

## **Student Attitudes Toward Reading: A Case Study**

**Lindsey Seitz**  
*Buffalo State College*

*Over the last 15 years, researchers have become increasingly interested in children's motivation to read. Because reading is an exigent activity that often involves choice, motivation is crucial to reading engagement. The purpose of this case study was to investigate student attitudes toward reading at summer reading clinic through an urban teaching college in upstate New York. It was hypothesized that student attitudes would improve during their literacy clinic attendance because students received dynamic support from reading specialist candidates. Student attitudes were assessed through classroom observations and informal interviews. Findings indicated that reading specialist candidates' consistent involvement in the learning process was crucial for student success. Furthermore, student attitudes toward reading were found to be multidimensional and challenging to assess.*

The recent emphasis placed on improving children's English Language Arts test scores often leads teachers to ignore the role of student attitudes in the process of becoming literate. In order for students to develop into effective readers, they must possess both the skill and the will to read. As noted by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), "motivation is what activates behavior." Student attitudes toward reading are a central factor affecting reading performance.

This case study addressed the reading attitudes of three students enrolled in an urban teaching college's summer reading clinic. It was expected that these students would be provided with supplemental support, including one on one and group coaching from reading specialist candidates. Because instruction that provides cognitive and emotional supports for learning can increase students' motivation (Nolen, 2007), it was hypothesized that the student attitudes would improve during their literacy clinic attendance. The specific motivational and supportive components utilized by the reading specialist in conjunction with instructional strategies and practices they chose to use with each student were documented in order to determine their impact on student attitudes.

### ***Review of the Literature***

Using questionnaires, researchers have found that children's motivation is multidimensional in the later elementary grades. Through analytic assessment several

components of reading motivation have been distinguished (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). These components include (a) self-efficacy, (b) interest, (c) preference for challenge, and (d) social interaction.

Current research suggests that motivated readers hold positive beliefs about themselves as readers (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997). Conversely, struggling readers assume they are responsible for their reading difficulties. Recurring failures to succeed and self-concept issues often complicate a student's ability to learn any of a variety of reading skills. Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) found that students who doubt their ability to learn give up quickly when faced with new challenges. Therefore, reading instruction for struggling readers should focus on the rebuilding of damaged self-concepts. This can be accomplished through successful experiences.

To continue to make progress in learning, as well as fuel self concept and motivation, students should participate in regular classroom experiences appropriate to their cognitive and maturational levels, including interesting and cognitively challenging books presented orally or on tape (Worthy, 1996). Berliner (1981) found that success rates had a substantial impact on student learning. His studies produced strong, consistent evidence that tasks completed with high rates of success were clearly linked to greater learning and improved student attitudes, while tasks where students were moderately successful were less consistently related to learning and hard tasks had a negative impact on learning. Hard tasks also produced off-task behaviors and negative attitudes.

According to Worthy (1996), it is not sufficient to provide books that are geared solely to a child's instructional reading level. When reading level is solely considered, below level basal readers are generally used for instructing struggling readers. Reading such "baby books" often makes struggling readers feel more defeated. Focusing on student interests in selecting reading materials may be more beneficial in promoting reading success than a focus on level.

It turns out that interest is far more significant than readability. When students have strong interest in what they read, they can frequently transcend their reading level (Worthy, 1996). Many educators and researchers consider interest to be an essential factor in all learning (Hidi, 1990; Schiefele, 1991). Students who do not enjoy typical school texts often fail to engage in reading, and may develop a lifelong aversion to reading. Even if they are not initially struggling readers, "reluctant readers tend to gradually lose some academic ground, because wide

reading is related to increases in general knowledge and reading comprehension” (Williamson & Williamson, 1988).

High challenge academic tasks invite students to expend the maximum level of effort and encourage students to value the processes of learning. As a result, motivation researchers view high challenge tasks as most beneficial for promoting learning and motivation (Miller, 2003). Challenging academic tasks promote motivation because they offer students opportunities to learn “thoughtful information-processing and skill building strategies” while expending reasonable amounts of effort (Brophy, 1986). Teachers promote such occurrences when they provide students with opportunities to assume increasingly higher levels of responsibility for their learning. Moreover, a challenging task often requires students to use prior knowledge and construct an understanding of a topic. This practice increases the personal meaning that students attach to an activity, therefore increasing the likelihood of becoming engaged in an activity (Miller, 2003). This engagement can also be enhanced by providing students with opportunities to interact with their peers.

