve students' attitudes toward school is to promote an atmosphere that stresses positive self-concepts as well as skills. Berliner and Casanova (1985) offer a few suggestions on how this can be accomplished.

The amount of teacher interaction students receive influence their attitudes toward school. To help students develop a better sense of well-being, teachers should allow the students to know a little about themselves. They should describe some of their own personal school experiences. This gives students a sense that teachers are real people and helps to develop a bond. Feeling an attachment to the teacher will most likely increase students' interest in school subjects and school (Berliner & Casanova, 1985).

It is also important to let the students become familiar with each other so they can see other students as being not as different as they appear at first. This helps eliminate stereotypes students take into the classroom (Berliner & Casanova, 1985).

Another suggestion for teachers is to begin the school year with easier lessons making them more difficult through the year. This will also help give students a sense of well-being (Berliner & Casanova, 1985).

Berliner and Casanova stress that teachers should not concentrate entirely on having a positive classroom environment, but also on developing students' skills. Having a good mixture of both is needed (Berliner & Casanova, 1985).

Offering all students the best there is in education is another way to improve students' attitudes toward school. Haycock (1991) discusses in her article some of the problems the American educational system is facing.

According to Haycock, educators must focus on having equal educational opportunities for all students. By the time many minority students reach their senior year (if they make it that far), they are functioning at three grade levels lower than the white students. The drop-out rate for minorities in some states is as high as fifty percent. What enters the schools in the beginning is quite different than what comes out in the end (Haycock, 1991).

Haycock suggests that if poor and minority students are challenged in the same way as all other students, they would learn equally as well. Students learn what they are taught. Often the poor and minority students' educational experiences consist of receiving instruction from the least trained and least experienced teacher who passes the time by assigning boring ditto sheets. These students also are often exposed to a weak curriculum and

poorly stocked laboratories and libraries. This is not even to mention the biggest hurdle of all: not having people who believe in them (Haycock, 1991).

The problem exists mostly because of two reasons. Minority and poor students usually attend different schools than do other students. As if this were not enough, there are different tracks within the schools. Poor and minority students are generally placed into low-track classes where they receive their education from the worst teachers and the oldest books. Expectations for these students are low. The system expects less of these students, teaches them less, and in return, receives less from them (Haycock, 1991).

Haycock argues that these are the changes that need to be made to our educational system. Instead of the generic across-the-board changes that are being made, the system needs to make changes that will make all schools more equal. No more expecting less and teaching less; no more making school easier; all students must be challenged (Haycock, 1991).

More efforts need to be made to prepare students for learning before they enter school. These changes would be less expensive in the long run than turning out uneducated, unemployed, and dependent citizens. These changes can and have made a difference (Haycock, 1991).

Incorporating in the schools the results of research is a fourth way of improving students' attitudes toward school. Schmuck and Schmuck (1991) feel that what is learned from the students about how to better schools should be utilized. For example, Schmuck and Schmuck's study revealed that students are more concerned with their interaction with their teachers than they are with the curriculum, homework, and tests. Yet the system focuses on how well a prospective teacher performed in college instead of on their personal characteristics which, according to the students, make them a good teacher. Students should be allowed to become more involved in choosing and rating teachers (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1991).

The writer has reviewed the literature concerning students' attitudes toward school. Attitudes toward school are affected by different factors. The studies have supported the connection between attitude and school achievement. The reviewed literature suggests ways to improve students' attitudes toward school. Brantlinger in her 1990 article summed it up quite well:

Since major portions of childhood and adolescence are spent in school and school is reputed to have long-term effects, students' perceptions of school are of considerable importance (Brantlinger, 1990).

CHAPTER III

PROCEDURE

Subjects

The subjects of this study were twenty-one first grade students (10 boys and 11 girls), twenty-six seventh grade students (13 boys and 13 girls), and twenty-seven tenth grade students (9 boys and 18 girls).

Setting

School. All three of the schools where the surveys were administered have fewer than five hundred students each. The elementary school feeds into the junior high and the junior high into the high school. About six years ago, two former high school rivals were consolidated to form this high school. All students in all of these schools are white; there are only a few black teachers.

Community. The community where the schools are located is a rural area in Southwest West Virginia. Although the largest industry in this area has been coal since the industrial revolution, the coal industry is not booming as it once was. This downturn has forced many people to move away from the area and it has forced others to rely on government assistance. The income level ranges from lower class to lower middle class. Educational resources are limited in this area.