During school, students interact and work alongside peers and adults. These social perceptions and relationships are related to and predictive of school-related outcomes (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). Vygotsky (1978) argued that one internalizes higher cognitive ability through social interaction. He perceived learning as a profoundly social process, suggesting that individuals master their surroundings when immersed in dialogue and engaged in the social construction of meaning. Similarly, Patrick et al. (2007) found students perceptions of dimensions of their classroom social environment, including affiliation, cohesion, fairness, mutual respect, and support from teachers and students are associated consistently with adaptive motivational beliefs and achievement behaviors.

### ***Method***

The primary participants for this study were three students enrolled in the summer reading clinic, housed at a local urban charter elementary school. One student was in the fifth grade during the 2007-2008 school year and the other two were in the fourth grade during the same time period at the same school. All three were referred to the reading clinic by their classroom teachers because of their reading difficulties during the 2007-2008 school year.

The secondary participants were five reading specialist candidates. The candidates were current graduate college students enrolled in a required clinical practicum, which was offered through the summer reading clinic. These participants ranged in age from 22-45 years old. Three reading specialist candidates taught in the fourth grade classroom, while the other two taught in the fifth grade classroom. The fourth grade classroom included nine students, whereas the fifth grade classroom included four. This maintained a manageable student to reading specialist candidate ratio in the classrooms. Students were placed according to their grade level during the 2007-2008 school year. For example, students in fourth grade during the 2007-2008 school year were placed in the fourth grade classroom.

Each student was observed on four or five occasions between July 7<sup>th</sup> and August 1<sup>st</sup> during the classroom clinic time, 9am to 12pm. Both clinic classrooms had a specific schedule in place, which included whole group, small group and individualized instruction. As a result, I tried to observe students in various situations. Observations lasted ten minutes and occurred during different periods of the morning. Field notes pertaining to student levels of engagement as they participated in class activities were recorded at 30 second intervals. 30 second intervals were selected because it allowed for student attention over the course of an activity to be noted. Within a minute, students may change the direction of their attention. For example, they may become distracted by a peer or an item in the classroom. Therefore, 30 second intervals allowed for a more detailed overview of student engagement within the ten minute observation. The focus of each observation session was on the selected student in relation to the literacy activity and/or reading specialist candidate leading the activity. I looked at student attention to classroom activities, active participation and expressed interest, as well as the lack thereof.

Each student was interviewed after being observed at least once as he engaged in an instructional event designed by his assigned reading specialist candidate. Students were interviewed individually in the hall or a small room, outside of the classroom. Each interview took about 4-5 minutes. The questions were intentionally general, to see whether students raised motivational issues spontaneously when discussing their reading and writing. The questions that prompted the content of the discussion were:

1. Tell me about the last activity you did (centers, guided reading, read aloud etc.).  
Follow-ups to affective responses were: What did you like/didn't like? What was fun about it?
2. What are some other fun reading/writing activities that you remember from the literacy clinic? Why do you think you remember those things? What made them fun?
3. Do you read/write at home or outside of school? What kinds of things?

The *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* (McKenna & Kear, 1990) was administered to each student at the beginning and end of the clinic. This survey is a norm-referenced measure that includes twenty statements about reading. Ten of the statements relate to recreational reading, while the other ten relate to academic (school related reading). Examples of recreational items on the survey are "How do you feel about starting a new book?" and "How do you feel about spending free time reading?" Examples of academic items are "How do you feel when the teacher asks you questions about what you read?" and "How you feel about learning from a book?". Four pictures depicting the cartoon character, Garfield, with facial expressions ranging from "very happy" to "very upset", follow each item. Students are advised to circle the Garfield that best expresses their feelings about the item. For scoring purposes, the values 4, 3, 2, and 1 were assigned to the very happy, happy, upset and very upset Garfield pictures, respectively. This created forty possible points for the recreational and academic subscales, and 80 points for the total reading score.

Informal interviews were conducted with the reading specialist candidates to assess their observations of the students. Each interview took about 4-5 minutes. Reading specialists were interviewed after student dismissal at 12pm. My questions focused on their perception of each student's attitude toward reading and the literacy clinic, such as:

1. What appears to motivate the student?
2. What feelings does the student express about reading?
3. What does the student do when asked to participate in an independent reading task?
4. What does the student do when asked to participate in a group reading task?

**Analysis**

To organize observational data, I initially created a checklist with four motivating components: self-efficacy, challenge, social interaction and interest. I believed this checklist would allow me to tally the occurrences of these motivating components as I made my observations. However, after two pilot observations it became apparent that this information could not be collected in this fashion. For example, self-efficacy and challenge could not be determined through an observer’s perspective. As a result, I began to look at behavioral manifestations of motivation, such as active engagement or distraction. With that in mind, I continued to observe students and record field notes. After reading over the transcribed field notes, I inductively coded my data into five major categories: actively engaged with reading specialist candidate, actively engaged in activity, engaged with peers, distracted by peers, self distracted. Table 1 provides an explanation for the criteria and shows how items were categorized. Transcribed field notes, student interviews, and teacher interviews were organized to assess trends.

Table 1. Categories of Student Observation Data

<b>Actively engaged in activity</b>	<b>Self-Distracted</b>	<b>Engaged with reading specialist candidate</b>	<b>Engaged with peer</b>	<b>Distracted by peer</b>
Student visibly worked on assignment.	Student looked around the room.	Student responded to reading specialist candidate’s question.	Student spoke with peer about shared activity.	Student watched peers engage in off task behavior.
Student read assignment or text silently or aloud.	Student stared at various objects in the room.	Student shared story with reading specialist candidates about shared activity.	Student laughed with peer about activity or related anecdotal story.	Student spoke with peer about topic unrelated to activity.
	Student played with objects unrelated to activity.			Student laughed with peers about unrelated topic.
	Student did not respond to	Student asked reading		

	reading specialist candidate's prompt.	specialist candidate question about activity.		
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### **Findings**

From the data, I constructed mini-cases of three students. Student names were changed to ensure anonymity. I called the first subject Ben. My observational field study data reflected Ben's tendency toward visual distractions during the literacy clinic. This was reasonably correlated with a score of 63 on his first *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*, 30 raw points toward recreational reading and 33 academic reading. His final *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* score increased by 5 points to 68, with 31 points toward recreational reading and 37 for academic reading. This confirmed an increase in his positive attitude toward academic reading. I found it interesting that his answer to "How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?" increased from a mildly upset Garfield to slightly smiling Garfield.

During his informal interviews he appeared happy with his experiences in the clinic's fourth grade classroom. Ben advised me that he enjoyed playing games in centers, particularly word sorting games. Additionally, he was visibly pleased to tell me about a writing center activity, which involved picking a topic card out of a paper bag and then proceeding to write about it. Ben expounded by sharing one of his pieces about a preferred movie, *Hancock*. He appeared pleased as he read aloud sentences about Will Smith and his recent movies. During our discussion, I also learned of his preference for basketball.

His reading specialist candidates were aware of his interest in sports and provided an assortment of sports-related books for sustained silent reading time. They advised me that Ben selects the same book each day for silent reading, *Salt in His Shoes*. It is an uplifting story about Michael Jordan's childhood experiences, from his mother and sister's perspective. While a seemingly interesting text, Ben did not appear to read it. Therefore, although he repeatedly selected the book for his personal reading, he was not engaged in his selection. One of his reading specialist candidates commented "given time and opportunity he would rather sit and look at the wall." The reading specialist candidate shared that Ben often kept the book open to the same page during the course of the personal reading period. Additionally, his eyes wandered around the room instead of focusing on the pictures or text. During one of my discussions with

Ben, I asked about *Salt in His Shoes*. Ben smiled when he spoke about the book, telling me that it was a “good book.” However, he did not offer additional details about the text.

An analysis of the observational data reflected Ben’s success in small group and one on one instruction. Large group instruction consisted of the nine students in the class. In groups of more than two students, Ben appeared distracted and unengaged. For example, during a shared reading of *Charlotte’s Web*, Ben was preoccupied with watching (and laughing) with his peers rather than listening to the text. However, he was more likely to be actively engaged in smaller group activities. Furthermore, peers in separate groups did not distract him, while he worked in his own intimate group.