Data Collection

Construction of the Data Collecting Instrument.

The following semantic differential was administered to measure the students' attitudes toward school. The adjective pairs were selected from the related literature and from Isaac and Michael (1981).

<u>SCHOOL</u>						
Good	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Bad
Boring	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Fun
Easy	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Hard
Important	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unimportant
Sad	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Happy
Fair	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	Unfair

Administration of the Instrument. The writer administered the semantic differential questionnaires to the students at each school. Directions were written at the top of the questionnaire and were also given orally. The students were asked to mark their age, grade, and sex on the questionnaire.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Presentation of the Results

The results of the semantic differential have been organized in table form.

TABLE I

RESULTS OF THE SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL AMONG FIRST GRADE STUDENTS

Group	N	\bar{X}	S
Boys	10	28.50	2.80
Girls	11	29.73	0.45
Total	21	29.14	2.05

TABLE II

RESULTS OF THE SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL AMONG SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS

Group	N	\bar{X}	S
Boys	13	17.62	8.27
Girls	13	22.31	5.00
Total	26	19.96	7.22

TABLE III
RESULTS OF THE SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL AMONG
TENTH GRADE STUDENTS

Group	N	\bar{X}	S
Boys	9	19.67	5.21
Girls	18	19.56	4.57
Total	27	19.59	4.79

TABLE IV
RESULTS OF THE SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL AMONG
FIRST, SEVENTH, AND TENTH GRADE STUDENTS

Group	N	\bar{X}	S
Boys	32	21.59	7.76
Girls	42	23.07	5.82
Total	74	22.43	6.77

Discussion of the Results

The major focus of this study was to determine if there are differences in attitudes toward school between first grade students, seventh grade students, and tenth

grade students. The writer was also interested in the differences in attitudes toward school between boys and girls.

The scores of the semantic differential range from thirty (most positive) to five (most negative) with eighteen being the middle score (neither positive or negative).

The results of the survey given to first grade students about their attitudes toward school are presented in Table I. As the writer hypothesized, first grade students do have a positive attitude toward school. Although both sexes feel good about school, first grade girls like school slightly more than do the first grade boys. As the standard deviation shows, the first grade boys' scores cover a wider range than the girls' score do.

Table II displays the results of the seventh grade students' attitude scores. The attitudes toward school of both boys and girls changed negatively from first grade. Girls still have a positive attitude toward school, but boys do not. Boys in the seventh grade seem to have negative attitudes toward school. There were a wide range of scores for both sexes of seventh grade students. The results of the survey given to seventh grade students do not support the writer's hypothesis about the attitudes toward school of seventh grade students.

The semantic differential scores of tenth grade students are presented in Table III. The writer believes that the tenth grade students' scores are the most interesting of the three groups. The scores of the male students increased from the seventh grade, but they are still much lower than those of first grade boys' scores. Female students' attitudes toward school, however, have consistently continued to drop from the scores of the first grade girls. Since scores of both sexes are more positive than negative, the writer's hypothesis about tenth grade students is not supported by this study.

In Table IV the writer has compiled the mean and standard deviation scores for all three grades. Although the mean scores show that overall there are more students with positive attitudes toward school than there are with negative attitudes, the standard deviation scores indicate that there are students who still view school negatively.

The findings of this study are consistent with much of the writer's research. This study supports Berliner and Casanova's (1985) statement that students' positive attitudes toward school lessen as the students become older. First grade students' excitement toward school decreases as they grow older with the biggest change occurring around junior high school (Berliner & Casanova, 1985). The biggest drop in scores in the

writer's study is between the scores of first grade students and those of seventh grade students.

This study also seems to support the results of the study done by Schneider et. al. (1989). Their study suggests that there is a negative correlation between students' ages and their attitudes toward school. Although this appears to be true for both sexes, it is more dramatic for girls. In the earlier grades, girls like school more than the boys do; by the tenth grade, however, girls dislike school more than do the boys (Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham, & Crombie, 1989). The results in Tables I, II, and III support the premise that as girls grow older, their attitudes toward school become less positive. The writer thinks that a possible explanation of the increase in boys' scores and the decrease in girls' scores may be a result of sports participation. In many school districts, including the one in which this study was done, there are limited sports opportunities for girls.