The observations revealed that regardless of the group size or interest of the activity or text, Ben might not remain engaged in the activity. For instance, during one observation, he was asked to complete a sequence and prediction activity about *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. It consisted of cutting, ordering and pasting pictures from *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. After sequencing the pictures based on their memory of the text, students were asked to write a narrative for each picture. This activity offered the benefit of challenge because students needed to access their prior knowledge of the story. It also offered interest through a familiar text. However, a peer initially distracted Ben. As a result, Ben laughed with his peer and remained disengaged with his activity. Because the reading specialist candidate was attentive to Ben’s behavior, she reviewed the instructions for the activity and further modeled it. As a result, Ben became reengaged in the activity and began to make progress. Although Ben was often provided with a high interest and/or challenging activities, he did not consistently remain engaged. Reading specialist candidates repeatedly redirected and re-instructed him.

I called my second subject Thomas. Unlike Ben, Thomas was visibly motivated throughout my observations. This was reinforced in our discussions about the clinic and accompanying activities. During our interviews, he often described the “fun” he was having throughout the day in the fifth grade classroom. For example, he expressed his pleasure with a computer-learning center. This center allowed him to “type on the computer,” while he created words for a wordless storybook, such as *Free Fall*. Thomas also enjoyed the listening center, especially reading into the whisper phones. This activity appeared to be particularly memorable for him because during one interview he clearly listed four books he recently read in the center: *Jumangi*, *Amazing Grace*, *Miss Nelson is Missing*, and *Click Click Moo*.



During his interactions with reading specialist candidates and peers, Thomas expressed his interest and pleasure. One activity included reading a book without seeing the book's cover or title. After finishing the book, students created a cover and a title for the recently read book. He appeared to like the challenge of creating a cover based on his knowledge of the book and of book covers. Additionally, he conveyed his positive emotions saying, "I like drawing" while he drew the cover and putting his arms up with a small cheer when he felt successful with his drawing. His behavior was similar during the class' Readers Theater activities. Thomas appeared to enjoy speaking his lines and sharing the experience with his peers.

Thomas' expressiveness may be because of the intimate classroom setting. Unlike Ben, Thomas was in a small classroom. Thomas shared the room with two reading specialist candidates and three other students. With fewer students, it appeared easier for Thomas to stay on task with minimal distractions. He also appeared resilient toward other students' off task behavior. During a shared reading activity, one of Thomas' peers exhibited off task behavior, such as drawing on her folder, sighing loudly and laying on the desk. Rather than joining his peer, Thomas continued to actively listen to the reading specialist candidate and participate in the activity.

Although my observation data showed evidence of Thomas' active engagement, his initial *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* score of 45 reflected a negative attitude toward reading and writing in academic and recreational environments. Additionally, his reading specialist candidates advised me that Thomas' fifth grade teacher commented on his attitude toward school on his referral form, claiming that Thomas "needs to be motivated and prompted" and he failed three subjects "due to lack of motivation." However, Thomas' reading specialist candidates did not perceive him as unmotivated. Instead they commented on Thomas' attentiveness and consistent participation. My perception of Thomas' attitude toward reading and writing was reinforced after Thomas took the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* at the end of the four-week clinic. His new score increased by 21 points to a 66, with 31 points in recreational reading and 35 in academic reading.

I called my third subject Melissa. Melissa's initial *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* results, interviews, and observation data confirmed my understanding of her attitude toward reading and writing. She scored a 79 on her initial *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*, 39 raw points toward recreational reading and 40 academic reading. Melissa's positive attitude toward

reading was exhibited in her classroom activities. Her future aspirations included becoming an author and/or a teacher. When asked why she wanted to become a teacher, she advised me that “looking at (her) teachers’ experiences” helped her decide.

Her admiration for her teachers was apparent in my observations of her in the fourth grade classroom. When she did not understand a concept, she asked the reading specialist candidates clarifying questions. Additionally, she looked for opportunities to demonstrate her success, especially to earn the reading specialist candidates’ approval. For instance, one activity required students to identify the meaning of unfamiliar words in a previously read text. Melissa readily followed the directions and applied the reading specialist candidate’s strategies to decipher the meaning of the unknown words. When the reading specialist candidate asked the small group to record the words’ meanings, Melissa quickly complied.