As in Chase's 1982 study, the results of this study indicate that although the overall scores suggest that there are more positive than negative feelings toward school, there are students who do not view school in a positive way. Another result of Chase's study supported by this study is that although some students view school negatively, there are twice as many positive attitudes among secondary students as there are negative ones.

As Edington and Gardener (1984) state, students who attend smaller schools seem to have better attitudes toward school than do those students attending larger schools. The writer feels that this factor influenced the attitudes of the students in this study. It has been the writer's experience that students in smaller schools appear to feel more comfortable and not as alienated as they might in larger schools. Smaller schools provide a more personal setting which seems to offer a sense of personal security to students.

The writer believes that students' attitudes toward school become more negative around junior high school level. The writer thinks that this is due to the changes that occur within schools around this time. This is around the time when students switch from having one classroom and one teacher to having several classrooms and several teachers. The relationship between students and teachers seems to change around this time also - maybe as a result of the scheduling transition. Research shows that the relationship between teachers and students is an important one which should be considered when examining ways to improve students' attitudes toward school.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

In 1991 the Children's Defense Fund revealed that one thousand three hundred seventy five students quit school in the United States everyday (Haycock, 1991). This is an alarming statistic that educators need to examine. Not only are the schools failing these students but also the thousands of other students who become truant or who slip through the school system unmotivated and uneducated. Although there are several factors involved in each of these problems, students' attitudes toward school is an important factor to consider.

The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of first grade students, seventh grade students, and tenth grade students toward school.

First grade students will have a positive attitude toward school. Seventh grade students will have a negative attitude toward school. Tenth grade students will have a negative attitude toward school.

The writer administered a semantic differential questionnaire to measure the students' attitudes toward school. The subjects were first, seventh, and tenth grades students in schools in a rural area of Southwest West Virginia.

As the writer hypothesized, first grade students do have a positive attitude toward school. Although both sexes feel good about school, first grade girls like school slightly more than do the first grade boys.

The attitudes toward school of both seventh grade girls and seventh grade boys changed negatively from first grade. Girls still have a positive attitude toward school, but boys do not. Boys in the seventh grade seem to have negative attitudes toward school. The results of the survey given to seventh grade students do not support the writer's hypothesis about the attitudes toward school of seventh grade students.

The scores of tenth grade male students increased from the seventh grade, but they are still much lower than those of first grade boys' scores. Female students' attitudes, however, consistently continued to drop from the scores of the first grade girls. Since scores of both sexes are more positive than negative, the writer's hypothesis about tenth grade students is not supported by this study.

Conclusions

1. Most students have positive attitudes toward school.
2. The biggest change in students' attitudes toward school occurs sometime between the first grade and the seventh grade.

3. There is a difference in attitudes toward school between boys and girls.

The findings of this study suggest that the majority of students have a positive attitude toward school. The students with the most positive attitude were those in the first grade. Overall tenth grade students had the most negative attitudes toward school. The biggest decrease in attitude scores for both sexes was between first grade and seventh grade students. This change could be linked to the transition from elementary school to junior high school.

This study also suggests that there is a difference in attitudes toward school based on gender. Girls seem to like school better than boys do in both first grade and seventh grade, but they appear to dislike school more by the time they reach the tenth grade. Boys' attitudes toward school decrease by the seventh grade but they increase by the tenth grade. Both boys and girls have the most positive attitudes when they are in the first grade.

Recommendations

Since research links attitudes toward school to success in school it is important that attention be given to students' attitudes. Students enter school with positive attitudes toward school but these positive

attitudes decrease as students become older. According to the results of this and other studies, the most drastic change in attitudes toward school occurs between first and seventh grade. This suggests that at some point between those two grades something in the school system is changed that influences students' attitudes toward school. It is therefore imperative to identify and modify those factors which influence students enough to change negatively their attitudes toward school. Educators and administrators should examine all aspects of school between these two grades to try to determine where the problems exist. The curriculum, teaching methods, teacher/student relationships, and teachers' attitudes are a few aspects which might negatively affect students' attitudes toward school. It would be interesting to see a study done not just at each school level as this one is but at each grade level. Another helpful longitudinal study would be to follow the same group of students through all twelve grades to see how their attitudes toward school change as they progress through school.

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