Her desire to please the reading specialist candidates did not prevent her from occasional distractions. For example, during a guided reading group segment she continued to fidget and play with her clothes while the reading specialist candidate tried to cultivate her interest. The reading specialist candidate realized Melissa’s distractibility and continued to model the comprehension strategy and ask Melissa open-ended questions. As a result, Melissa stopped playing with her clothes and began sharing answers with her group partner. This maintained her active engagement in the activity.

Our interviews reflected her connections with the class text. *Charlotte’s Web* was the trade book used in her classroom and she demonstrated her enthusiasm by regularly bringing her personal copy into school. She also advised me that she sometimes reads *Charlotte’s Web* to her mother. This enthusiasm was visible in other *Charlotte’s Web* related class activities, such as Readers Theatre and viewing of the movie.

The most striking component of Melissa’s data was her final *Elementary Reading Attitude*. Although our final interview indicated her satisfaction for the clinic, her survey did not. Her final *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* score decreased to a 51, with a recreational score of 37 and academic reading score of 15. Her dissatisfaction was reflected in questions such as “How do you feel about reading in school?” and “How do you feel about learning from a book?.” On her initial survey she circled the “happiest Garfield” for both questions. However, on the final survey she circled the very upset Garfield. Because it was at the final segment of the clinic, I was unable to discuss the change in her results. Perhaps she better understood the questions

now than she did during the first administration of the test. Additionally, her peers may have impacted Melissa because she took both tests in the classroom during whole group administration.

### ***Discussion***

The purpose of this study was to examine student attitudes toward reading during a summer reading clinic experience at an urban higher education institution. The results were obtained through student observations and interviews, reading specialist candidate interviews, and the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*.

I found that students exhibited positive attitudes toward reading during our interviews. However, student attitudes are multi faceted. Although students may be provided with high interest and/or challenging activities, they may not remain engaged. This phenomenon was apparent in my observational data. Reading specialist candidates repeatedly redirected and re-instructed students. These well-versed reading specialist candidates understood that regardless of the activity or instruction, students might need additional support to remain engaged.

The preference for student choice was a visible trend emanating from the transcribed student interviews. Choice allows students to select tasks and texts that they are interested in or they find personally relevant. This encourages students to set goals and take responsibility for their own literacy development (Powell et. al., 2006). Choice is important because it seems largely related to interest and control. As Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) noted, “Investigations focusing on individual interest have shown that children as well as adults who are interested in particular activities or topics pay closer attention, persist for longer periods of time, learn more and enjoy their involvement to a greater degree than individuals without such interest.” They also found that providing students with choices “even when seemingly trivial and instructionally irrelevant seems to enhance interest.” Given the opportunity for future research, I would examine the specific opportunities for choice in the literacy clinic classrooms.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

This descriptive case study involved a small number of participants in one setting. Because of the size of the study and my position as the observer, there is a possibility that I changed students’ behavior with my presence (Bogdan & Bikler, 1982). Additionally, the

observer role makes it difficult for researchers to collect subjective data from students on their own perspectives. For future research, I would consider the use of a participant approach. Francis et. al (2004) found significant advantages to this research strategy including “students felt comfortable to share their views on various subjects, even unprompted” and helped researchers “to gain a broader understanding of the school as it is seen by its students, as well as student perceptions of academic performance.”

The length of the study is another variable. It is difficult to gauge changes in attitude during a four-week session. The study may be lengthened to assess changes in attitude over the entire summer or school year in a traditional classroom setting. Additionally, I would change the method of data collection.

Although, the survey data showed that two of the three students’ *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* scores improved during the clinic, the third student’s score decreased. The survey scores challenged my findings from interviews and observations. For example, Ben showed frequent distractibility during observations but his *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* scores remained higher than the other two more actively engaged students. For future research, students would be interviewed during the administration of the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey*. This may ensure students understand each question. Additionally, the *Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* could be supplemented or replaced with the *Motivation for Reading Questionnaire* (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). This questionnaire assesses eight dimensions of motivation: self-efficacy, motivation, work avoidance, curiosity, involvement, recognition, competition, and social. The questionnaire is also appropriate for fourth and fifth grade students.

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